



UNAFRAID

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I recently bought a small apartment in Brisighella, Italy, on the Apennine Hills between Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. It's only an hour from my childhood home and, although I live in the Netherlands, we're all getting older and I wanted to have a base near to my parents. While I was moving some stuff from my parents' house to my new home, I found a little medal. The paper ribbon is almost falling apart and features the colours of the Italian flag. The medal says "first place".

I immediately felt a wave of bittersweet feelings, tenderness and pride. The day I won that medal was sometime in the spring of 1996. I was 13 years old and, together with three other girls, we ran the fastest 4x100m relay in the school. Even faster than the boys.

I still remember the other kids' gaze as we crossed the school auditorium in our tracksuits to take the little trophy from the school principal's hands. It was glorious.

In my home town of Fusignano, the athletics track runs around the outside of the football pitch. Back then, we didn't have access to the track to train. The facilities weren't very well maintained, and besides, the football pitch was religiously kept for the local team – even if the boys were not training on that pitch but used it only for matches on Sundays. Hence, we did our training on the grandstand. Where the spectators would sit. As teenagers, we were not permitted to train on the streets.

Back and forth, back and forth, a couple of hours per week. We used to practise the relay change incessantly, literally screaming out "Op!" at each exchange, just as our coach (a supportive teacher at the school who was passionate about our training) told us to do.

We wanted to be perfect, and we knew our legs could push hard.

The day before the race, we finally practised on the track. We were so excited that we did the three exchanges perfectly... and we even got to use a real baton.

It was race day at the "Trofeo Deggianni" tournament. The speaker called all the teams; we held each other's hands for a second and took up our positions. Glenda started. She was so fast, I was taken by surprise when she arrived with her straight arm, looking at me and screaming "Op!" Her big blue eyes seemed even larger than usual and had a little spark – or so I thought. All of a sudden, it was my turn. I had the baton and ran toward Elena as fast as I could ever remember running before. "Op!"

Elena's long ponytail almost went through our hands and the baton, but we held on. I followed her until the last passage with Elisa. "Op!". Elisa was fast. She was the greatest in every sport. She ran with her red glasses fixed on to her nose with a funny lanyard. She was our superheroine.

We won. The stadium exploded, and it was hard to fight our tears. When I was 13, I didn't want to be seen crying – and definitely not in front of all the other kids. My guts felt like they were upside down. We ran toward Elisa, who was still catching

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her breath. We hugged and screamed with all the strength we had left in our lungs: “Op!”

Afterwards, we looked at the race results with our coach and discovered that we were faster than the boys.

When you are a teenager in a town like Fusignano, with around 9,000 inhabitants, in the middle of the lower Po Valley, without a railway station, time drags. Our alternatives on those long teenage afternoons were catching the bus or getting on our bikes to hang out with friends, some very limited sports practice during the week, and the parish recreation room on weekends. Elena and I soon started to rollerskate around... until the local police told us it was illegal to do so on a sidewalk, so we stopped. Elisa joined a cycling team. Elena's parents could drive her to the next town, where she joined the track and field team. Glenda just stopped doing sports, and I went back to gymnastics. I wasn't encouraged to run. I was an OK gymnast; I practised until I was 25 years old, but running was always there: when I took a run-up to the vault or for a double flip, I gave it my all. Running made me literally fly. However, my gymnastics instructor always told me that I “was not beautiful to look at, but [I was] strong”.

I didn't think about those words again until I found the little medal 29 years later.

I started running again during my university years and now running is a big part of my life. Having a very demanding job for which I travel constantly, running has been the only anchor to a sort of normality and a way to stay active.

Last year, I ran my first 100km race in Biel/Bienne in Switzerland, and if I look at the photos: “I am not beautiful to look at, but I am strong.” This made me start to question myself and delve back into the past to see whether my instructor's words had perhaps left some scars. The first thing I asked myself was: “What does it mean for me to run?” My answer is that running as a woman is a political matter.

Despite being born just two years before female runners were officially admitted to compete in the Olympic Marathon, I never had to fight to do certain kinds of sports. I must thank my parents for always being very supportive. Since I was six years old, I have practised tennis, swimming and gymnastics and eventually became a gymnastics trainer and a competition judge. But growing up in the gym, I always struggled with the attention given to gymnasts' appearance, rather than how well they performed the exercise. One of the parameters judges are asked to evaluate is the gymnast's “aesthetic presence”, and I always refused to penalise female gymnasts if their underwear had somehow slipped out of the leotard. This little act of resistance from my side did not change the way the bodies of girls were looked at and judged by others, but I felt it was right to make a point.

But gymnastics takes place in a protected environment: the gym. When I approached running, it was another story.

A woman who runs on the streets is still the exception in some places; I experience this myself every day when I sense the gaze of others on my back until I cross the road and disappear from their sight in my little town. “Isn't it a bit too much, running for six hours?” “Are you not afraid to run alone?” “Does it not bother you to be catcalled?” Yes, yes and

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yes. However, I want to be able to run a marathon, and then an ultra marathon, because I can. I want to stop worrying about being assaulted or harassed. I would like others just to let me be. Therefore I keep training, even though I might go against the aesthetic and social rationale that women running are a distasteful spectacle and are not “feminine” (an idea explored by Jaime Schultz in her 2019 essay¹). Like Brazilian football star Marta, who always wears her blood-red lipstick because “we had to leave blood on the pitch”, I always put on my mascara to highlight the marks of a sleepless night running under my eyes.

At this point in my life, I feel it is crucial to recognise publicly the struggle of other women and non-binary people before me who helped women's distance running to progress – and, most importantly, to thank them. For them, running became a contested space and, through their bodies, they politicised long-distance running by claiming their right to be visible on public roads. Today, even for someone like me – a white, well-educated cis-gender woman living in Europe with a supportive husband – it is still not easy to claim the time and space just to run and to have fun alone.

Not being afraid to show the vulnerability of a woman's body that runs, sweats and struggles under public scrutiny means something different to comparing it with that of a male. It is the male's body and how it looks that sets the standard. On the one hand, if a woman's hair is not perfect after 100km, well, sorry, but that's nothing special. On the other hand, if a woman wears a bit of make-up while running, some will think that it is inappropriate to do so while exercising or simply that it reinforces the mainstream norms of femininity, and that

this is wrong. Thus, “You are not beautiful to look at” started to sound like a compliment to me. Hence, I pushed harder and further until I reached 100km and, to be honest, I felt quite beautiful when I crossed the finish line.

When I run, I don't care too much about anything, really. I just want to go far. Sometimes, I would like to run forever to feel the same butterflies I felt when we won the 4x100m relay in 1996. ■



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