

Growth and Performance Through The Lens Of Maya Stovall

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Growth and performance in the sport of distance running is something that must be factored in order to achieve long-term success.

When I decided to join the cross country team in 7th grade, I was aware of the physical pain that accompanies running. But I didn't expect the mental toil would envelop me. Successful workouts and races require a good deal of determination, but the real pain became dealing with accumulated failure.

I blame it partly on freshmen track. It seems as though everything went a little too right in that initial season. I set massive personal records, shattered the school record in the 3200m, and placed 3rd at state. All of a sudden, I became the athlete of my dreams- the version of myself who had I only fantasized would show up and blaze around the track. This unexpected success filled me with happiness and pride and commitments to the future. Because if I was this good now, surely next year I would be a state champion, Footlocker finalist, triple crown winner...

Nope.

But you know that already because if you follow Illinois distance running, you know Maya Stovall has never won a state title.

As it turns out, girls grow into women in high school. This means that while I was investing myself in becoming the next great, my body was transforming. During sophomore year, I like many of my competitors developed hips and gained weight. The hormones and oxygen in my body began to function differently. The only part of this I noticed was the weight gain, which oddly, didn't irk me too much. But after I crossed the finish line a few times during my sophomore year, fighting back tears as I saw the times on the clock, I knew it was slower than I thought it should be, I frantically googled for answers.

There is not much research on growth and performance in high school female runners. In fact, it took several articles for me to figure out that growth could be negatively affecting my performance. Since then, professional runner Lauren Fleshman released an excellent article on the topic: **Read it (see below)**. No one had warned me that I might encounter this obstacle in my career. No one was able to advise me on what it would be like and if I could do anything about it. Instead, I was told the linear male narrative: work hard, and you'll get better; the winners are the ones who put in the most miles.

The information on the impact of growth on female high school distance runners on the internet is largely negative. The growth period has been described as a "cruel twist," and "an uphill battle," and "a decline" and "running against the clock." The articles and personal accounts I read sent me cowering over my iPad with tears blotching out the screen. Three years of something that made me so gratified and alive and my fate was to be a "cruel" slowdown?

I plateaued through the sophomore cross country and yoyoed through track season but continued to believe in myself and my dreams and my hard work. I still felt confident that my body would even out, and I would speed up because I knew I didn't have an iron deficiency and have avoided eating disorders and stress fractures. And anyway, I wouldn't be a competitive dream chaser if I didn't hope.

Junior year fulfilled none of those hopes and dreams. Instead, my performance, confidence, and passion took a major plummet further down. Until it hit rock bottom, the point where everything felt shattered.

A big part of me didn't want to climb out of the hole. I considered walking away and finding a different passion to dedicate my life to. Ultimately, I convinced myself to train again because I needed the exercise for my health and mood, and besides, I was a team captain. And, maybe, if the sport had made me happy once, I could find that joy again.

So I tentatively tried again, running only for the things I listed above, not out of any expectations that I would get faster. But my season didn't start too badly. I surprised myself a bit and really started to love my teammates and, yes, even the sport itself again. I lined up at state excited but desperately hoping I would PR and that it wouldn't be my freshman time that lived past my career on the school record board.

And guess what? I blew myself away that day. I dropped 40 seconds off my season best and 24 from my PR. As it turned out, I had needed to let my body grow to reach my potential.

For two years, I seemed to be that girl who would never perform as a woman, the one who was experiencing the "cruel twist" in her career and would never be the athlete she once was. I was the crazy horror story that I once feared I would become.

But those two years ended up being the best investment in myself I could make. Not only did I get faster afterward because I persevered while my body was changing, but the strength and mental endurance I gained from dealing with failure have made me incredibly bold and confident. Now, I am happier in my sport and don't take anything for granted. The media was wrong, and it needs to shift its narrative on growth in high school girls. We need to realize that while we may encounter slumps, periods of declined performance don't necessarily mean a failed career, they mean we are growing into faster and stronger people.

Dear Younger Me: Lauren Fleshman

MileSplit USA Staff - Nov 09, 2021

Note: Entrepreneur and former professional runner Lauren Fleshman wrote a letter to her younger self in 2017 for MileSplit. This is a reprinted version of the same essay, which sparked discussion and created an enormous amount of positive feedback.

Dear High School Lauren,

I have so many things I want to tell you, but I'm going to start with the most urgent. Because of all the ways I've seen athletic stories unfold over the years, this is the No. 1 destroyer of dreams.

You're a young woman, but the sound of the word "woman" makes you cringe. Well-meaning coaches and parents and aunties and grannies and inappropriate uncles comment on the changing bodies of girls—not yours yet but those around you. It's coming. You know it's coming.

You notice what happens sometimes to female athletes. She hits puberty; her times get slower or plateau. She is confused; she is working harder than ever. Clueless adults who are overly invested in her "performance" will grieve, as if her worth is based solely on PRs. This makes you scared of growing up.

Seeing girls go through this is confusing because there is a story once told to you about running: "You get out what you put in." You've heard there is a direct line between effort and improvement, between wanting it more and winning. This is a "truth" written by men, based on the experience of boys and men. Your male teammates are bathing in testosterone, a dramatic performance enhancer. You will not. You are about to bathe in different hormones, hormones that, more often than not, temporarily interrupt that promised straight line of improvement. What you need are knowledgeable coaches and parents who know how to support you during this time, to let you know it is normal, to celebrate you through development, who can zoom out on the big picture, because it is at this time that many girls give up.

You'll see girls react to a changing body in three ways: give up, ride it out, or fight against it. With 100 percent confidence, I can tell you the best choice is to ride it out. The best is yet to come.

You will go on to race at a NCAA Division I university and watch several girls do whatever it takes to fight their changing bodies. But before you choose a school, you will go on visits. You will have meals with the teams and notice they do things differently. There is the school that has "salad with dressing on the side," the school where everyone orders "no gluten and no dairy," the school where the girls bring their own food from home to the restaurant... Go to the school where people order a variety of things: the burger, the chicken sandwich, the salad. Go to the school where you can order French fries and do it without shame.

Go to the school where the majority of girls look athletic and healthy, with hydrated muscles, and get their periods. Listen to how they talk about themselves--and one another. Listen to what they value.

Do they value effort or performance? What do they worry about openly? Fixations on their appearance? Or do they lift one another up to be good teammates and performers? Do they value themselves and one another by time and place and weight? Or by the whole package of who they are as people?

How do they treat the teammates who are struggling physically or mentally or psychologically? Do they isolate them? Talk behind their backs? Do they have empathy and compassion? Do they call one another up?

Like it or not Lauren, you are a woman. A strong one. Your body is at some point going to become what it is meant to be, based on a long line of strong women who have survived generations in a tough world. For most of the time, and in most cultures, what is happening to your body would be celebrated with ceremony. Women are powerful beyond your imagination. You cannot reach your power by making yourself small. And yet in competitive running, you will find yourself in a world in which you feel pressure to do just that.

Let me speak to the competitive dream chaser in you now.

You can be fast and a developed woman. In fact, you can only reach your ultimate potential if you let your body go through its changes. If you get to the dips and valleys and fight your body, starve your body, attempt to outsmart it, you will suffer. You will lose your period. You will get faster at first. And then you will get injured. And injured. And injured.

Depending on the methods you used to fight your body, you may end up destroying your relationship with food and sport for years to come. You won't go this far, but you'll see so many of your friends and teammates do this. In your age group, the mortality rate from anorexia is 12 times higher than any other cause of death. You will see some come close.

You will see this so much, fed by reckless coaches, fed by unhealthy team culture, fed by the desire for short-term success, that it will break your heart. It will break your heart so much that it will be difficult for you to watch many of the top high school and college races after you graduate. So many young athletes will reach out to you for help. You will learn how destructive and reckless so many coaches are, and you will want to find a way to change things.

I need you to know, I PROMISE you, that the ultimate star you are chasing is further ahead than any shiny thing you see now. The way you get there is to protect your health and protect your love of the sport above all, even as you reach for the shiny goals right in front of you. You simply do not know and cannot predict your personal path, but you'll get there. It will look different and brighter and richer and more multi-faceted the closer you get.

I need you to know, you have always been more than a runner, more than your times, more than your state championships, more than your school records. But you will get confused. You will forget. Luckily you will have teammates and family and friends who remind you. You will go on to do almost every single thing you could have dreamed of, not in the way you imagined, not on the timeline you imagined.

And when you retire from being a pro runner after 12 years, you will be surprised at what ends up being most valuable to you. Your medals will be in a box somewhere, and you'll never look at them. Your proudest accomplishment will be a race in which you finished last because in that race you were tested more than ever and you were brave.

Finishing seventh in the entire world in the 5K and having a bronze medal in cross country brings you a smile, the same smile as winning league with your team as a freshman in high school, the same smile as breaking 5:00 in the mile for the first time. The real life-changers, the memories that make the peach fuzz on your cheeks and the hairs on your forearms stand up, those will be braiding your teammates hair in the 15-passenger van on the way to a race; a random tempo run along a sidewalk past a gas station where you felt like you were flying while home on Christmas break; descending a forest trail at camp behind your best friend with your arms outstretched in flight; running at night with someone you are falling in love with; pushing your baby in a running stroller for the first time; passing under a canopy of trees temporarily blocking the rain on a cross country course you can't remember the name of, the sound of your feet squelching in the mud while chasing your rival.

Protect the opportunity to make memories like those for a lifetime. You're going to be OK being all of yourself. Make sure your teammates know it too.

Love,
Lauren