

The Track

A 6-minute Toastmasters speech written and presented by Matt Danda

I jog to the track before the sun rises. It is 0.8 miles from home, just far enough to shake off the sleep. Sometimes the track is empty, but usually there is another, a dark mysterious figure, gradually approaching and receding. I'll bark, "Morning," if it's convenient, but it's usually not. No matter. I'm here for myself.

The track is a perfect oval, unnaturally flat, surrounding a silent field. A series of parallel white lines mark the six lanes necessary for competition, each just wide enough for a runner. The surface between the lines is pitch black and completely invisible in the darkness. I run with blind faith that the path is clear, flat, and unbroken. I know this track, there are no imperfections. I run fast.

Fellow Toastmasters, welcome guests. Everyone needs a spiritual escape, a place to find solace and inspiration. It doesn't have to be a grand or dramatic location. It can be a simple, unlikely place. Mine is the track.

I start with an 800 meter run. Two laps of the track. Speedy but gentle. I cross the finish line and walk for a moment, regulating my breath. The workout begins now. It won't last very long, maybe a few minutes. I shake off memories of younger, faster days, when my body could do so much more. Next I'll run a 400, one time around, faster. I feel the strain in my abs and biceps--a good sign. The 400 was my race as a kid. The hardest race, many say. A race of heart and

determination. Words I almost never associate with today, caught up in the 40-something grind of a mortgage, job, and kids, day-in and day-out.

In high school, I was the kid who wasn't fast enough for the sprints, not skinny enough for the distance, but who wanted to run. So I did the event no one else wanted: the 400 meter dash. I gave it everything I could--and just a little bit more—and was just barely fast enough to make the Varsity team. But I made it. Heart and determination.

I never won a race while on Varsity, usually fighting for third or fourth. The only reason I finished that high is because a faster runner would inevitably give up in the last few meters, after someone else had won the race. I'd kick it until the end and pass one or two just before the finish line.

At one seemingly insignificant meet, I was allowed to run in a Junior Varsity meet. Just once during the season. At the starting line for the 400m dash, I surveyed the other runners. "Which of you will get second?" I wondered silently. Such a tiny memory. But so precious.

A lifetime later, I'm a middle-aged guy on the middle-school track at 6:00 in the morning.

I finish the 400. I did not run at race pace. That would probably kill me. But I ran fast. I didn't time it. I never time it. I walk halfway around the track, gathering

strength for my next run. I stop just before the starting line for the 200 meter dash. This is my favorite moment. Alive, loose, and ready.

I start with a tiny jog and with each step increase the speed. I cross the 200 meter marker on the track and soon I'm at my best, my most perfect form. I round the corner to the straight. The straight is excruciating. I see the finish approaching but not fast enough. My body wants to stop. My mind fights to continue. It must control, it must dominate. It does. I reach the finish line, but I slowed down a few steps early. The coach wouldn't have approved. But, Hell, I'm forty-three, I don't need to kick it. Heart and determination.

I'm tempted to run another, and sometimes I do. But I also worry about injury. It happens when I push too hard. And I want to run again, tomorrow perhaps. I continue around the track, walking the corner and running the straight, just fast enough to stretch my legs. Then I leave the track and begin the short journey home. A slow, cleansing jog with no walking. No resting. Heart and determination.

In a few minutes I'll be back home, facing the wrath of several children getting ready for school. Breakfast, backpacks, clothes, shoes, jackets, homework.... After a fair bit of shouting and directing and madness, they'll be corralled in my car and I'll drive them to school, on my way to the grey cubes of my IT job.

After the kids jump out and scurry to their respective buildings, somewhat exacerbated, I relish the quiet in my car. Just as I pull away from the school parking lot, I see the track, now bright in the morning sun. And I remember this morning, and I remember the competitions. I had heart and determination back then, and sometimes I feel like I've forgotten it.

But not today. I drive off to work, ready to face the challenges ahead. Heart and determination. God, I love the track.