

THE PERFECT STORM

Female runners who dazzle us as freshman but disappear as seniors!

Janet Smith Leet

www.runsub5.com



We see it all the time, these lightning fast girls that come on the running scene and display an amazing talent their freshman year but by their senior year they have faded in the results. Why is it that these young 7th, 8th grade, and freshman and sophomore woman can run so fast early on but then disappear later in their high school and college careers? IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE LIKE THAT. A strong message to the young female athletes, coaches, and parents – boys mature differently than girls and because of that girls training needs to be accommodating. If this is happening to someone you know or yourself you need to read on. THERE IS HOPE!!!!

What needs to be CLEARLY understood is the biology of a young female runner. Cross country running is an aerobic event. What that means is that oxygen is required by the body to create energy to run the race. When a young girl goes through maturity, the oxygen transport system is compromised, just like in low Ferritin levels that I wrote about last week. When the young women's menstrual system is turned on, the body steals oxygen from other organs. Oxygen is stolen from other sources so there is not much less left over for aerobic exercise. On top of all that, the young woman's body begins to change. Her pelvis expands affecting what is called the Q-angle. She can put on some weight, which is extremely common. She needs to now relearn how to navigate this new body. Combine the decreased oxygen levels with the body change and the weight increase and the result is a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN NOT A DEFEATED ATHLETE. This young woman now requires more energy to perform the same task that she

did before. Accommodations need to be understood and made to get the young female athlete through this time. The research says it can take 12 – 18 months or longer for her to get on the other side and back to performing where she was before the process started. A level of understanding by all, accommodations by the coach in training and racing, along with continual positive reinforcement to the athlete is all it takes to get this young beautiful new woman running fast again.

Haley was this beautiful runner who broke 5 minutes in the mile as a freshman and won her state meet. She had a running resume loaded with youth national titles and some incredible fast times for her age. Everyone was so excited for Haley and plans were being made for her future. If she can break 5 minutes in the mile as a freshman what is she going to do by her senior year? Well, Haley was that athlete I described earlier. She struggled to run a 5:20 mile by the end of her junior year. She ended her senior year in a boot, had an extreme iron deficiency, was suffering from mono, and had a defeated mental attitude. This young BEAUTIFUL women with so much in front of her as a freshman saw herself as a failure by her senior year. Did it really have to be like that? NO

Haley's body was doing what it was supposed to do - GO THROUGH A MATURITY. It was changing and so was she as a person. Haley's support crew did not understand this, so instead of backing off in certain areas they were pushing and forging ahead because her future scholarship was on the line. I don't doubt that Haley's iron deficiency was already well underway. Haley's hips were expanding, changing how she had to apply her running mechanics (called Q angle). Her coaches did not understand this and kept pushing her even harder though this time. She was complaining of many aches and pains. The decision to continually forge ahead cost Haley many fractures and serious injuries. Now add in the strong wave of confusing emotions all girls get going through during this change and we get an athlete with a poor self body image. Why not, because this was not the body she had when she ran 4:57? Her body is bigger now so that must be why she is not as fast, right? Wrong, Haley fought this by quietly dieting so she could get the old body back. I hope you are following this because the result of lack of understanding caused Haley to see herself as a physically and emotionally broken defeated athlete. IS THIS SPORT OR ANY WORTH THAT? I SAY NO AND LET'S START TODAY TO CHANGE THAT.

Last week I wrote about low Ferritin levels. I strongly suspect that the iron storage levels become compromised in a young female athlete right before she begins her change. I tripped on this when I asked Megan, a successful junior high athlete, to be tested at the end of her track season where she just set a personal record of 5:09. I asked her to get tested because I wanted to know what her good Ferritin level was so we could track it throughout her entire high school and, hopefully, college career. I was shocked to find that the storage levels were already compromised. She was at a 9, well below the ideal 50+ mark. Megan was all set up to be another fallen statistic. But, since we caught it so early, we were able to intervene. Megan went on to be an ALL-STATE runner her freshman year, 4 months after being diagnosed with low iron storage. She continually showed improvement through her sophomore and now her junior year. Megan is currently one of the state's top runners. More research needs to be done but I strongly recommend Ferritin iron level testing to start early and continue all during the runner's career. Ferritin testing needs to be done every 3 – 6 months. I would love to see some kind of forum set up so we could share information about this topic because there is so little known about it. Maybe ESPN

Dyestat or USATF could create some kind of sharing page to post all our stories and help others who are not getting answers.

The young girl's body will change as she goes through maturity. The pelvis widens to accommodate the eventual child birthing process, a natural process that happens to all women, some worse than others. The Q-Angle, measurement between the knee and hip, changes and widens which sets the young athlete up for running mechanic issues and possible injury. If the athlete is pushed hard during this time she could develop serious injuries. Or, she could survive it but later over time it can injure her. Haley was continually pushed. She believed every runner has to run through pain so why not run through it. She believed that because her coach told her that. I was Haley's first coach to tell her to STOP RUNNING and LET THE INJURIES HEAL. Haley was a senior and ran her entire high school career with little nagging injuries that haunted her. She had what was perceived to be a beautiful running mechanic but inside it was really ugly. Every injury she ran through set her up for a future injury because her body made adjustments to the pain. I had to retrain Haley's body how to run from the ground up, but I could not do that until her body was pain free. Coaches DO NOT HAVE YOUR ATHLETES RUN IN PAIN.

Megan, on the other hand, developed a nagging hip injury her freshman year in track. We had her take off until that hip was better. She lost her freshman track season. I told Megan freshman track means nothing especially if it costs her future. Megan did not like it but knew inside it was the right decision. Patience is a virtue and Megan came out on the other side stronger and better for it. She worked hard and did drills and multi-joint stretches and strengthening sessions to train her body to deal with the changes. Everything was done to create a positive learning environment both physically and emotionally. Megan came back her sophomore year stronger and better for it. She placed in the top 5 at her state meet in both cross country and track. She is currently in her junior year and showing incredible promise.

It is very important that when a young girl goes through maturity she is handled with care. She is more than an athlete, she is a person. Instead of pushing through that time and ignoring subtle signs of danger, STOP AND LISTEN carefully to her. She will tell you and teach you something very important in her own way. Proceed with caution. Back off the training and make the correct adjustments. Nothing is worth risking the athlete's health. NO POINTS ON THE BOARD can justify that. Remember, this is JUST HIGH SCHOOL RUNNING. Coaches, don't be afraid to ask for help if you don't know how to proceed. No one knows everything. I consult with many different coaches, doctors and mentors all the time for different issues my clients present. Information sharing is critical. My athletes have taught me more about the sport than any textbook or college course ever has.

The evolving young female athlete from childhood to womanhood does not only have to fight through low energy levels due to possible low iron stores, but also, a changing body with a wider pelvis, additional weight, and worse yet, raging hormones. I call this "THE PERFECT STORM". She looks in the mirror and her body is changing. She is not as lean as she was before. Her pants don't even fit her. Is that why she is not running as fast? She tells herself, "If I only lose 5 lbs I can be back to the runner I once was". I hope you are following along because what you are seeing is the potential beginning of life-long disordered eating habits and/or eating disorders. It is very important for coaches and parents to

help guide the young woman through this time in a positive way. Help build her self esteem and confidence. Don't break her down. Be there for her, don't turn your back. If she is handled with care and compassion she will come through this time with a higher level of confidence, a strong self esteem, and a will to fight. A confident athlete will always perform better than a broken one.

Haley came to me her senior year a broken athlete. She was defeated emotionally and physically. But, she knew she had more in her. All it took from me was to approach her at a cross country meet and tell her, "I know who you are and that race was not you. I have watched you run since your freshman year and you have a tremendous talent. You need to get checked out medically because I suspect a low iron storage issue." I walked away and those three little sentences gave Haley hope again. It did not take long to get her to start believing in herself again. It actually took longer for her body to heal physically from the damage done from past abuses. We found Haley a good college home, under a coach who cares about her, not only as an athlete but even more as a person. It has taken a year of healing the body correctly and Haley currently is back to training full time. Her spirit continues to grow and new love for the sport has developed. She is on her way.

We tend to quickly forget about that young female athlete who dazzled us her freshman year but disappeared by her senior year. Whatever happened to Sally Que, oh we are onto Jane Doe. Sally Que is a senior now who was told in her freshman year she was going to get a scholarship and be the big name in the state for the next 4 years. The pressure alone from that is unbelievable. These young athletes are people too. They are developing women who have to deal with so much change inside their bodies and out. Get your young athletes iron tested early and often. Listen to all their little aches and pain (they are telling you a story). Respond appropriately and err on the side of caution over pushing ahead. Create a training environment that builds a young athletic woman's confidence up, instead of tearing it down. Don't get on her because she put on a few pounds. She already knows it because she lives it. If weight becomes an issue then get her the proper help needed. **DON'T TURN YOUR BACK!**