Expertise Essay

March 21, 2013

Countdown to Takeoff

 Running competitively is something I never intended on doing, yet somehow it pushed its way into my life and consumed me. At a young age I ran in the mile fun runs while my parents ran in the 5k (3.1 miles) at local races. I was somewhat forced into these not so fun mile runs but remember never completely hating them; how could I when everyone walked away with a shiny metal. I stopped running when I got older and it was no longer acceptable, or cool, for a 12 year old to run in the kids race. It was not until high school when the thought of running competitively ever crossed my mind but once I started, I knew there was nothing that could stop me. I fell in love with running and competing and continue to do so for my college cross-country team. Running is not easy even though it does not require much of a learned skill however, lots of hard work and training must be put in to be able to successfully compete at the collegiate level.

 Running is largely a mental sport in which I have to constantly push myself farther than I think I am capable of and that is not easy. The steps I take to mentally and physically prepare for a cross-country race are tedious but I see results when I cross the finish line. Although running does not require any equipment, packing my bag and remembering to bring everything I will need the next day is crucial and I am constantly going through a mental checklist in my head the night before a meet. I bring an extra pair of running shorts and a t-shirt for after my race because I like to take my sweaty uniform off and be able to have something comfortable to put on that I can still cool down in. I also bring at least 2 extra pairs of running socks. I prefer the SmartWool brand because they provide extra cushion and they go high enough up in the back that they do not slip down in my running shoes. I also bring a pair of sweatpants, an extra long sleeve shirt and my raincoat because the weather can be unpredictable. Knowing that I am ready for any unexpected weather that may occur is a way of mentally calming myself for my race. In addition to all of the extra clothes, I make sure I have plenty of water and snacks for after the race. I am never hungry after I finish running a hard race because I have pushed my body so much the very thought of food makes my stomach hurt. It is important that I refuel my body however, so no matter how much I don’t want to, I have to force myself to eat something. I tend to stick to the bland snacks such as pretzels or nut granola bars because they give me the energy I need after my race without making me sick.

On the mornings of my meets I usually have to get up early because it takes a while to travel to the courses. When I get up I wash my face and brush my teeth and then I get dressed. It is important to dress in layers because I need to keep my muscles warm but as I warm up I like to take layers off. I put my uniform bottoms on which look like the bottoms of a bikini-bathing suit. The reason we wear such small bottoms is because there is less fabric rubbing together and rubbing against our skin, which can cause chafing and slow us down. I then put on my red sports bra. I like a particular one the best because it has thick straps, which are supportive and do not cause chafing under my armpits, a major issue with certain sports bras. I then put on a t-shirt, long sleeve shirt and sweatshirt to ensure I am warm for the bus ride there. On top of my uniform bottoms I put on my long black spandex pants. I only wear the kind with the small zipper at the bottom of each leg because it is easier to take them on and off with my running shoes on and they are tighter against my leg, keeping the air from flowing up my legs like normal sweatpants do. Once I am all dressed I put my hair up in a big ponytail on top of my head and secure it with a hair elastic I know will hold it in place and keep my hair from falling into my face while I run. The last thing I do before I grab my bag and head to the bus is put on my socks and running shoes. The make and brand of running shoe a runner wears is something that is decided on in the very beginning and is never altered unless an injury causes a runner to need a more or less supportive shoe or that earth shattering moment when the type of running shoe you are used to running in is discontinued and a runner is forced to switch. Luckily for me, I have been running in Brooks Ravenna since high school and have not had to change shoes. I like these particular shoes because they provide the support I need for my ankles and they come up higher in the back protecting my Achilles tendons.

Once on the bus I have my breakfast, which consists of two rice cakes with peanut butter and a banana. I do not like to eat a big breakfast before my race because I don’t want a lot of food moving around in my stomach but the peanut butter gives me enough protein to energize me through my race and the banana gives me the potassium I need. I am also drinking plenty of water to stay hydrated. When I am on the bus I do not like talking to people because I begin to really concentrate on the course. If I have been to a course before I visualize myself going up certain hills or the ending and exactly where I am going to begin my kick. To help get me mentally prepared I also listen to music, specifically Taylor Swift. Although many people find this very strange to listen to such slow music I find her voice soothing and calming which helps me relax and moves my attention away from my nerves.

As soon as I get off the bus I become a competitor. All of the funny jokes and nervous conversations are over and I very rarely say a word to anyone before my race begins. It is all part of getting myself mentally prepared for what I am about to do and I do not want any distractions. As a team we walk parts of the course and I note sections that have lots of roots sticking up or big rocks so I know where to watch my footing. I also look at where the hills are positioned throughout the course and where the downhill sections are for me to really let my stride open up to pass people. Once we have seen the course we begin stretching and doing dynamic drills. All of the stretches and drills we do work each muscle group and really get our legs and arms loosened up for the race. I have tight hamstrings so I focus on stretching them well but not too much so they become sore for the race. Once the stretching is done I keep moving around making sure my legs do not get stiff before my race and I start taking off some of my layers. I always keep a long sleeve and pants on until right before I go to the start line because I do not want my muscles to get cold or to stop sweating because that can lead to injury during the race. I also put my spikes on during this time, which are a lighter weight version of a running shoe. They are a lot faster to run in and also have small spikes that get screwed into the bottom of the shoe, which helps grip trails and prevents runners from slipping on uneven surfaces.

In the final moments before I head over to the line I do a few strides (an exaggerated version of a run but not a sprint) and then use my chafing stick on all of the places I know my uniform can rub against my skin: along the edge of my sports bra and along the edge of my uniform bottoms. Then I start taking off the rest of my layers and put on my uniform top. For most races we are only given one number to wear on the front of our tops and I like to make sure mine is safety pinned in the middle of my stomach but high enough that it will not interfere when I tuck my shirt in. Once I have everything in position I walk over to the line with my team. We take one final stride out, do our team cheer which helps get the last minute nerves out, and stride back to our starting box. I like to be on the right side of the box next to this girl Erika on my team. She is faster than me and I like to be able to get right behind her when the gun goes off to immediately start pacing behind her. When we get a one minute warning I step away from the box for the last time and do a quick jump up and down to let my last bit of nerves leave my body. There is no room for nerves on the starting line. I get back into position with my left foot slightly forward and my left arm raised in a running stance because I know I get a better start this way. I keep my eyes on the official in the center of the course as he raises the gun and look for the smoke. Our eyes can see the smoke before we register the sound of the gun in our ears. Seconds before the gun there is a hush that overcomes everyone and I can hear nothing but my heart beating. The gun finally sounds and I am off.

The amount of preparation that goes into preparing myself for a race may seem obsessive and unnecessary but all of the little things add up in the end. Feeling like I am mentally prepared to run is often times even more important than knowing I can physically complete the 5k with no problems. By going through each of these steps and feeling more and more confident in my running ability I am able to have a great race and is the reason why I have been so successful in running.