

Ashley
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Without my brother proudly waving an ISU flag and giving me high-fives along the way, or my sister encouraging me to keep going after I was determined to drop out at Mile 23, I would have never reached the finish line in three hours and 44 minutes.

But finishing a marathon, at least for me, was much more than accomplishing an extremely difficult athletic endeavor. Going the distance was a humbling experience that helped me realize what's really important in my life.

Training for the marathon taught me how valuable patience and support really is.

After having to cut my training schedule in half due to a nagging injury, I was able to understand the importance of quality, not quantity, and I was forced to grasp

the concept of patience.

And no matter how frustrating the time off was, I had my siblings and parents encouraging me to work through it. But when my family wasn't there to push me, other people were.

Walkers, bikers and fellow runners on the Constitution Trail quickly became my mini-support group during the months leading up to the marathon. The waves, head nods, good mornings and memorable conversations were all I needed to persevere during those tough workouts.

And when I finally made it to race day just a couple days ago, I was overwhelmed with how much the marathon meant to other people.

Looking around, waiting for the race to start, I noticed women wearing pink shirts reading, "This is for mom," or "She was strong, now I'll be strong." I saw men

wearing shirts with pictures of their children on their backs. I saw groups of people wearing shirts supporting their charity.

I saw two people running with a prosthetic leg. And I even saw a woman with "[Marathon] 10 on 10-10-10" on her back.

Every person participating in the Chicago Marathon had a story to tell and it wasn't until I ran with those people that I was able to understand that.

The marathon, in general, taught me how important it is to treasure the people around you. It taught me that the human spirit will always defeat the will of the human body.

And more importantly, it taught me how big people's hearts are.

But I would not have learned those valuable lessons without having a cause to run for—so thanks Nick and Kelsey, I love you guys.

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I realized the similarities between the race Sunday and the race that runs within us all in life.

The "I'm going to quit" adage falls into play when we're having a bad day at class or work, when we're struggling through a fight in a relationship or when we're dealing with the loss of a loved one. It's about persevering and finding a way to overcome.

Of the 36,131 finishers, each runner had a different story.

I couldn't help but feel inspired by the determination I witnessed in others Sunday. A runner next to me had his late wife's name sharpied on his back with the date of her death, and under it, "for you" in capitals.

I noticed runners of all backgrounds putting themselves through the same gut-wrenching pain—and helped me believe fully—that I was not alone.

The pain carried over after a medallion was placed around my neck following the race. In fact, I'm still sore as I'm typing this. But it was about the goal, not the pain that came along the way; the pain that derived from a piercing pain in my chest or the red flag that surfaced at close to 11 a.m. when temperatures reached the mid-80s.

As a family member pointed out to me online, "the pain will go away but the experience will last a lifetime (smiley face)."

Agreed. It made the training that I did worth it, despite an unsatisfying time. All of the hours running long distances at odd times of the day, the dedication and grit that

went into it.

Going the distance—the 26.2-mile distance, helped me to become grateful for the finer things in life. I didn't run because I was a runner, I ran because I wanted to say I ran a marathon. Most people had a purpose to run either before the race or after. Admittedly, I didn't find my purpose until Mile 21.

It's amazing what you'll think about on the last six miles of a death sentence race. I thought about the people who care about me the most. I thought about great friends, old and new, that have always been there for me—my friends fighting for their country, my friends who helped me deal with my parents moving out of state, my friends who helped me deal with a deflating loss in March.

I thought about the people who didn't believe in me.

I thought about my cousin, Andy, who passed away last year, I thought about my grandma Rose who passed away this summer. I thought about my mother, who has the biggest heart I know.

On the last two painful miles, I thought about my cancer-stricken father who helped save our family financially and emotionally when it seemed like the end in 2007. I'm sure he wanted to quit then, calling it "the toughest time" of his life.

Footsteps away from the finish line, my dad shouted my name for what seemed like my only coherence of the last few miles.

He pointed at me and said, "I'm proud of you." I pointed back. He couldn't hear me, but I remember what I said under my breath.

I'm proud of you too, Dad.



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