

### What Running Means to Me

I was introduced to the sport of running four years ago as a freshman on Andover High School's cross-country team. At the time I knew little about what running really meant and honestly only joined because it was the only non-cut sport offered by the school. My previous running experience included running the mile in gym class and running the Feaster Five every Thanksgiving; that was it. My expectations were low and I thought of starting cross-country more as a way to make some new high school friends than anything else. On the first day of practice I was amazed at how friendly and welcoming the rest of the team was. It was a hot day in late August and I was anything but in shape. Fortunately, one coach took all of us "rookies" on an easy jog through the woods. It was truly my first taste of running purely for the sake of running. Though I was proud of completing that first trail run, I gazed in awe at the older kids who had been subjected to a "speed workout." I was secretly jealous of their experience and expertise and hoped to someday be like them.

Four years later and I can say with confidence that running has become a part of who I am as a person. Since that first season on the team I have never even considered not participating in a season of cross-country or track. My unfaltering commitment and dedication has established me as Andover's top cross-country and two-mile runner. While others groan and complain when it comes time for a race, I jump at the opportunity to push my limits and see how fast I can go. I love the thrill and adrenaline that comes from a close race, and the relief and pride that comes at the end. More than this, however, the sport would be nothing if it weren't for the people. My teammates and coaches are like family to me and I have made some of my best friends through track and cross-country. I can count on them to cheer me on in victory and cheer me up in defeat. They are there at practices and meets, even on their own time at pasta dinners and team activities. My coaches may be tough, but they truly believe that I can achieve anything I put my mind to if I put in the work. Even my competitors are always friendly. We wish each other luck at every start, and shake each others hands at every finish. It is this endless net of support that has allowed me to feel a part of something great and proud to be a runner.

After hundreds of grueling practices and heart-pounding races, I have come to realize what it is exactly about running that makes it such a unique and wonderful sport. Unlike any other sport, running is completely objective. There aren't off-sides, or balls, or fouls, there is only getting from one point to another as fast as possible. You can't cheat or fake your way through running; in track or cross-country, you get what you put into it. The people who work the hardest are the people who accomplish the most and see the most dramatic improvements. Running is pure athletics at its finest; the true strength and speed of a person measured out in the open for everyone to see. It takes a lot of courage to start a race, but it takes even more courage to finish that race. In a race, every competitor is an equal and treated with respect. At the end, one may feel proud for winning, one may be happy with a personal-best time, and one may celebrate for getting across the finish line. The very nature of running, the raw beauty that comes from the human body performing at its ultimate form, makes it an incomparable and truly remarkable sport.