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# Focus on yourself, not on others

Ranjeet Singh



It was 2019, almost exactly 5 years ago to the day, when I fell down like a sack of potatoes.

It was the annual school Sports Day for my two daughters, aged 7 and 9.

And like every year, after watching the kids tirelessly run their sprints, the headteacher announced on his megaphone those fateful words, “Can all the Dads who would like to run, come to the starting line”.

A shudder always runs up my spine when he says that. I can’t help it.

No matter how much I try to control the emotion, it gets the better of me.



I picture pulling my hamstring, or my shoe falling off, or worst of all falling down in front of hundreds of children, and all of their teachers and parents.

But every year, my daughters looks at me with those innocent eyes and say, “Papi, you are going to run this year, aren’t you?”, to which I always reply ‘yes, of course I will sweetheart’.

Little do they know the dread that consumes their father, the anxiety that runs inside him.

I make that scary walk from the crowds over to the starting line, my mind filled with anguish. Each time I make that long walk, I am reminded that the majority of the Dads are not racing.





They're still standing there in the Sun, chatting, enjoying the weather, drinking their cool lemonades. Great, they'll be watching me make a fool of myself.

It happens every year.

Only a small group of about 20 to 30 Dads will race and the rest just watch. Lucky them.

When I reach the starting line, I start looking at the other Dads, making an assessment of each one.





Negative thoughts start running through my head, “Wow, he looks fast”, or “I think he plays for the School Parents football team”, or worst of all “didn’t I see him in the Olympics a few years ago?”

The mind starts to play tricks with me like it does every year.

I try and shut it out but the little voice in my head gets through, “You’re slow and fat, get off the track, old man”.

I try to remind myself that last year I came second, and the year before that I also came second. Bizarrely, every year on Sports Day, I always seem to come second.

I was hoping that this would give me confidence that I could win, but it did the opposite.

It was a curse.

It's why I felt so much pressure. I didn't want to come second, I wanted to win, just once in my life I wanted to win.

That's why I always feel so anxious, because I put so much pressure on myself to win. I didn't want to be a runner up. Just this one time I had to be a winner.

Even my daughters would say "you came second again...". What does a father even say to that?

If I could come second, then I knew that I had a chance to win.

If I came fourth or fifth or even last each year, and some Dads did, then it wouldn't matter to me. I really wouldn't care.



I could run just for fun, and I could enjoy the race like many of the Dads do.

They didn't care, some of them would even wave at their kids as they ran. They always lost but they lost with a big smile on their face. I was the polar opposite.

But because I always came second, I didn't have that luxury. I was too close not to care. I had to prove to myself that I really could win. Just once.

I wanted to win for my daughters, so they could be proud of their Dad.



So now here I was again. A whole year had passed, it was déjà vu, my heart was racing, and my mouth was dry, I was so scared.

## **“Oh God, here we go again”, I thought.**

The grass track had 7 lanes painted in white and the Dads line themselves up in each lane. I did my best to join the group of Dads that looked as though they watched more sport than played it, but unfortunately that group was already full.

So now here I was, at the starting line, filled with dread again.

No warm-up, no stretching, no practice runs.

The last time that I had sprinted was exactly 365 days ago, at last year's Sports Day. That was the full extent of my training.

I just had a large Costa Mocha coffee, and chocolate croissant for breakfast, yes, I was definitely prepared.

Before I could think of anything else to shatter my confidence -

“On your marks....Get Set.....Go!”

We’re off.

My adrenaline is pumping through me, and I can hear the crowd shouting and cheering, clapping wildly. The kids are screaming. Somewhere in the crowd I can hear my daughter begging for me to run faster.



I feel hundreds of eyes all focussed and staring straight at me. For some reason they're not looking at anybody else.

I have no technique, no idea how to run. I just put one leg in front of the other and repeat the whole thing as fast as I can.

I have no grace, no style, I'm running just on fear.

The track is only about 90 metres long, but the finishing line feels like it's at the other end of the park.

Then something strange happens that's never happened to me before.

Half-way through the race, I suddenly realise that I'm winning. I'm never in the front. At this point in the race, I'm always second or third, maybe even fourth but never at the front.



This can't be right, I immediately think.

But it's true. In my peripheral vision I can see the others are close, very close.

But I'm ahead.

Oh my God, I'm winning!

This could be it! This could be my final moment.

Every year I'm acutely aware that I have become a year older than the year before, a year slower, and my chances of winning is now a more distant dream.

I'm fighting that ageing clock, against this weakening body, the pain, the aches, the tiring muscles, the more brittle bones.



But that's not all. It gets worse.

Each year not only do I have to beat all of the Dads from the previous year, but I also have to run against the new younger, fitter Dads whose kids are joining the school Reception. Some of them are half of my age and twice as fit.

So, I know that every year, the chance of winning slips further and further away from me.

I realise that today is my last chance. And this moment is it.





This is it, right now, right here. I won't get this opportunity again. And finally, I'm winning.

I grit my teeth and pump my arms through the air, I push my legs even harder. I can feel the burn, but I don't care, I'm going to push through.

Too late to worry about pulling a muscle. I need to throw everything at this.

70 metres have now gone and I'm still winning. I have just 20 more metres left, and I can enjoy the rest of the year. I can enjoy the rest of my life.

This will be the fairy tale ending, the bedtime story for my daughters to tell their children about their granddad.

A story about perseverance, about believing in yourself, about victory.

And then it happens, the unthinkable.

I feel my legs turning to jelly.

My legs literally give up on me. From pumping pistons, they collapse into wet sponges.

Without notice or prior warning.

Within a split second I go from pole position to collapsing on the ground like a sack of potatoes.

The crowd is shocked and suddenly the screaming and cheering turns into just silence.





Hundreds of children and parents simultaneously put their hands over their mouth, as you would when you see something horrific, like a car crash.

It was unexpected. I was going so well. There was no sign that it would happen, I had no time to prepare. It just happened, and it happened so quickly.

But for me it wasn't quick at all. I was falling in slow-motion. Time stood still as I crashed unceremoniously into the ground.

A grown man running at full speed is not like a small child falling. Children fall like butterflies, gracefully and beautifully.



Grown men fall like elephants. There's nothing graceful about it and the ground is not forgiving.

So many thoughts ran through my head as I headed into the Earth; the loss, the embarrassment, the end of my dream to win a race, the disappointment in my girls' faces.

My worst nightmare that I had dreaded had just come true.

Of course, I didn't come second that year. I came last or to be more accurate 'joint-last'.

Because something quite unexpected and special happened.

While the other runners hurtled past me, the slowest guy at the very end actually stopped to help me up.

He put his arm around my shoulder, and I hobbled across the finishing line with his support. We finished together.



That was a beautiful moment and the crowd clapped wildly.

And then it dawned on me.

You see, I was trying to teach my daughters about winning but without meaning to, I actually was able to teach them something far more important.

The man who picked me up and helped me across the finishing line taught my daughters and all of the other school children, about the importance of helping others. He didn't care that he had an opportunity not to come last.





He didn't care about beating me in a race.

He chose to help a stranger. I don't know the impact it may or may not have on the children, but one day it may inspire some of them to do the same.

And there was another very valuable lesson.

After I dusted myself down, I had some cuts to my knees, and I was bleeding. But my younger daughter still had her sports day in the afternoon and so I had no choice but to run again for her.

I didn't want to let her down.

So, despite having embarrassed myself once, suffered cuts and bruises and had my confidence completely destroyed, I realised that I had to go through it all again.

I had to run again in front of those same people, the same crowd who watched me fall down just a couple of hours earlier.

It wasn't easy but I knew that I had to do it. For her.

I was sure that this time I would come last. I could barely walk, let alone run. I was overwhelmed with what had just happened, and I convinced myself that I would fall again.

I tried to talk myself out of it, thinking of all the reasons why it didn't make sense.

I knew that lightning could easily strike twice.

This time I could really hurt myself. I was wearing shorts and if I fell again, the cuts would open in an instant.





Besides, if I fell again, this time I wouldn't be forgiven.

The crowd that had supported me earlier and clapped as I crossed the finishing line, would now turn on me and think "What an idiot, why's he running again?"

They didn't understand that I was doing it for my daughter.

Only I knew why I had to run, and so I did.





And unbelievably, to my astonishment I didn't fall. I was panicking throughout the race expecting my legs to turn to jelly, but they didn't.

I expected to hurtle towards the ground head-first, but I didn't.

I expected to come last, but I didn't.

As fate would have it, she decided to do what she's always done. I came second.

But this time, I've never been so happy to finish second in all of my life. It felt better than winning.

And that for me was a more important lesson that I could have given both of my daughters. It wasn't about the winning after all.



It was about all of the other things.



It was about helping a stranger in his hour of need.

It was about falling down and getting back on your feet and trying again.

It was about doing your best, even if that means not winning.

Of course, nobody was to know in 2019 that this would be our last Sports Day because an unknown flu virus would shut down the world the following year.

In fact, there was no Sports Day in 2020 or 2021.



And then a few days ago, I got that spine-jolting text again that I dread so much. It was from my ex-wife and read “It’s Sports Day tomorrow, are you running?”

Well, after 5 years almost to the day of falling down like a sack of potatoes, I realised that I would have to run again.

And all of the fears came rushing back. Yes, I still struggle to control them.

Thankfully I didn’t fall again.

But I did come second.

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