

The runner with the broken heart who thrives on perseverance and love

October 7, 2018 by Jay Slagle.

“Who’s the kid in last place?” “What’s his story?” “You haven’t heard about the runner from McCool Junction?” “The next time you race, will you have as much heart as Noah Lambrecht?”



The world is full of incredible things but we’re moving so fast that we often miss them. When we do recognize them, we always have questions. Sometimes we don’t ask them, but they’re always there. They gnaw at us, begging to be asked.



Ten days ago I was standing near the finish line at the Nebraska-Kearney high school cross country meet when I heard a man tell a race official, “That’s my son. He’s had four open-heart surgeries and he’s got a pacemaker.”

The father pointed to Noah Lambrecht, a senior from McCool Junction (Nebraska), 100 meters away and running towards the finish line. Noah would finish the 3.1 mile race in just over forty-two minutes. Dead last. But very much alive.



The drive back to Omaha took just under three hours. By the time I made it home, I had dozens of questions in my head. The first one was, “Who was that kid in last place?”



Bill Rodgers was a four-time Boston Marathon winner in the 1970’s. When asked how he could run a marathon in just over two hours, he discounted the effort but saluted the recreational runners who covered the same distance. Running for two hours was easy, he said. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to run five or six hours.”

If a media outlet covers high school cross country, it’s almost always focused on the winners, the medalists, the top-ranked runners. I’m guilty of it too; the majority of my articles focus on Nebraska’s fastest runners. And then, in a phone interview that lasted a few minutes longer than one of his races, I learned how Noah Lambrecht defines success. It has nothing to do with gold medals, and it’s a lesson that every runner should hear.



His story started off all wrong. Noah was born with blood vessels that weren't attached correctly to his heart. He had his first open-heart surgery when he was three days old. A second open-heart surgery a few weeks later. A third open-heart surgery at seven weeks. Things weren't going well. In addition to his heart problems, he was suffering from kidney failure. Even worse, he had no mother or father to care for him in the hospital. His doctors gave a grim prediction: if the social workers didn't find parents for him within the week, he would probably die without leaving the Chicago hospital. 'Failure to thrive,' the doctors said. Noah needed love.

Gaylord and Sheri Lambrecht, who already had three children between the ages of 15 and 24, had been searching for a child to adopt for over a year. As part of that process, they had registered their interest with a Chicago adoption agency. Sheri was (and still is) a nurse. A hospital social worker, whom the Lambrechts didn't meet until after they signed the adoption papers, decided that Noah, the kid with the bad heart, needed parents who could manage his serious medical conditions.

After his third surgery, Noah went home with the Lambrechts. He improved but was not out of the woods. A fourth open-heart surgery at age five. Three years later, his parents realized that all Noah wanted to do was sleep. His heart was beating too slowly and he needed a pacemaker. This time open-heart surgery was not required, but the surgeons had to break his sternum and open his chest to implant the device. After five major surgeries, the doctors had finally fixed his broken heart.



Noah can't remember why he decided to go out for cross country. In the spring of 7th grade, he came home from school and told his parents that he was going to join the team in 8th grade. That was three months away. His parents thought he'd change his mind. Noah even thought he'd back out.

Since he had received his pacemaker, Noah had always been active. The doctors had ruled out football, but running and basketball were fine. Noah knew distance running would be good for his heart. His physical heart. He never considered what it could do for his spiritual heart.



He didn't garner much attention as an 8th grade runner. The races were only one mile and Noah finished a few minutes behind the other runners. He wasn't a member of the high school team, but he could see that those runners had a bond. He'd already been adopted into one family. He didn't expect to be adopted a second time.

At Class D schools, coaches always need more athletes. Ryan Underwood had coached Noah in 8th grade, and he was pleased to see him at the first cross country practice the following year. It didn't take long for Coach Underwood and the upperclassmen to see that Noah could be an integral part of the team. However, there were a few problems. Noah had never run three miles. He had a pacemaker. He

would probably finish last, or nearly last, in every race. Why would Noah want to go through so much pain for so little reward?

Just before Noah's first high school meet, the upperclassmen approached Coach Underwood with a question. "After we finish our race, can we go back and run with Noah? He could use our help." Coach Underwood responded that they could run with Noah as long as they didn't give him a competitive advantage over a nearby runner. At that first meet in Superior, a handful of teammates joined Noah to run his last 800 meters. Not cheering, not giving sympathy. Just running with a new member of their family.



The questions start with whispers, because Nebraskans are polite.

"Who's the kid in last place?"

An answer comes. Voices still quiet, but a little louder this time.

"What's his story?"

The volume grows.

"You haven't heard about the runner from McCool Junction?"

By the end of the day, a coach from another town is shouting above the din in a crowded school bus headed home.

"The next time you race, will you have as much heart as Noah Lambrecht?"



Noah has a PR of 36 or 37 minutes. He's not sure of the exact time because it's not something he worries about. On his bad days, when he's not breathing well or his pacemaker doesn't do its job, he may go slower. At the Fairbury meet in 2017, he didn't feel great but still broke 40 minutes. During his next cardiology exam, the doctor told him that his pulse rate had spiked to 220 during the race. At the 2018 race in Kearney, he ran a 42:23. It wasn't a good day; he doesn't remember most of the race. He knows he got last place.

Last place is not failure in Noah's view. Failure is giving up in the middle of a race or quitting in the middle of a season. Success is not defined by earning a gold medal. Rather, it's knowing he did his best and he gave his full effort. Being part of a team. Maybe giving a little inspiration to a fan or another runner who has a disability or wasn't born to be an athlete. Since 8th grade, Noah has finished every race he started. He usually has company.



Noah visits his cardiologist a few times each year. While his pacemaker can be monitored remotely via a telephone line, Noah will have regular office visits with a cardiologist for the rest of his life. Download pacemaker activity. Check and change the battery. Listen to his heart.

The summer before his sophomore year, the cardiologist gave Noah some unexpected news. "You're cleared to play football," the doctor said. Nebraska kids grow up dreaming of playing football. Noah is bigger than your average distance runner. Even if it were for only a few snaps a game, McCool Junction probably could have used him on the offensive line. Move for six seconds. Get in somebody's way. Rest for twenty seconds. Do it again.

He stuck with cross country. Throughout our discussion, he repeatedly talked about his cross country family. The love and support they have given him. He cherishes the experiences we all had as high school runners. The jokes, bus rides, mid-run flatulence, and especially the girls and boys who treat him like a brother. The times when it got so hard but his teammates were there to encourage him. The upperclassmen who watched over him; Chris Vera, Connor Cogswell and Tristian Perry were particularly supportive. They're in college now, but they come to meets and stop by practices when they can. The coach who treats him like a son, always telling him, "I know you're doing the best you can." The school superintendent, Dr. Curtis Cogswell, who has always been one of Noah's biggest cheerleaders.

It's been ten years since his last surgery, but running is still difficult for Noah. In addition to his heart issues, he has asthma and his left lung is about half of the size it's supposed to be. He alternates between running and walking, and his goal is to walk no more than four times during a race. Most of the McCool Junction runners are given distances to run at each practice, but Noah is usually assigned a workout in terms of minutes. He averages 20-25 miles per week. He plays basketball in the winter and is a sprinter on the track team. When I asked how a pacemaker affects his running, he minimizes its impact. "Tough courses will kill me before my heart does."

I ask Noah how his four open-heart surgeries, his pacemaker and his adoption make him different than other high school seniors. He hesitates because his initial thought is that he's not much different than any of them. He reconsiders. "I might have a bigger spiritual side than most kids my age. After everything I've gone through, and all the gifts that have been given to me, I just can't doubt God's miracles. The fact that I'm still alive is a miracle."



Noah Lambrecht makes people cry. It's as simple as that. He did it to the tough ICU nurses in Chicago when he, without any parents, was fighting for his life. He's done it to Sheri and Gaylord through all the ups and downs of life. He'll make them cry again when he goes to college next fall. He wants to earn a musical education degree and play the tenor drum for his college band. He wants to try out for the drum line. Marching will be a piece of cake compared to cross country.

Hell, he made me cry. The first three times I told his story to my friends, I cried every time. Not only because of Noah, but because of everyone who loves Noah.



Most cross country teams have consistent schedules every year. Coaches get to know one another. The athletes talk, if only to expand the dating pool beyond their small towns. Once a race starts, however, everything is a blur. A competitor's vision is quickly covered in a shroud of pain and focus. Coaches, teammates and spectators dash from one vantage point to the next. The crowd at the finish line dissipates quickly, as each finisher draws away two or three supporters to head to the team camp.

I've been at Class A meets where the last finisher was practically a ghost to the hundreds of people – including me – still at the course. As a freshman, Noah often finished last, sometimes five, eight or ten minutes behind the next-to-last runner. His teammates didn't want him to be a ghost, and they quickly realized that other teams didn't either.

Fairbury is sixty miles southeast of McCool Junction and was the site of the second meet of Noah's freshman year. A few Fairbury upperclassmen knew runners from McCool Junction, so they heard about Noah. They ran the last ten minutes of the race with Noah and his teammates. Hardly anyone noticed.

That fall of 2015, Fairbury and McCool Junction were in five meets together. Fairbury's coach, Kristi Peterson, started to notice that the pack running with Noah grew larger as the season progressed. Kids from other schools – not just McCool Junction and Fairbury and East Butler – joined Noah. The funny thing is, many of the coaches didn't know why. Coach Peterson didn't hear Noah's story until later in the season when Noah's parents thanked her for Fairbury's support.

Runners and coaches understand how difficult Noah's path has been. We all fight the same demons, the same self-doubt and exhaustion. Noah's body tells him to stop a hundred times during a race. He fights the demons and tells himself, "If I can survive something that should have killed me, I can survive this race." He's started over twenty cross country races in his high school career and he's finished every one of them. Every one. He knows that at the finish line, or maybe even 1600 meters from the finish line, there are people waiting for him, and they'd be disappointed if he quit.

After races, or sometimes around town, people talk to Noah about his running. They want to know his story. They want to have his guts. Despite that support, he's never gotten emotional on a race course. Sometimes after the race, but usually he waits until he gets home. In the fog of a race, surrounded by a pack of runners in those last few minutes, it's too hard for him to wrap his brain around why the cross country community has embraced him so tightly.

For a boy who finishes last more often than not, it was impossible for Noah to fit all of his cross-country highlights into a fifty-minute phone interview. A few stand out. At Hebron's meet, the football players practice in the morning so they can cheer on their home team in the afternoon. McCool Junction runs that meet every year. At this year's meet, two Hebron football players wearing blue jeans and boots

were the first to join Noah. Then his teammates, then runners from other schools. By the finish line, there were 75 to 80 runners with him. It's always just kids, and never adults. The adults are too busy crying.

At this year's Fairbury meet, the Fairbury kids did more than just run with Noah. At the awards ceremony, the Fairbury team captains gave Noah a Fairbury XC t-shirt signed by the entire team. They made him an unofficial member of their team. After four years and roughly 160 minutes on their course, they felt he deserved it.

Coach Peterson gave him one more award. A gold medal. Noah was wrong. Sometimes success can be defined by a medal, especially when it's not for finishing first.

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Noah has probably never heard of Bill Rodgers, the Boston Marathon winner, but he's reached the same conclusion that Bill did. Rodgers once said, "being a runner means you are now free to win and lose and live life to its fullest." For Noah, living life to its fullest has often meant getting last place. He's never cared.

Noah's last high school cross country meet was on Thursday, October 4, 2018. It was a home meet at Camp Kateri, a mile south of McCool Junction. Camp Kateri is bounded by the Big Blue River and eight-foot high rows of cornstalks. Across a gravel road, a dozen cows graze in a meadow painted green by the recent rains. The camp's 80 acres include rustic cabins, hidden trails and, on that day, the first hint of autumn in its thousands of trees. The presence of God seems to be in every little detail of camp, including the wooden cross near the campfire area.

The race begins and Noah settles into a rhythm at the back of the field. By the time he reaches the 1600-meter mark, the fans are chasing the leaders to the other side of the course. Occasionally I hear a cheer from 200 meters away, but as Noah runs through an open field of prairie grass, it feels like the rest of the world has disappeared.



At 2500 meters, Noah runs by a picnic shelter where dozens of fans are congregated. He receives a burst of cheers before heading to the wooded section of the race. Somewhere around 3000 meters, his teammate JJ Mertz joins him. JJ placed third in the girls' race that ended an hour earlier. They talk quietly as they follow a serpentine path that takes them near the picnic shelter two more times.

With 500 meters to go, fifteen teammates and three middle-school girls join JJ and Noah. The pack is loud. With 100 meters remaining, they stop to let him finish on his own. In less than 38 minutes. On a day and in a place that God made perfect for a cross country race, Noah runs his fastest race of the season. He didn't finish last. He didn't get a medal. He's not a hero. He's just a runner who doesn't give up.



The night before Noah's last meet, with this article nearly complete, I traded a series of e-mails with Sheri Lambrecht to verify a few final details. During our exchange, she wrote that she had forgotten to mention one important item. Before the Lambrechts signed the adoption papers, before they even got in the car to drive to Chicago, the social worker was blunt with them. "He'll be able to go home with you," the social worker said, "but he'll most likely die before his first birthday."

The doctors may have fixed his broken heart, but Noah knows that the Lambrechts' love is what saved his life.

Now that you know his story, I have a question for you.

The next time you race, will you have as much heart as Noah Lambrecht?



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