

The Frustrated Dance

Diana Gallagher

“On your marks,” the voice intones.

The herd shuffles forward.

This is a bad idea.

“I better beat 8:30 today,” announces the girl next to me to nobody in particular.

I could do that without a problem. That is, if this were a running race.

“What’s *your* time?”

“Um.” An elbow jostles me to the side. “I’ve never done this before...”

“Stay in order!” barks the masculine female official.

One heel is forward at the line, waiting. There is no “get set.”

Gun shot.

Stampede! Shouts from the team! Grunts as limbs speed into rapid motion! Flying ponytails and flashing batons! Runners stumbling over each other in the passing zone! The occasional bloody slash of sneaker spikes!

That excitement is saved for other events.

Halfhearted claps and cheers occasionally break the air, inspiring thrusting heels and wildly gyrating butts to march ahead of me. “YEAH, DEE!” screams Kelsey. I smile, feeling only moderately foolish.

The few cheers fade away. Kelsey’s pre-race advice runs through my mind: “Make sure to shake your ass.”

We prance down the straightaway and around the curve. A spectator yawns and walks away.

1400 meters to go.

Thus is the absurd despair and glory of the race walk.

...

How to Race Walk (No, It Is Not Power/Speed Walking):

I've literally competed in nearly every track and field event: hurdles, sprints, long distance, relays, high jump, long jump, shot put, pole vault, and pentathlon. The observer has heard of these events and respects them. The race walk? How does one race while walking?

Heel hits the track first, leg straight. Foot rolls across the ground. Tension builds as the knee struggles to stay locked, sometimes passing through hyperextension. As soon as weight shifts to the ball of the foot, the leg is temporarily released. It bends with relief.

The rest is fleeting, however; it must quickly push forward again, straight, to relieve the other leg of its labor. Meanwhile, the hips swivel from side to side to assist with keeping rhythm and form. It is a very exaggerated, precise, and rapid manner of walking.

Officials stand around the track with clipboards to monitor the racers' form. Improper form is noted down as a warning. Some officials call out comments, such as, "Watch the knees, 5234/Shoreham/Blue." Other officials observe silently.

Step forward with a bent knee, one warning. If both feet leave the ground simultaneously, another warning. Commit a third error and you are disqualified.

You did not know, however, if you'd received a warning or been disqualified. You discovered this at the end of a 1500 meter jaunt, one hundred meters shy of a mile.

World class race walkers can walk the mile in under six minutes. Races exist of up to twenty kilometers for women and fifty kilometers for men. (I have yet to meet a male race walker.) This begs the response of, "Oh! So race walking must feel *much* better than running."

...

First Steps:

The dry air of the Suffolk West indoor arena burned my throat. *You're getting there*, I tried to encourage myself.

"Hey, can you show me how to race walk?" I'd asked Kelsey after we'd exhausted the topic of our hairy chemistry teacher. I had time to kill before my next race. I also had that smug sense of, *I bet I can do this, no problem.*

Kelsey and I always found a way to be near each other at practice and meets. Short and sprightly, I bounded to catch up with Kelsey's longer strides. She had a good seven inches on me, as well as "a little junk in the trunk, but hey, I'm not huge." To observers, we were "those annoying sophomores who never shut up." We laughed loudly about

jokes that nobody else understood and burst into song while our teammates tried to sleep on the bus.

Kelsey had braved out a few long-distance races in winter track our freshmen year. However, running fifteen laps on the indoor track lost its appeal around lap eight. Our team had excellent distance runners and only two race walkers. Kelsey quietly but quickly joined the ranks of the latter.

“Sure!” With expert ease, Kelsey slowly demonstrated the proper technique. I followed. Heel, foot, knee.

At practice, always held outdoors unless a phenomenon occurred, like the apocalypse, the rest of us sprinted and gasped for relief in the cold air. We dodged ice patches and ran until our Spandex-covered legs tingled with the odd sensation of sweat striking frigidly. Meanwhile, Kelsey trotted over the ice, passing the runners who stalled before their next sprint. She seemed to enjoy her new event. Hell, it looked easy.

“Make sure to shake your ass,” she instructed with a straight face. I swiveled my hips accordingly. “Yes! Perfect!”

“Mr. K, look, I can race walk!” I called to our coach.

With his orange cap and plaid vest, the coach was never inconspicuous in a crowd. Unlike other coaches who shouted at their athletes disparagingly, Mr. K simply watched. None of us were exactly sure of his age, but he certainly had to be approaching his seventies. He had that grandfatherly quality of telling tangential, lengthy stories about past teams.

He looked up from his clipboard. I demonstrated my new strut and looked for his approval. Perhaps I’d earn a chuckle.

Freshmen often took his eccentric yet benign appearance to signify that he was a slightly senile pushover. They were wrong. Mr. K’s mind constantly crunched numbers and strategies. He knew all of our capabilities and those of our opponents. He plotted every possible lineup that would earn us the most points. His scheming was successful: the Shoreham-Wading River girls’ track team had been league champions in both winter and spring track for the past twenty years. Indeed, something about Mr. K suggested the invincible; he had the quiet aura of a living legend.

“They’re lining up now,” Mr. K replied. “Get in the race.”

I laughed. He pointed to the hallway.

Oh...he was serious.

“I’ve never done it before...” I wavered.

“Go.” It was akin to a command of God.

I went.

..

Quiet Desperation:

Self-conscious thoughts in the race gave way to something far more urgent. Pain.

My shins were a bit tired after lap one. I eased up the pace. My calves joined in humming a subtle hymn of pain. The knees took up this chorus. *Hey, us too!* Evidently the quadriceps wanted to get in on this. Sweat suddenly coated my forehead and arms. I inhaled. Oxygen inspired a shrill group shout.

I still had 1100 meters to go.

Burning, unyielding, shrieking, pounding from the knees down. Fists clench, but that’s no relief. Don’t bend. Follow the curve of the track. Don’t cry. And don’t bend.

Endless.

A strange phenomenon occurred at the end of the race that I’d like to title, “Peg Leg Syndrome.” At this point, your legs have become so numb that you can no longer tell if they are bent or straight. The finish line beckons you. *Right here! Just a little bit faster!* The only thing that keeps your integrity in line, as opposed to breaking into a run or falling down, is that the officials continue to stare you down. Thus you struggle to pick up the pace. However, concerned about bending your knees, you begin to walk rapidly with both legs straight. Your carefully crafted rhythm disappears. This is rather awkward-looking and not particularly comfortable. But for crying out loud, you don’t care.

I crossed the line in 11:45 and immediately bent my knees. Never before had walking like a normal person felt so cathartic. “Good job, Di!” said teammates who had noticed the race.

I succeeded in not getting disqualified. If I had, all of that anguish for nothing...? It was too much to consider.

Mr. K gave me an approving grin. I smiled back weakly. Never again.

...

For the Glory of the Empire:

Of course I did it again.

Spring came. We sweat under the sun. I did not become a regular race walker. But the next time I did race walk, Kelsey was on the track with me. We were the two members of a “relay team” – the lowest combined times of two walkers would win.

At the Shoreham Invitational our junior year, Kelsey and I lounged on the grassy inner track and made fun of everyone we knew. The sun glanced off of her hair. Today, it was reddish and curly; tomorrow, perhaps black and straight, but never just brown.

“Hey, what race is lined up over there?” I wondered out loud.

Kelsey pulled off her sunglasses to assess the situation. The link between best friends, however, made words unnecessary. Simultaneously we stood, stripped off our sweatshirts and pants, and sprinted to the starting line. We stumbled into order with the rest of the girls, who looked slightly confused at our entrance. Seconds later, the race began. Kelsey followed the wave of leaders. I mentally said farewell to her back.

Pain was somehow more pleasant, or at least tolerable, under the blue sky. The afternoon assured me that there was no rush. A tall girl from Kings Park drew up beside me. She’d get a few paces ahead, and then I’d step it up a notch. I wondered why her long legs couldn’t overtake my strides for long.

Race walkers circle the track in a frustrated dance, trapped by the demands of “proper form.” If they lengthen their steps, if they step too vigorously, they risk a break. Thus they stalk each other, simmering with the speed that they cannot manifest through walking.

Momentarily content with this low-key duel, I glanced up and saw that Kelsey, about half of a lap ahead, was nearly finished. Another walker from Kings Park followed in close pursuit. *I gotta beat this girl*, I realized. For all I knew, she stood between us and a medal. I couldn’t let Kelsey’s efforts go to waste.

It was time to take the initiative. No excuse for passivity. I quickened my pace and crossed in front of her. *Don’t blow it for Kels!* my mind kept repeating. Her long shadow stayed at my shoulder. Her footfalls sped to meet mine. She couldn’t have been more than two strides behind me. But she could not recover them.

As Kelsey and I walked to the table to retrieve our silver medals, I realized that for the first time, I had raced without seeking my own benefit.

...

Final Laps:

Southampton, dual meet, senior year. We're dominating the small team and the meet has just brushed the halfway point. The late-afternoon spring sun reflects off of the red track. Everyone is in high spirits; Shoreham because our victory is sealed, Southampton because they don't know this yet.

The bullhorn announcement had summoned the race walkers to the track a few minutes ago. Kelsey was the solitary brave soul who emerged from the masses. By now, she is our team's only official walker. This guarantees our team first-place points.

I have the reputation of being our team's "anything and everything girl." Need a leg of the 4x100? Another runner for the 3000? "Get Gallagher," Mr. K would say to whoever was standing next to him.

I'm standing here to keep Kelsey company. The long jump is finishing up, and soon the officials will come over to begin the race of one walker. Over here, nobody hears our sarcastic comments.

A breeze blows past. She grumbles that her chest threatens to fall out of her jersey. I can't really empathize. I do, however, remind her of the practice when she forgot a sports bra and had to wrap herself with a scarf.

Across the track, Mr. K waves. We wave back. He shouts something.

Kelsey and I glance around. We're not violating any rules or on the verge of doing something stupid. "What?" Kelsey shouts back.

"Gallagher! Get in the race!"

Kelsey begins to laugh.

Does our team need the second-place points? Not at all.

I lean down, tighten the laces of my flats, and step onto the track.

As I turn for the last straightaway, I am the only one on this track under the slanting sunlight. Later, I will experience pure adrenaline-fueled fear in the 4x800 relay, pulling out a victory as the anchor leg. I will then bounce onto the bus and suffer intense cramps from not cooling down sufficiently. I will groan that I feel like I'm in labor, though of course I do not know that sensation. After my stomach settles, Kelsey and I will share trail mix with Lauren and Jill, who are just as crazy as we are, and eventually burst into another rendition of "Bohemian Rhapsody."

This moment, then, should be almost anticlimactic. It's the lull that each story requires between breaks in the action. It's the "intermission" between bursts of speed and rapid breathing in track meets. The only impact my performance holds on the world is that the meet will take longer if I linger out here.

Therefore, why am I doing this?

“GO, DI!” The cheers of my friends are more enthusiastic than my pace merits.

“Yeah, Galileo!” shouts Kelsey, using the nickname she’s coined for me today from our pre-meet screeching of “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Out of all sixty girls on the team, she is the only one to know exactly what I am experiencing right now. The pain from this forced pace. The recognition of how ridiculous I must look. The urge to laugh at myself, because this is all my own doing. I walk because I *can* and nobody else will step forward.

The team will be quieter next year without us. I’ll be navigating through April snowfall in Cortland. Kelsey will commute to St. Joseph’s College. Neither of us will be running track, much less race walking. Instead of every day, we’ll see each other when I travel home for weekends and breaks. We both know this. We won’t acknowledge it.

Time runs. But right now, I control it. And I choose to walk.

My legs have long since gone numb. The sun burns my pale shoulders. Seeing the grimace on my face, Kelsey screams out every nickname that she’s concocted for me since seventh grade. With only ten meters to go, I give in to the feeling I’ve had ever since that first race two years ago. I laugh, all the way through the finish.

“All right, Gallagher!” Mr. K says with a grin. I’ve finished my race walking career without ever being disqualified. Those second-place points are ours.

Everyone’s attention has turned to the next event. My moment has passed.

“Way to shake your ass!” Kelsey gives me a high-five. “You have the relay next, right?” I nod, still a bit out of breath from the finish. “Let’s keep you warm. I just got the strangest text message from Henry. That boy has serious issues...”

Slowly, we begin to run.