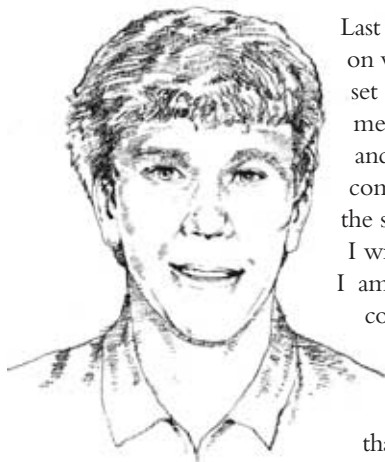


A TEAM ALL OUR OWN | By Louis Albanese '04



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Last fall, I wanted nothing more than to be on varsity cross-country. It was a quest, a goal set just at the reaches of my physical and mental abilities. But despite extra training and mentally refocusing, my plan didn't come to fruition. It wasn't until the end of the season that I was glad it did not.

I will always remember bridge-jumping day. I am in the middle of the crowded cross-country room surrounded by 40 other runners, all listening intently as Coach Weber gives us his final words before the very climax of our season. The thing that sticks out in my memory is that this is his last year as head coach, and it is almost certainly my last year of cross-country. So, silently listening, I share in his final reflection, no matter how much I try to convince myself that because I am on JV the sport is not all that important to me. There is something about the way Coach Weber can say things: you may not know what he is getting at right away, but in the end everything he says makes perfect sense. I share his feelings when he tells us what running means to him.

The meeting adjourns and the team leaves the room and heads up the stairs outside. Waiting for me at the top of the steps are four other JV runners: Bill Welsh '04, Spencer Sherman '04, Seth Hayward '04 and Paul Gavin '04. The five of us have trained together throughout the season, and this day is no exception. Every day we go out in the woods, run for an hour, get lost, have a water fight, slide in the mud, come back and then do it all again the next day.

It soon became very clear to the rest of the team that we were not entirely connected with them. There were jokes made about it. They called us, among other things, the "Furious Five." We called ourselves "PEABJVXC04." (The initials explain themselves.) Either name worked, because we were the definition of a motley crew, probably the most eclectic mix of seniors you could find—all from different dorms, with different groups of friends, different interests, different personalities. Being seniors on JV is probably the only thing we did have in common. But that was more than enough, because every day we were out there, in the woods, finding out who each other was.

Today, everyone knows what the plan is. We are supposed to take a rest day, and that is precisely what we intend to do. We jog over to the white cement bridge that leads to the football stadium, all the time filled with silent anticipation. Without much discussion, we strip down to our running shorts. Each of us mounts the wall, the one that is supposed to keep us away from the water. We nervously collect our balance, and our courage. "Everyone ready?" I ask, almost screaming. I am

answered with a loud and jumbled wave of sound that is most defiantly not English. The answer is yes.

"P-E-A-B-J-V-X-C-0-4!" the five of us chant. There we are, at the end of a season, and almost certainly at the end of our cross-country careers, standing on the rail of the bridge staring down at what we all think is the dirtiest, coldest water we have ever seen. And with the end of the chant, I jump and am free. In those few seconds in the air, there is a lifetime of reflection. All at once, like a barrage from the past, memories more vivid than real life come flooding back to me from some dark hidden corner: memories of my first race, of my coaches, of my mom and brother and coach cheering me on. Memories of winning races, of running in the pouring rain, of snowball fights and all-out finishes. Six years of memories in three seconds—now that must have been some sort of record.

Splash. The water comes, colder and dirtier than any of us anticipated. Before I know it, I'm swimming for the surface and trying to find my breath that the cold took away. Then, we make a mad dash for shore, five pairs of arms and legs moving frantically, rushing toward the soggy brown bank. Just as I reach the shore, I go completely numb and try to climb up a slippery slope with two people ahead of me, two people behind.

Once we're all out, we stand in huddled circle, surrounded by passersby who had stopped to stare at us, puzzled by what it was we were chanting and by what we had just done. "It's our team," I explain. "Phillips Exeter Academy, boys junior varsity cross country, class of '04." The last part doesn't exactly roll off my tongue, but that's not all that important. What we did, however, well, that was pretty significant—to us, at least. Our last group effort after a whole season of bonding. All those long runs in the woods, just the five of us—we weren't five different people after that. We had run as a group every day, trained together and even helped each other during races. And yes, we had our share of fun in between, for sure.

We were our own team. Each of us with our own very different traits, different reasons for running, different agendas. But for those hours we were together, there was nothing separating us.

Maybe I'm overdramatizing. Maybe we just jumped off a bridge and broke a simple rule. But five, maybe even six months later, I look back to that moment and know that that was when Exeter taught me what it is to truly be part of a group. It was not in the classroom, it was not part of the assigned homework, it was not the set workout. It was just the five of us going out and making something, somewhere between the lines of time and place, where the only thing that mattered was Now and Us. ■

Editor's note: While bridge jumping is against Academy rules, it is perhaps a rule more honored in the breach than the observance.