

Slough-Moving

Silence. I have never struggled with silence as much as I have in the context of running. During a lazy evening at home, silence is a welcome guest. While I'm running a timed mile in the slough, silence becomes my worst enemy. It leaves me time to think about how much my legs hurt, how much I'd love to just stop and catch my breath, how wonderful cool water would taste in my mouth, and how that water would feel even better on my skin, as I can feel each bead of sweat form on my face. It was this struggle to push myself onward, to motivate myself to be better and faster and stronger in the midst of the silence and the pain, that taught me how to be an athlete. It was each interval training session in the Prairie Wolf Slough that shaped the runner I am today, allowing me to realize that each great competitor must find her own rhythm.

There is a widespread joke on the Deerfield girls cross country team about the slough. It's not exactly a joke, but a common understanding of the fact that the slough gets tiring throughout season and it "never ends." The scenery, although beautiful, becomes dull after ten or twenty or thirty or so runs through its path, and each curve and each sharp winding turn towards the end of the path resembles the finish. *That bridge is juuuuuust around the corner. Okay, just around the next corner. I thought this bench over here meant that the bridge is coming up soon. Is there another curve? Do people keep moving the bench to confuse me?* Needless to say, my thoughts during a run are often jumbled. This is remedied only by entertainment, which I have figured out that I cannot provide for myself, but someone must provide for me. My sophomore year running buddy, a then senior, used to narrate Law and Order episodes to me. She would do all the talking. I'd run alongside her and try not to fall over from exhaustion. We ran together at a leisurely pace every other day. The days in between were interval training days, and that meant *no talking*.

I tried to figure out what to do with this silence. *My legs hurt*. It's not that I have an issue with trying hard, it's that doing my absolute best and aiming for my best time ever comes with a lot of pressure. *Did I drink enough water today?* I've just always had trouble motivating myself. *If I get a cramp this time, I swear I'm going to stop*. I've tried the inspirational quotes. *I'm Beaumont I feel sick and I knew I shouldn't have run today in the first place*. And the pep talks. *"Damn, I really wanted to try and do this for myself today."* Good, then it sounds like you gave it your best shot. All right, and with that plan ready to be set into action...*If it...this feels great...how fast am I going? 8 minute pace? I'm flying!* (Well, for me.) This feeling of accomplishment cannot be beat. The great moments, whipping through the wind, feeling invincible, while running in the slough make up for the uncomfortable dread and silence that precede them. It is the moment when I fall into a rhythm and let worry slip away that allows me to appreciate where I am. I am no longer on a silent and never-ending dirt path. I begin to hear the bugs chirping and setting a steady beat for my pace. Then that chirping turns into the beat of

a catchy pop song echoing in my head and those inspiration quotes start flooding back. *Pain is temporary, pride is forever.*

Silence. There is no such thing. There is really only inner dialogue, which precedes finding one's personal rhythm. Sometimes it takes longer than others. Sometimes I'll have hit more than one of the slough's confusing curves or seemingly-misplaced benches before I start to appreciate my workout. The slough taught me what to make of my silence. It taught me to anticipate better moments to come. It taught me to remember that each slough workout is a practice in perseverance. It taught me that despite what is - in my opinion - a poorly-laid-out, confoundingly curvy pathway, I needed to find the voice in my head that allows me to push myself to my limit every day, knowing that I might not be the best, but I could always be better, as long as I take the time to let the magic of the slough set in. It always does, sooner or later. At that point, I can look around, breathe to the rhythm of whatever song seems catchiest that day, and keep moving onward 