Iron Lung

I broke down into tears as the nurse brought me a wheelchair. This was the moment that I realized I would never take a normal breath again. I was having one of the best cross country seasons ever. I achieved personal records in every race leading up to this point and this was my time to shine. Having advanced to the varsity team with my previous best, I was excited to make my debut. It was a late afternoon race. The sun shined bright through the receding clouds as the storm had passed. The beautiful hike I was on was suddenly cut short when I realized I was going to be late for my race. I hopped in my red Mini Cooper and sped down the windy mountain road. As I peeled into the parking lot, the first person to meet my gaze was my coach, and my heart began to race. I told myself: ‘Get it together John, grab your stuff and get over there, be honest with coach and just apologize.’ ‘Hey coach, I’m sorry I’m late, I was having some family issues.’ He gave me an “I’m disappointed in you” sigh and briefly lectured me about what I should be doing. ‘So much for being honest, oh well.’ As penance for being late, coach gave me the directive to break 19. I had never completed a 5K race on any course in less than 19 minutes, but was up for the challenge. My coach made his demands clear to me. Approaching the starting line, adrenaline pumping, I knew I was about to go to war. The tension on the line was unreal, I said one last “Good luck Rebels” to my brothers on the team and then silence swept the field as we waited for the gun.
Bang!! Shot the starting gun. My teammates and I began the treacherous journey up the Bowdoin Park course. I pranced off the starting line like a gazelle being chased by a family of tigers. It was a stampede with over 300 athletes from across the county funneling into the narrow trail. It didn’t take long for me to get into the zone. I knew what I needed to do. And by “zone” I don’t mean comfort zone, which was forbidden on our team. Running is supposed to be uncomfortable and full of pain. Coach had always preached: “The best pace is suicide pace, and today is a good day to die!” Oh boy did I know what pain was; well at least I thought I did.

I managed to maintain my ground and stick with the top of the pack. I was going to break 19, I could feel it. Consistent waves of energy took me through the first half of the windy, muddy course. I was ready to take on the infamous 150 meter climb. Darting up the hill, passing kids left and right, my breathing intensified as I neared the summit. Only 20 meters off, I could see the top; this was my chance to make a move. I kicked it into overdrive up the last stretch of the hill, just as my coach insisted. Thud! Thud! Thud! My footsteps got louder and louder while everything else began to get slower. I was pushing too hard and my body couldn’t handle it. Just as I reached the summit, time froze and I knew something was terribly wrong. It felt as if a knife had been jabbed right in my back, along with a debilitating shortness of breath. ‘Oh god, what is happening to me? I’ve never felt this pain before. Is it my heart!? ’ I started to feel dizzy, I guess from the lack of oxygen when I needed it most. All I could do was wheeze. I continued down the hill unsure if I could finish the race. I glanced right at my father with a frightened look when I passed him at the bottom of the hill, trying to hint that something was wrong. He still gave me the generic “C’mon John! Let’s Go!” but with different expression this time around. His face dropped from this encouraging, cheerful smile, to this fearful, dazed look when he saw me pass him all hunched over and in pain.
Now I’m in the middle of the trail, I felt the pace of my teammates and competitors whiz by me. No words were said. Not a single, “Are you okay?” Nope, nothing. In the quiet of the park, deep in the woods, I am alone. I kneeled and watched as the last few runners disappeared into the distance. So out of breath, neither a single word nor yelp could breach my lips. I could only imagine what went through my father’s head when he realized that I would not be crossing the finish line that day. I pictured him thinking ‘Where’s John!?’ with a frightened look on his face, knowing that I was in pain when I passed him earlier; I knew that the timid, blank emotion he showed me before, was running through his veins. He and my mother ran the course backwards only to find me in a state of panic and distress. They looked nervous. “What happened John? Are you okay!?” my father exclaimed. Unable to speak, I quickly pointed to my chest along with gasps of pain, my skin turned pale. “Bill, we have to take him to the hospital.” my mother said. She immediately thought the worst and figured something was wrong with my heart, making an already tense situation even tenser.

As my eyes began to flicker open, all I could see was a white, sterile room. Waking up in this unfamiliar environment with my entire chest numb was a cruel wake up call for me. “Where am I?” I said. “You’re in the hospital bud; you experienced a spontaneous pneumothorax and you’re having surgery tomorrow morning.” My father exclaimed. A huge ‘Woah!’ went through my head along with the question aloud: “What the hell is a spontaneous pneumothorax!?” Both my parents were already experts on this injury because the same thing happened to my uncle a few years back. My surgeon came in to introduce himself and explained to me that pneumothorax is the scientific name for a collapsed lung. Dr. Kaufman then went on to explain how these were common among tall and skinny males. To say I was the poster child for pneumothorax is an understatement. He then went on to tell me that the surgery I would be
having was meant to scar my lung to my chest wall so that my lung could never collapse again. Not knowing what to expect, I was scared beyond belief.

The only things I remembered from the next morning was laying completely naked under three gigantic surgical lights and of course, waking up. This was where reality set in. This marked the beginning of my recovery. The next few weeks were incredibly painful; I could not do the physical tasks that I could before. I could barely walk or stand up straight. I needed help with almost everything. I went from being this incredibly active, athletic young man to a young man who suddenly lacked the ability to complete basic tasks such as walking to the bathroom or washing myself. My father tended to my every need and stuck by my side, day and night for those two agonizing weeks that I was in the hospital. As the months progressed, I nursed myself back to health to the point where I wanted to run again. I decided that I would slowly push through the pain by doing basic exercises. I was at the local gym when I took those first few jogging steps, my nerves were wrecked, my palms were clammy and my mind began to wonder, ‘Will it happen again?’ It was like I had never run before. This injury haunted me, I was not sure of my own limits. ‘Do I run any faster? Maybe I’ll wait a month or so.’ The last thing I needed was another pneumothorax. After all, I didn’t even know if the surgery had worked, that was terribly frightening to ponder. It took me many months before I really pushed myself. I needed to make a daring comeback; the next spring track season was where it would happen.

Against all odds, and my doctors’ recommendation, I came back to competitive running less than a year later, and much stronger than I ever was. What a truly beautiful moment it was as I darted down the last hundred meters of the track knowing that I was about to break the five minute barrier in the mile event. 4:54, 4:55, 4:56... 4:57!! In complete and utter shock, tears of joy ran off my face. “I did it!” and, “F*** Yes!!” were the only words to escape my mouth. I
received some shameful yet proud looks from the on-looking parents for that triumphant outburst. I wanted to embrace every bone chilling feeling that was showered upon me. The real euphoria came not from the fact that I had just broke five in the mile, it was the “I’m so proud of you son” look that glowed upon my father’s face. I was instantly flashed back to the day my lung had first collapsed and the eerie feeling that came along with it. The blank look that my father showed me that day was now replaced by the ecstatic cheer he gave as I crossed the line. I think I saw him shed a tear. That was what kept me going all this time.

Having the surgery left a huge gap within me. I felt as if my confidence had been stripped away from my being. As for my father, he seemed to fill that gap. I found confidence within him and used him as motivation to better myself mentally and physically. He pushed me to challenge myself even though I was scared. Everything was great at this point and I wished it could end this way, but it couldn’t. To this day, I am still haunted by this injury. There will always be that “what if” factor, ‘Did the surgery work? What if it didn’t? Could my lung collapse again?’ But the most terrifying question of them all: ‘What about my other lung...?’

Inhale. Exhale.