



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Two-mile races

The coach never even looked up as I heard my 100-yard dash time. “Have you considered the distance events, son?” was the only acknowledgment he allowed, and his message was clear — I was too slow, and the hope for substantial improvement was simply nonexistent. Thus began my initiation to the two-mile run.

Unexpected lessons

While my career as a competitive athlete ended with graduation from high school, the three years of laboring as a distance runner provided experiences that would eventually become lessons on life. Unexpectedly, these lessons have been of huge value in the realm of ranching and beef production.

Five concepts were drilled into us as we struggled through the training regimen: give effort, be accountable, contribute to the team, be tough, and joy is the reward.

- Give effort, as there are no shortcuts to completing a two-mile race — you have to run all eight laps to finish. This is a significant truth in business as well. The landscape is littered with failed ventures that attempted to build success via shortcuts or by taking the path of least resistance.
- Inner accountability is an absolute requirement, because no one can run the race for you. Once the starter’s gun is fired, the race is set in motion, and no matter the conditions or the level of competition, each runner has to commit resources of energy and dedication to run well. The goals differ from athlete to athlete. For some, the objective is to win the race; for others, it is to attain a personal best time; and for others, it is to simply complete the task at hand.
- Teamwork takes on a unique meaning in the race. Even though each athlete has his or her own objectives, two-milers are a community of competitors who respect all who run. Words of encouragement are typically exchanged between teammates and competitors. Teammates take on the role of rabbit to set the pace, and often those who have completed will take on the role of cheerleader to encourage slower runners to finish strong.
- Toughness is an absolute requirement, as pain will be part of the experience. There

is simply no way to run the race without the expenditure of significant resources and the accompanying pain that is associated with great effort. Somehow though, there is an inner confidence that comes from facing the challenge, enduring the hardship and accepting the consequences of participation.

- The reward, however, is joy. Completing the race, drained of all reserves, is the pinnacle experience for a distance runner. Every single competitor in a race can receive the joy associated with giving absolute and complete effort. This sensation is so powerful that it trumps winning for many runners.

Interestingly enough, these attributes were reinforced by participation in junior livestock association activities. Whether a heifer show, a public speaking contest or a judging competition, each activity required the investment of effort, accountability, teamwork and pain to be able to experience the joy of accomplishment in the end.

We frequently hear criticisms aimed at youth activities that involve competition, and yet in what other arena beyond that realm can we pass on the lessons of striving for a goal, dedicating substantial time and effort to its attainment, being accountable for the outcome, and learning to deal with difficulty, hardship, and the pain of growing and improving?

Encouraging spirit

The world is competitive by its nature, and in a free-market economy there are those ideas, products and services that win market share and those that flounder and eventually fail. Economist Thomas Friedman wrote, “When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me: ‘Finish your dinner — people in China are starving.’ I, by contrast, find myself wanting to say to my daughters, ‘Finish your homework — people

in China and India are starving for your job.’” The reality is that we should not attempt to protect young people from failure. Only by encouraging a spirit of effort and trying can we expect to maintain our status as the world’s leader.

Larry Bossidy in his work *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* goes so far as to say, “The person who is a little less conceptual but is absolutely determined to succeed will usually find the right people and get them together to achieve objectives. I’m not knocking education or looking for dumb people. But, if you have to choose between someone with a staggering IQ and an elite education who’s gliding along, and someone with a lower IQ but who is absolutely determined to succeed, you’ll always do better with the second person.”

Investment in youth programs that promote and support a healthy competitive atmosphere and programs designed to help young people develop effective skill sets to thrive in a global marketplace will provide substantial returns over time.

My parent’s generation invested in future generations often with the hope that we would have it easier than they did. My generation’s investment should not be motivated by the notion of making life easier, but rather to assure that the next era of American leadership has the work ethic, personal accountability, team skills and willingness to face hardship as a means to assure that our society will remain competitive in the future.

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