

FINISHING UP HILL

Staffer explains how he's learned to never give up on the track through his mother's death and dad's survival of cancer

an opinion of **Mitch Kaskie**

Looking down my lane, everything becomes silent. The yelling of my coaches and teammates becomes irrelevant. At last, I hear the gun, and off I go. Nothing goes through my head. I put one foot in front of another, striding out and sticking behind a fellow runner. After four laps of sheer pain, I'm finally done. I look toward my coach. Gasping for air, I manage to spit out "time?" 4:33. With a smile I pump my fist. Finally, after three years of harsh winter practices, spring track workouts, miles and miles of hills- I did it. I beat my time from freshman year. Even if it was only by a second, I did it. More importantly, I never gave up.

Never give up.

It's something my mom lived by. She was a perfectionist. If I ever thought about quitting a sport, or skipping a class, it wasn't allowed. "Finish out the year," she'd always say. If I didn't like what I was doing, that was okay. But it was necessary I finish what I started.

When I first started running the mile in fourth grade gym class, it wasn't quite the same. The biggest worry was my safety. She would tell me over and over, "if you don't feel good, sit out." I had other ideas on my mind. If it hurt, I'd finish it anyway. Besides, that's how I was taught.

Soon enough, my mom realized that I had things under control. I even was good at running. In those gym classes I always beat the other kids in my class, and my mom knew it too. So she sparked my interest in track. In sixth grade, she entered me into the Hershey Relays. I made it to the state level both in sixth and seventh grade, and placed in the 1600 and 800.

Sometimes I didn't like the running. It's painful just to run. But there was something about it that got my attention. I liked to challenge myself, to see how far I could push myself. In many ways, I liked to think that I shared my mother tenacious, never quit attitude.

Cancer is a completely different story.

One warm night in early September, I was out and about with my best friend playing football in the front yard. I was the quarterback, he was the receiver and we were both stars in the NFL — our typical seventh grade pastime. Soon enough it began to get dark, I said farewell to my friend and went inside for dinner. Before we sat down, my dad wanted to talk to me. He began to explain it to me — he had been diagnosed with Squamous Cell Carcinoma, a type of skin cancer.

Before I knew it, we took my dad to the hospital to undergo surgery. The entire day at school all I did was to try not to think about it. He'll be okay, I thought. The doctors said he would, so I stuck to that. The next day we went to visit him at the hospital. I saw him hooked up to the machines, with tubes everywhere. I couldn't stand to see him in such pain. He couldn't eat anything, so he was fed through a feeding tube. We stayed for a bit, and that was the last time I saw him until he came home three days later.

After that visit of the hospital, the image of my dad laying there, suffering, was burnt in my head. The chemo and radiation began, and things only got worse. My dad could barely get out of bed. My mom and him began to miss all of my sporting events. I caught ride after ride to basketball games with my friends' parents. At soccer games, when I looked to the sideline, neither of them were in sight. I was angry, and became selfish.

Cancer is cruel and scary, and a lot of the times when started, it can't be undone. I was so scared to death of it that

I probably felt closer to it than he did. I didn't talk to my dad much, and acted like nothing happened. My parents didn't want it to be a big deal, so I didn't tell anyone, not even my friends. I just hid from it, and kept it out of my life.

My mom was different. She was right beside him at every single radiation treatment. She was there on those day long chemo treatments at the hospital. She was there to help him learn how to eat, to help give him pills to take away the absolute staggering pain. She was there to make sure he did not give up.

And he didn't. By spring of my seventh grade year, my dad beat cancer.

Thump. I heard it from the couch I was laying on, where just moments ago I had been cuddled up with my mom watching Spongebob Squarepants in a 42nd floor condo with a great view of the John Hancock building. It was a beautiful summer day in Chicago. With my dad recovering from the cancer treatments, we decided it would be nice to take a vacation and celebrate his healing. The night before we had seen the Blue Man Group, and we spent the morning being lazy, trying to decide what our agenda for the day was.

But this vacation would end early. When I heard the thump from the couch, I had no idea what it was. I got up to look, and saw my mother laying there, face up on the bathroom floor. My dad leaned over her, and shouted, "Call 911." It was too late. She was dead before she hit the floor.

A massive heart attack, they told us. The paramedic seemed to take years to make it up to that 42nd floor. A police man drove us to the Hospital a few blocks over. I sat there, hands in my face, with tears dripping onto my white shirt, uncertain of my future. For an unknown reason, just out of instinct, I asked my dad, "Are we going to keep our house?" The answer was yes. All I could think was that I wanted to go home. Go home and pretend that this ever happened.

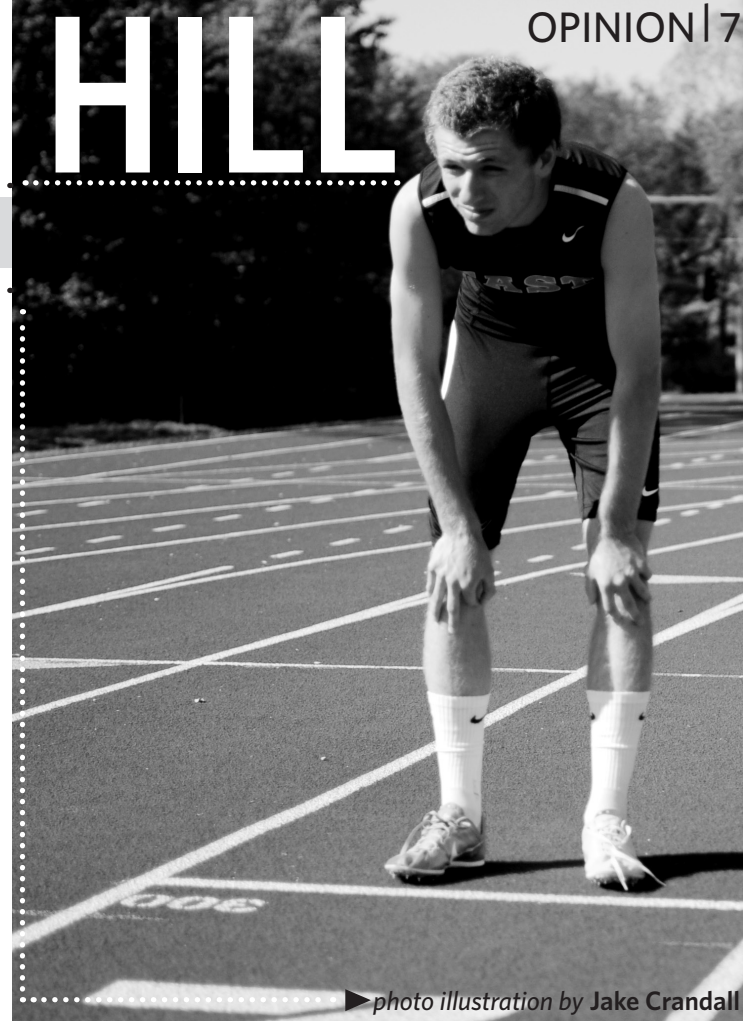
Like that, abruptly — without a fight — my mother's life was taken from her. She had no chance to fight it. With a snap, it was all over.

After my mom's death, I didn't know what to do. There were times I thought about giving up on everything. School. Sports. Life. But in the back of my head, I could always hear my mom's voice, and every second I spent with my dad was a living reminder not to give up.

When high school rolled around, I felt lost without her. There would be nights after long days, where I would lay into my bed, holding Pooh Bear, a stuffed animal I've had since I can remember, and just cry. I would wonder why this could happen to me. But I knew I couldn't give up.

High school track was where my mom's legacy stuck with me the most. She was the one who sparked my interest in it, and I wanted to do it for her. Freshman year, I came into track knowing I could do something great. My dreams from the beginning were to eventually win state. It may have been ambitious, but I worked hard, and times came easy. It seemed every meet came with a drop of 10 seconds or more of time. Like that, my time dropped to 4:34, and that's where I hit a wall.

At the end of freshman year, I placed 7th at regionals, missing state by three places. I knew I had three years left to



► photo illustration by Jake Crandall

make state, but my heart was still broken. I promised myself it wouldn't happen again.

This promise turned out to be a bit harder to keep than I thought. Although I pushed through winter training, the running took a toll on my body. I couldn't keep my weight up, and in result many days I felt weak and drained of energy. The season came and went without any change of time, and once again I missed state by three spots. This time I was emotionally distraught, and I felt like I could quit.

Junior year only brought more toll on my running career. I trained twice as hard during the winter, and tried everything to make it to state. I spent spring break in town, and ran daily with my fellow runners. Finally, in a meet at ODAC, I beat my time, by one second.

I had gotten over that hump that had haunted me for so many years. It felt great, but once again regionals came around, and there I was again, missing state by one place.

It could have been easy to quit, right then and there, on the Lawrence Freestate track. I saw the four other runners in front of me, all seniors, cross the line. When I finally got there, I knew what was in store. I had been here before, this time was the third. I knew it was the last time I would be with the big group of seniors that had lead me since senior year. I dropped to the ground, and instantly tears poured from my eyes.

Then I saw my dad standing in the crowd. He had made it to almost every track meet over my high school career. I remembered being mad at him in middle school, for the little soccer and basketball games he missed. But now, a traveling single parent, he had made every soccer game and track meet he could, even the ones in Lawrence. He was a living example of my mom's determination.

When he had cancer, she wouldn't let him down, wouldn't let him quit. Now, bent over in my East track uniform and blue and green spikes, I knew I couldn't let her down. I had one more year to fulfill my promise, and it would be done. I wouldn't quit, no matter how much the odds were against me — even if it's just for a second.