

Cool Down

By Rachel Toor

down

Three words that make this runner cringe

Did You Win?

Three little words. Three little words can wilt me like a neglected house plant, can take me from the puffed-up bigness of running a good race and shrink me to child-small. Three little words can wipe away moonlight like mud.

Three little words: Did you win?

I come from a family of well-intentioned but non-athletic occasional, if enthusiastic, spectators. Perhaps it's a peculiarly American way of thinking. Perhaps it's because we've all become so competitive that we focus only on the gold.

Perhaps it's because we're used to measuring individual achievement only against crude and obvious standards.

Perhaps it's because my family loves me so much they really think I could win the Boston Marathon.

For a long time, whenever I chirpily reported back about having done well in a race, I was deflated by the Did you win? question. I explained, repeatedly, sometimes patiently, that at my level, it's not, for the most part, about winning. It's about getting a good time. Having a good time. Beating Cathy. Keeping up with Owen. It's about setting and realizing realizable goals. If I win anything, it's generally an age-group award, and since I really only care about getting the Shiny Metal Object, as long as I get something, I don't care much if it's for first, or third, in my age group.

My brother Mark has been a trooper—waking up at four in the

morning to drive me a couple of hours to half-marathons, waiting around in the rain to pick me up after ultras. He's cooked me light meals before races and prepared bloody steaks after. Following a 50K in his West Virginia hometown—during which I went off course, added a couple of miles, fell three times and won Best Blood—he bought me a car. This is a good brother.

But for many races, after each one, he'd ask the question.

One day I ran a trail race. I was feeling strong, and the really fast women did not show up. I arrived at my brother's house muddy and tired.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?"

Mark looked me up and down and said, "Did you get hurt?"

No. Not hurt. "Did you have fun?" Yes. Fun. "Did you run well?" Yes. I ran well.

"Ask it." I demanded

"Ask what?" he asked.

"Ask what you always ask after I race?"

"What do I always ask?"

He honestly didn't know.

"I won! I won! I won!"

I thanked him for not asking.

Sometimes strange things happen and people don't do what you expect them to do. ■