

Watching Ryann

By Lorna Milne

It was my daughter's physique that first clued me in. People say Ryann is built like me. But through a mother's eye it is clear that she takes after her Aunt Leslie, my husband's sister, who raced in college. Like Leslie, Ryann's feet toe in, and her legs are long, thin, and muscular. Mine, on the other hand, are merely long and thin--hiker's legs, not fast, steady.

Yet it was more than her build that informed me. It was her grace. For five years I have watched her play soccer, sprinting down the field in fast bursts. Even though Ryann often stops short of the ball--not quite having overcome her fear of it--she can outrun most of the other players. Yet when no players threaten her, she dribbles with confidence, skillfully crossing the ball to her teammates. Now it is sixth grade and Ryann's first track season. I am perched alone on the bleachers; my husband Mike has wandered off to shout encouragement at the starting line.

Just last week Ryann announced that she had signed up for the 400-meter run, a decision that surprised me. Although I have often told her she is fast, she usually brushes me off, having grown immune to my compliments. The next day she reported that she qualified for the 400-meter relay team. I wanted to tell her that I'd seen this potential in her for a long time, but I bit my tongue.

At the tender age of 12, Ryann has already put limits on herself. Whereas I did not start playing softball until I was 13, she has already crossed softball off her list because she lacks the experience of the other players, and is afraid they will notice. Even more disappointing is the fact that, unless she signs on to train year-round, she may not play competitively enough to make the high school soccer squad. Despite the fact that she began playing basketball at ten and is learning quickly, she's apparently already "too old": while the more experienced players were on the court for an entire game, Ryann's coach only played her the mandatory one quarter last winter. At age 11--a full year before I even held a basketball--Ryann believed she was not good enough to play this sport beyond sixth grade. Given how hard our generation fought to give girls access to sports, it is enough to make a mother weep.

If It Weren't for Running

Running, it seems to me, is an extension of play, something Ryann and her younger sister have always insisted on finding time to do. Loose, unscheduled, old-fashioned play: tag, pretend, discovery. This continuum from play to running is what has led my daughter to track and field--a logical extension if one considers that 400-meter runs, javelin throws, and long jumps are direct descendants of the survival skills of the first athletes. Maybe that's why I feel excited, yet apprehensive, as the girls line up for the staggered start. As I witness my daughter's skill, I wonder what implications for Ryann's survival lie in her physical ability.

She lines up last, on the innermost track. I'm only vaguely aware that a handful of other runners are also in place. The gun goes off.

She begins cautiously--I imagine she's calculating the pace she should keep. For the first time in months, her posture is erect, her head balanced squarely over her shoulders. As she runs to the far

side of the track, I revel in her dexterity. Her legs extend with ease, their rhythm flawless. I can't take my eyes off her body in motion, the beauty of it. When she approaches the stands, I add my voice to the others. "Gooooo," perhaps the oldest of cheers. Go where? Why go?

My husband brings Ryann home while I retrieve our youngest daughter from a playdate. As we pull into our garage, we find my oldest daughter crying into the fur of our springer spaniel, who patiently absorbs her grief. Mike stands nearby.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"She's unhappy about the race," Mike says, shaking his head.

"The race?" I ask, unbelieving. "You did so well."

"I was last," Ryann half-yells at me.

"No you weren't," I say.

"I was too."

Realizing that I hadn't paid any attention to her place, I glance at Mike. "Was she?"

He nods his head yes.

I recreate the finish in my head: there they are, a half-dozen girls finishing in the same places they began in. "But you didn't lose ground. You were as close to the next girl as when you started."

"Mom, I was last!" She slams into the house.

I ask Mike, who was an athlete. "She ran well, don't you think?"

"She did great," he confirms. "But she did finish last."

"What does it matter?" Exasperated, I brush by him and find Ryann sprawled across her bed, inconsolable. I call the one person who I think can help in this situation--her Aunt Leslie. Ryann won't talk to her, though. So I do. For 15 minutes I laugh at Leslie's tales of high school sports: how her basketball coach told her to pass the ball if she got it, and how her swim coach put her on the diving team in hopes that she'd do better there. And she recounted how her field hockey coach used to tell the team to run sprints "until Leslie grows tired," which made everyone groan. Yet through it all she loved to run, often sprinting the three miles home from school. Finally, in college, a dormmate encouraged her to try out for the cross-country team. This was in 1978, six years before women won the right to run marathons in the Olympics.

That first year Leslie finished in the bottom third. But she enjoyed it and spent the next summer building up her endurance. Early in her second year, she began to excel; her coach noticed and hired another coach--someone who ran competitively--to train the team, especially Leslie. We are laughing so hard at the memories that eventually Ryann emerges from her room. I hand her the phone, and she and her Aunt Leslie talk through dinner. They talk through piano practice. By the time Ryann hangs up, she is smiling.

"Leslie," she says, "finished last in her first race. Second to last in the next one. She says it takes time to find your pace. And she says the 400 is the hardest race."

I know, however, that Leslie won nearly every race in her second year of college. And that December, because she was considered a US hopeful, my sister-in-law was one of five US women invited to Puerto Rico for the 1979 Annual Feminino International, where she placed ninth. But I don't tell Ryann all this--not yet.

One week later we are regrouped in the stands. This time I find a friend whose sons have been running for years. She tells me that Ryann's time from last week was only 14 seconds slower than the top high school racers. I hope this news will encourage her.

What I want for my daughter is what I imagine most of us want for girls of this generation. The knowledge that her body is powerful as well as beautiful. That she can depend on it, trust it, learn courage from it. In spite of my discomfort with the business of athletics, sports are the best vehicle for giving girls this knowledge.

That evening after the meet, I find Ryann typing an e-mail message to Leslie. In part it reads: "I think next year I will do long jump, and hurdles, too."

Next year. . . I keep quiet, content in the fact that what Ryann needs to know for now is that she loves to run. Just like her Aunt Leslie.

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