

Honorable Mention
Hannah Baird
Forest Hills Eastern High School / 12th Grade

Leadership Today

Everyone needs a sheepdog: someone who ensures that their pack's path is correct and is willing to nip at heels when it wanders off course. Sheepdogs herd their packs, sprinting from side to side until all cattle arrive at the desired destination. In essence, the meaning of leadership today is possessing a sheepdog mentality.

Nick was my sheepdog. A timid freshman running varsity hurdles, my splits fell well behind those of the older runners, but Nick refused to accept my surrender. He taught me how to come out of the starting blocks low and how to snap my trail leg over a hurdle with ease, and day after day, I gained speed and confidence. During meets, he could sense that moment when my lungs screamed and my legs ached and my throat burned, and every time, his voice, bellowing above the murmurs of the crowd, convinced me that I could finish the race.

The word "leadership" carries with it a wide array of connotations, and with multiple interpretations, true leaders become muddled behind individuals with loud voices and stubborn dispositions. By failing to listen to others, these bullies lose the trust of their followers and fail to make an impact. In today's society, the concept of trust has become outlandish and unfamiliar; people find it easier to cater to their own needs and purposely blind themselves to those of others because society has created the false illusion that success is the result of independence, when in fact, success results from interdependence.

Nick never decided, in a single moment, to be a leader. Over time, he grew into his position with the mentorship of coaches and past captains. He relied on their guidance to hone his skills so that, when the time came, he would be the best version of himself. At practice, he sprinted with the sprinters and hurdled with the hurdles, making his presence felt even in his absence. His suggestions gradually became definitive; if he thought we could sprint a second faster, we did. If he thought we could jump a centimeter higher, we did. As we stepped on the track, day after day, every member of our team bought into their role, and not a single individual challenged his position as captain; his newfound title was the synthesis of four years of dedication and leadership.

Captains typically lead the team in exercises and finish first, but Nick would often run through drills from the back of the line. In a sense, he nipped at our heels to push us to perform at the level he knew we were capable of reaching. Always working toward a better result--whether in the form of a faster split or a quicker snap--he sought after excellence, and meet after meet, individuals continued to beat personal and school records. That year, Nick led our team to the state meet where one of our relay teams--coincidentally, one that worked on handoffs with Nick--broke the state record. Nick mastered the intangible aspects of leadership and garnered perceptible respect from his imperceptible actions.

The sheepdog mentality that Nick embodied shifts the paradigm of the societal perspective of leadership, but the sacrifice of self-glorification for team achievement defines a true leader from a loud bully. Nick set the standard for captains and leaders alike, illustrating that true leaders push those around them to success, even if it means leading from behind, even if it means more work for that individual, even if it means putting others before self because true leaders have accomplished their personal goals when their pack has reached its desired destination.