

I first met Coach Martin my freshman year when I was filled with a lot of expectations. My older brother had mentored me about his four years of high school as well as running cross country and track with Coach Martin. Marty, a nickname I would come to know him as, seemed like an enigmatic figure before I encountered him. After running at a club team, I knew the gray area for a good running coach is massive: some simply want you to run faster, but others know how to actually get you there. The Walter Johnson cross country team is one of the most well renowned in the state of Maryland, as well as having the most state titles at our school. Marty had coached the team since about 1999, so the success clearly had something to do with him.

Knowing all this before my freshman year, I was disconcerted at competing in WJ cross country under this effusive and bearded Coach Martin, who at first glance appeared like a figure akin to Confucius.

But on that first day, as all the freshmen and returning runners walked over to the bleachers for an orientation-like meeting, I noticed a bright smile under that same Confucius-style beard. After sitting us down, he began by telling us that many of the runners he'd coached over the years still are friends with each other even after leaving the team. He would continue, saying how billionaires have said that they are richer in their friends than in their money. Then he'd say half sarcastically and half inspirationally that he's making us billionaires by giving us friends. I heard that same proverb three times a year at the beginning of each season, and I loved it each time. Maybe it was the August sun, but I think it was Marty's vibrant and welcoming attitude that warmed me up before we actually began warming up for the run.

Three years later, running distance for cross country, winter track, and then spring track, I've come to talk with Marty like a friend. The best part about Marty is that he creates a supportive environment for the distance runners he coaches, one that's different from school. It's one that's filled with passion. Passion for the sport that he so clearly loves, and he shares it with all of us too. The workouts he's devised and come to know inside and out over the years really do push us as runners. Every workout he's right there with us, advising our pace and form for each interval. Even on long runs, when we leave him behind for about an hour, running the routes that he's known for decades, he's still there when we get back to make sure we stretch and strengthen ourselves.

That mental distance that I built up around any type of adult in my life, coach or teacher or whoever, got broken down and is still being broken down every time I show up to practice. Even after about 12 years of schooling, Marty is still the only teacher or coach I can remember hugging. When you're in Marty's hands, the environment around you can prosper, and especially in a sport like distance running, that is crucial.

Josh