I Hate Running

 First, to start off, I absolutely, truly, despise running. It is terrible when you first start, especially if you are not used to regular exercise. That was me, fourteen years old, and joined the walk-on cross country team at Jamestown Highschool. I admit that I did not join for the noble reason of getting healthy, but because my friends peer pressured me to join with them.

 Over the course of the summer, my best friend, Allison tried to convince me that cross country would help us make friends at school and to be skinny. Like any teenager, body image is a huge part of who they are, and we want a certain picture to project for people to see. During puberty, I gained a bit of weight and it was noticeable, especially when I started slimming down naturally because of growth spurts. However, to me, it was never enough. I had skinny, beautiful friends, and I would’ve done anything to be like them. I remember looking in any crowd of people and picking out features on the girls and comparing to myself how I could look better if I lost a few pounds. I would think to myself, “Why can’t I have that small of a waist,” or “Maybe if I lost a few, my boobs would look bigger like hers.” Like my life flashing before my eyes, memories rushed in on my thoughts from middle school, so in the end, I gave in to my friend’s constant nagging.

 The first day, I thought I was going to die. It was summer conditioning for cross country before school started. In Williamsburg, VA, it is hot and humid during the summers. When I showed up, I was nervous as -. I wore Nike running shoes, a green t-shirt, and shorts. Which was a mistake, since I sweat through everything and my legs got a rash from chafing. Getting out of my dad’s car, I walked to the football field. When the practice officially started at six a.m., we went to the baseball field to do plyos. Plyos were my enemy. We had to get in rows, and then one at a time, follow the leader and do the exercise. We did lunges, calf raises, high-knees, etc. By the time it was over, I was red-faced and out of breath. I immediately went for water, when Coach Schlick said it was time for the one-mile warm-up. I internally groaned and met up with Allison to die together. Running a mile is nothing to veterans of cross country. They absolutely loved to run and kept it up out of season. Starting the trail, I tried to keep a pace to keep my breathing under control, so I didn’t run out of breath too quickly. Unfortunately, that was too difficult for me. The wooded trail had many turns and several roots poking out to make me trip (a couple weeks later, I would land face first because of it). My calves were tightening rubber bands reaching its maximum elasticity and my breath was becoming ragged. I huffed, and I puffed, but I definitely did not blow the house down. I’d be worried for the wolf if he got tired after a slow ten minutes of running. Of course, there is a lot more to practice then just a mile.

 Next, we moved over to a long run. The long run usually lasted around forty-five minutes. At this point, I was red-faced and my legs were shaking. I did not know how much more I could take. But I pushed myself and kept going, no matter how long it would take. After that mind-numbing experience, the team stretched and went home. The minute after I took a shower, I passed out on my bed for three hours. Waking up the next morning, I was sore all over. It took me about a week to feel better and I had to brace myself when sitting and especially, on the toilet. My legs would shake and burn whenever I squatted down to sit.

 We continued the conditioning until school started. Then, the real work began. Before that, my mother wanted to take measurements before and after I started cross country to see the difference it made on my body. I lost 8 inches on my thighs, 3 inches on my arms, and six inches around my waist. I was gob-smacked at the results. I did not think I performed well at all. Each practice was difficult, and I was always in the back of the pack. The rewards I recieved made my day. It didn’t matter that I was good at it, it was that I tried to do better and complete what I set out to do. This was shortly before school started and at that point, I knew that I would continue to complete that image in my head of what I should look like. I observed myself in a sports bra in the mirror to see what I looked like and I hoped to God that it would be flat at the end of the year. I hoped I would look good in bikini or in shorts without cutting off the circulation to my thighs.

 The thing about being fit from regular exercise is that it takes forever to get there, but the moment you take a break for a weekend, it’s gone. This has happened to me several times over the years. In between the conditioning to school, there was a small three-day break where I lost all the progress I’ve made for my running pace. It was finally at the point where I could keep up and it disappeared. The first practice was miserable. It was a hard workout, where on the track surrounding the football field, we would have to run laps at different paces: stride, sprint, or jog. We could never walk (at least when the coaches were around).

 Running comes with many benefits, but when there are problems, it feels like you can never be the same or achieve anything. With any sport, there are injuries, and sometimes, the mental stress of it is too much for someone. There have been countless times when the stress on my body from cross country made me want to just lay down and have the pain go away. The first year, I had shin splints. Shin splints are these awful sharp pains that shoot up the front of your legs, and no matter how long I ran, I would have to stop every couple of minutes. It was at the point I had to take ice baths and when I got home, my dad would use these Dixie cups full of frozen water and run it up and down on my shins. I could feel the icy, burning sensation seep into my bones. It relieved it like no other and to this day, if I massage the spots where I used to get them, I would feel immediate relief. The solution to my shin splints was expensive – shoes. My dad and I went to a running store in Short Pump, and I went through a process to determine what shoes were best for me. The employee had me run in the store with him filming the back of my ankles and hop on the scale thing where it determines how high my arch was. The guy went over it and found a couple pairs for me to try on. After I found the one I liked best, we bought the two hundred-dollar shoes and left the store with a hole in my dad’s pocket. The next day at practice, I was wearing the brand-new pair of shoes. I felt like a new person. The only downfall is that shoes don’t last long when you run six to eight miles a day.

 Getting fit wasn’t the only thing that happened when I ran cross country for the first year of high school. I also made a lot of friends. Running together creates a bond that someone outside of the sport just doesn’t understand. What my coaches told me at the beginning of the year was to find a running buddy or group because you should never run alone. When school started, I only ran with my best friend, Allison. One day, however, Allison couldn’t come to practice, so I had to find someone to run with because I would’ve never made it alone. I met a girl named Lainie. She ran about my pace and was a year ahead of me. She didn’t have a group either because it was hard to find someone you could pace yourself with without burning out too quickly. Luckily that day was a long run, so for practice all you had to do was run for an hour then come back to stretch. She had come up to me and asked me to join her on the field after plyos. Back then, I was very shy and in any contact with a person I wasn’t familiar with, I blushed tomato red. It still happens today, but not on such an extensive scale. We walked together to the two-mile trail entrance. It was a public trail behind the school with more trails connecting to the main one. It was a very wooded area, with several trees, stumps, and a worn-out path to follow. If I ran that trail today, I would still know where each trail was and how to get there. We started running and I felt pretty good. We were side by side, my breathing easy. At that point, it was quiet and tried to get farther into the trail before we slowed down our pace a bit. When we were running for about ten minutes, Lainie struck up a conversation. Running and talking is hard if you’re not used to it. If you’re out of shape, it’s hard to breathe normally and talk. Luckily for me, I was able to talk. It was mainly small talk like what year we were and how our classes were so far. Once the trail was straighter than usual, we looked to each other and knew we had to pick the pace up. Sometimes on long runs, you had to stride or pick up your pace for a minute then go back to normal throughout the run. It was awful especially if you’re usually out of breath just jogging. I picked up my legs and put my body to work. Once it was over, I tried to get my heart rate under control because of the constant pounding. We continued talking afterwards, albeit with some difficulty, we came to the topic of food. Food was the greatest topic you could talk about running because after practice, you should eat within thirty minutes to replenish your energy. The team called it, “Close the window.” We talked about delicious pies like pumpkin or blueberry, and cornbread. We laughed and bonded over the horrors of cross country and the upcoming 5k event for the team. It was terrible, hot, and long. Heading back to the practice field, we did about ten strides to finish up and stretched. I knew after that I would have a friend I could turn to if I had any difficulties at practice and a running buddy.

 By the time my first race came close, I felt confident in myself. Little did I know what I would have to endure. Running long distance does not just depend on your physical ability. A lot of it is from your mental endurance and how much you can push yourself. Before cross country, I often tried to run on nice, sunny days. I would leave my driveway and start running next to the curb of the road, or on the sidewalk if there was one. Every single time, I would wander off into my thoughts. When it got hard, I thought to myself, “I need to stop, it hurts,” or “I can’t breathe, I’ll just walk for a few minutes.” My body betrayed me, even though I wanted to try. The thing is, it wasn’t my body. Sure, it was physically exhausting, but with mental endurance you can push beyond that. In the end, you will get the best rush of endorphins, which is basically a feeling of happiness, after you finish. I always felt accomplished and proud if I started improving or was able to complete a set without stopping for a break.

 I thought by the time my first race came about, I wouldn’t face these problems. Oh boy, was I dead wrong. After school, the girls and boys went into their respective locker rooms, energy flowing high. We all changed into our uniforms and waited outside for the bus. I got on with my friends and sat down in the seat. It was always noisy on the bus and usually the girls would start singing songs. The boys and girls had their own separate bus especially because the opposite sexes ran at different times, so if one bus is late, the other bus can participate in the race. When we arrived, I hopped off the bus and put my stuff down with the other team members. I was so nervous. It’s very nerve-wracking because of the waiting and anticipation leading up to the start of the race. I can definitely say that I went to the bathroom at least five times before I ran. Before the race started, we all warmed up with plyos and a short run to get used to the course. My heart was beating like a race horse, not because I was tired, but the suspense was getting to me. Walking shakily to the start line with other schools and my teammates, I got into a start position. When the flare gun went off, I took off. I kept pace with the other girls until about a quarter mile. The runners were starting to thin out, and I slowed my pace to accommodate my breathing. When in a 5k, I was taught to run at a pace that is uncomfortable, but not enough to burn out. As I made my way through the wooded trail, I could feel the humidity brushing against my skin. It was a hundred degrees that day and with Virginia humidity, it was suffocating. My lungs felt as if they couldn’t expand and suck in air. This slowed me down considerably and I felt even worse when people kept breezing by. I felt like I was the trees when a car passes by. On one side the trees are still, and the other the car was passing by at an unbreakable pace with the trees you identify instantly behind you. Running along, I trip over roots, rocks, and somehow making up a considerable number of hills. I kept thinking to myself that it doesn’t matter how fast I run as long as I keep going. But that small part in my brain, told me, “Walk. You’re going to be last anyway.” I’m not proud to say this, but that small part of me succeeded. I walked. After a few depressing moments, I started running again. I ran into people I was familiar with and paced with them. It helped me push myself to keep running. Then I heard it, loud clapping and cheering. I broke out in a huge grin. It was finally over! I was sweaty, most likely smelling terrible, and started running as fast as I could to the finish line. I saw all my friends waiting for me. I immediately went to the refreshment table and downed a couple Dixie cups worth of water. Later on, my friends and I all went to the bus and loaded up. All the girls, including me, sang Bohemian Rhapsody and other songs all the way back to school. Reflecting back on this day, I am proud of myself. I felt great once I finished and I knew I could do better. Overcoming mental obstacles is half the battle.

 After a couple more races, I performed mediocre at best. There were several students that were minutes beyond me. When my fourth race of the season was finished, the team went on a cool down run. I noticed something was wrong the minute I started jogging. I couldn’t put any pressure on my left leg. Every time my foot landed on the ground, the shock resonated up my leg and a burning pain was left in my hip. I couldn’t keep up with the pack anymore. I put in more and more effort, but it felt like I was in running through molasses while the others ran by me with ease. The next couple days was miserable. It had gotten to the point where walking and going upstairs hurt. I walked with an obvious limp and it felt like wires were tangled inside my hip. I talked to my coaches and I was sent to the athletic trainer. She wasn’t sure, so I told my parents and we went to a specialist to look at it. The doctor looked at it and when he touched it, it didn’t hurt at all, it was just when I walked or ran. He just told me to not run for a week. Leaving the doctor’s office, I was upset. All my progress gone because I was an idiot and didn’t take certain precautions while running. I later figured out that my injury occurred when I was sprinting at the end and crossed my arms making my hips not aligned. During that week, I felt like I was a middle-schooler again. I didn’t feel the happiness I usually did after a run, I just felt lonely. Getting back into it was worse. I ran off on my own to build my endurance back up. Running on your own than in a group, is leagues different. You have only your thoughts to accompany you. I am a day-dreamer with a huge imagination, so when my mind wanders it’s not always a good thing. Even though I ran out in the open, I felt like I was closed in a box. I couldn’t breathe like I wanted, and my body wouldn’t act like I wanted it to. I did eventually get back with the rest of the team, but I hated the process.

 At the end of the season, I was able to run eight miles a day, with considerable sweating. It didn’t feel awful, because I was surrounded by friends. I forgot about my promise to myself. That I would be skinny and have a flat stomach. After the first month, I didn’t lose any weight, hopefully it was just replaced with muscle. The image in my head didn’t seem so important now. I’m not saying that I was comfortable with my body at this point. That’s a lie, I just realized that my body is my own and I wasn’t built to be stick thin. I had hips or curves those girls didn’t and I shouldn’t be ashamed of it. I was me, and that wouldn’t ever change, and I shouldn’t have to. I can always improve what I have if I want, but it’s a choice, not an obligation to others. When it was the last practice of the season, it was memorable. The coaches ordered pizza after our long run and it was one of the best two hours of my life.

 Today, I’m just Alyssa. I’m the girl who used to run cross country and curses herself every time she runs because its hard and doesn’t like getting tomato-faced. I run because in the moment, I feel like it and memories tell me I should. Afterwards, not so much.