

I stood up.

I was seven, in second grade at an elementary school in Sunnyvale, California, the fifth of what would become 18 different schools for me from kindergarten to high school graduation. Not all were in the same town, the same school district, much less the same part of the state. Being a kid, I assumed I would easily make friends, even as the new kid. That was not always the case. This day was one of those cases.

The school had a field day that included running events for each grade, some of the events combining grades. One of those was a 50-yard dash on the grass that was well-mowed between two of the one-story buildings housing the classrooms. The layout was basically from one set of benches to the next set with little finishing room to spare. Anyone could ask to participate. I did not hesitate.

Even at that early age I thrilled to run fast. I never thought about winning or losing. I simply wanted to run. Fast. Turned out so many other kids from first grade through sixth wanted to do the same that there were heats to whittle down the competition to a last race. I kept finishing high enough in each heat that I found myself in that last race.

Standing at the final start, I looked at the other racers, kids in fifth and sixth grade that I did not even recognize despite sharing a school and schoolyard with them almost daily. School was my job. They appeared almost like small adults in my eyes. A teacher called us to the uneven start line. I felt my feet inside my shoes, making certain they were each snug. Feeling no shoelace untied or loose, I lined up on the far right, but not at the end.

I heard, "to your marks." I followed the older kids' actions of stepping up to the jagged start line, knowing I would hear "go," quickly. I leaned forward without hesitation, felt the heat from the big kids on each side of me, and hearing "GO!" yelled at the final racers, I began my sprint. And fell headfirst into the thin grass, arms flailing to my front just before I hit the ground, hard.

Elementary-school children collectively buzz like a beehive, no matter what they are doing. That is practice for adulthood. When I self-planted into the ground that white noise turned to a collective gasp followed immediately by silly laughter. I felt the laughter searing my shirt, heating my chest, burning my ears. Instinctively, I took corrective action.

I stood up.

Flashing through my thoughts were that I could quit. Or I could cry like little kids do sometimes. I chose to begin to run again, quickly. I knew I was fast, and I was going to prove it. 50 yards is a long way for a seven-year old to run all out with seven-year old legs. But I knew I was faster than the others and I was going to show it.

By halfway, I passed the slowest older kid just before I passed two more. Just past halfway, I veered towards the middle and passed three more. I had momentum. Just before passing a tree on the edge of the grass that was several long strides from the finish, I no longer had any other runner in front of me. Crossing the finish line just before running between the benches, I glanced back and saw that no one was finishing close to me. I also took in the amazed expressions of the teachers and some of the kids. I was awarded a ribbon, I think.

I have carried that memory, quietly tucked away in a jibber-jabber of my brain, throughout my life. I often forget its existence. That race, that moment, that day, was my grit. It was my gift to myself. Because we moved so often, I realized that inner-fortitude to hold my ground, expand my horizons, and more specifically, to grit "it" out, whatever "it" was, worked to my benefit with school, competitors, friends, and eventually with all the adulthood offers.

The next semester, my mom, a single mom of three, moved us, again, this time to a then small town on the Central California coast. Though I have no fear of change, I do enjoy staying in one place long enough that I meet people who turn into close friends. I also enjoy the running routes I create, with the variety and scenery available to the area. I still race. I don't fall too often when I race now. I don't always finish as fast as I think I should.

Now being old enough to smell retirement, I no longer am given attaboys for racing. I actually get hassled for still running at my age, the comments to which I merely offer a quiet smile accompanied by my eyes' glint. I long ago dropped needing the approval of others. I run because I can. When workmates, family, or nonrunning friends approach the topic, I do what I've always known to work best for me.

I stand up.