

# Win or Lose, Use Your Conscience

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We were always told to hate them. "Them" being our high school girls cross country rivals, of course. Since freshman year, I had been slowly but surely indoctrinated by irrefutable rhetoric—stories in which our noble team triumphed against these corrupt adversaries again and again. Of this conflict, there was an obvious protagonist, and for every protagonist there must be an antagonist. So teammates, coaches, and community—all breathed life into the hungry flames of our resentment. We learned to disregard their team camp at competitions, all the while regarding their frontrunners as ruthless brutes to be mercilessly defeated for the common good. Sure, any victory was welcome, but a victory over them? Ideal beyond compare. Thus our sport was polarized, the course a desolate battlefield, and I a no-name soldier willing—no, eagerly anticipating—to put my body on the line for this, the one true cause. And for good reason.

At the district championship my junior year, the unforgivable occurred. My brave, brilliant teammate had chased down and surpassed one of their girls at the finish, as a fearless lioness would a delicate antelope, only to be disqualified, her valiant efforts effectively invalidated. I watched from the stands, paralyzed by shock as my fellow fighter fell, and with her, her self-assurance. In that moment, I understood what it meant to succeed and struggle as a collective. It was as if I had lost myself in her combat. And their coach seized upon this opportunity to taunt my disqualified teammate, who was already tormented enough. For months afterwards, she and we all were haunted by the chilling memory. Suffice it to say, we had never hated them more than we did then.

Thus my senior year dawned with heightened tension and motivation against them. We couldn't wait to avenge our teammate and consequently rewrite the narrative from this of offense to that of justice. Finally, when the bright day came to race them, I was a tempestuous Fury buried in the body of a nonchalant adolescent, soul singing a serenade of slaughter. With every passing second, I became more and more determined to play the hero and vanquish this fabled enemy. Yet time slowed, then stopped on the starting line, us and them fading into obscurity, just some amalgamated army of midwestern, suburban teenagers with big dreams and hurt feelings inhaling, exhaling, and mentally preparing.

Stealing a furtive glance at their girls, I couldn't help but realize they were just that—girls, with the same glittery braids, the same carefully maintained uniforms, the same vibrant spikes, the same common routines, the same uplifting themes and cheers, the same consuming fears and hopes and ultimately the same purpose as us. They were inherently the same—and no less a product of manufactured animosity than we. Each and every one of us was trained to be a senseless assassin, executing our function undeniably well, but defending divergent sides. And my Conscience, endearing traitor that it was, couldn't help but commiserate with their cause, for it was the counterpart of my own. I was compelled to reconcile with—or at least, reassure—them, as if we were tied together by an invisible string of shared experiences.

After all, I couldn't expect their respect without appreciating them myself, couldn't wish for the idealistic elimination of binary opposition without working towards that very objective in my own heart, mind and actions.

So before I could think properly, I acted. Turning towards them abruptly, I articulated my well wishes through a short and simple: "Hey, good luck out there." Cool guy bro nod, and scene. Suddenly self-conscious, I shifted my weight from side to side awkwardly, anxiously awaiting their reaction.

And to my surprise, they responded with equal enthusiasm. A chorus of relieved "You too!"s became the continuous tune running through my mind as I ran along the course. In the end, I won the race, but I only remember their frontrunner's sincere congratulations afterwards, a rewarding validation made possible solely by concession to my Conscience. And this, too, for good reason—the tentative balance between us and them, me and her was far better than any revenge, however justified. We weren't best friends skipping (more like sprinting) off into the sunset hand-in-hand, happily ever after, The End. But we weren't a fairytale protagonist-antagonist dyad either, engaged in eternal conflict. We were just professionals—colleagues, if you will—neither good nor bad but an understandable amount of both, striving toward the same achievements, supporting one another before and after races to compensate for opposing one another during races. Perhaps that was all we would ever be, but it was more than enough for me.

The following week, we raced them again. My soul still sang, only this time, a serenade of sweet serenity. Released from the pressure and expectation of explicitly beating them, I could focus on what I do best—running itself. And as I charged confidently along the course, combating not others but my own personal record, I distinguished two voices in particular shouting from the sidelines—those of their coach and oh-so-familiar frontrunner, who wasn't racing that day. Both had made a point to cheer me on. I choose to believe that they recognized their ambitions in me; their Consciences guided them to embrace considerate compassion as had mine. Regardless, like harmonious Muses, their favor inspired me to give my all, not out of hatred but out of heart.

As the season progressed, I proceeded to struggle while their frontrunner succeeded competitively. Yet she, her coach, and her teammates continued to affirm me—and I them—whenever our paths crossed, strengthening our connection as faithful allies rather than treacherous rivals. Their support was all the more meaningful in my state of exposed vulnerability; although they could have celebrated their victory, they chose instead to comfort me in my self-defeat. I may not know the future, but so long as we are there for each other, I am certain I can conquer any challenge. Thus, my Conscience has taught me that win or lose, ultimately kindness prevails. And our relationships with others are all the better for it.