A State Championship Versus Runner's Conscience

By [John Christian Hoyle](#) / February 5, 1999

A light drizzle and fog fill the vast margin between gray clouds and muddy ground. The temperature is 42 degrees. The weather envelops and entices me and my six cross-country teammates as we exit the school van.

Our previous performance under similar atmospheric conditions was impressive. It got us here - the final meet of the season, the high school state championship. Physically and mentally, we are overprepared. We're cocky.

Jogging toward the starting line, I feel the eyes of our competition burn into my back. I reciprocate glares while laughing at a joke a teammate shares. I savor knowing that these 180-odd runners know we are the team to beat. I feel powerful.

As we stretch ligaments, I catch a glimpse of our coach smiling - a configuration his mouth and cheeks are not used to. He knows the probability of our placing first is better than excellent.

"This is the best opportunity your school has ever had to win a state title," he says in a gruff voice. "Don't let the school down. Don't let me down. Don't let your teammates down. And, most importantly, don't let yourselves down."

Coach is still speaking. But I've stopped listening. I dream of the big, shiny trophy.

We take our places: The gun fires. As I accelerate, I inhale deep breaths. Most of the racers are behind me. I'm hitting stride. A strong finish is mine.

Rounding a corner of a remote leg of the winding course, my eyes zero in on a runner in red shorts. He's sitting down, crying in pain, clutching his foot. I sidestep him, and glance at my watch. I'm making good time. I take comfort in knowing there's one fewer runner ahead of me.

But suddenly I freeze. Cold. I'm breathing heavily. My mind tells my legs to keep moving. But I don't. I can't. I swivel around, spotting the downed runner. He's now lying on his back - in the mud. I'm about 20 feet from him. I think for a moment. Do I help? Will someone else in the pack stop to help? Can I come back or send someone when I cross the finish line? I'm losing precious minutes. The agony on his face disturbs me. He's in trouble. Our eyes connect, and at this moment, the race has ended for me. Arguments against helping become moot. I can think of nothing other than helping this fellow.

I help him to his feet. We look for someone else to help but no one does. About 25 runners have whizzed by. Finally, two or three minutes later, a man comes to take over for me.

"Finish the race," he encourages. "Finish the race!"

I do. When I cross the finish line, my coach and teammates are waiting to find out what happened.

"Where were you?" Coach asks in a tone that would have dwarfed Lombardi.

I explain.

"You what?" he says, tossing his arms in the air in disbelief. "You stopped to help someone."

"Yes," I mumble sheepishly. "It seemed right. I'm sorry."

He laughs at me. His face is fiery red. The six-hour ride back takes days in my mind. It's lonely and silent. Drum beats from headphones are the only sounds that break the stale air.

My team placed fourth. Almost three weeks will go by until Coach speaks to me. Sports make my world revolve. It seems everyone thinks I failed, that I should have breezed by the guy.

I think about it a lot, even now, several years later. Did I do the right thing? Was it worth it?

Yes, because when his eyes connected with mine, my conscience demanded I stop and help. Though I had to think about it for a moment, I couldn't keep running. I would have felt awful if I had - and that would have smoldered in my mind a lot longer than the disapproval of Coach and my team. Basking in personal glory on the altar of ego, I figure, is never worth it.