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At 3:00pm when the school bell rings throughout the halls, I do not have to rush to my car to beat the parking lot traffic. I do, however, have the opportunity to change gears. When I manually transfer from school to athletics, all my frustrations of the day disengage. High school athletics have afforded me an outlet to be myself around people I highly admire.

Perhaps the best way to see the impact athletics have had on my life is to look at my life away from school sports. During my year abroad in Germany from August 2007 to July 2008, I literally experienced what I call "high school sports withdrawals" for an entire year. This phenomenon may be explained by the absence of endorphins, but I believe there is more to sports than that. In fact, I did a myriad of athletic activities, including competing on a handball team, playing tennis, and running six half-marathons around the country. These activities, however, did not have the same effect on me because they were not affiliated with school. Where I studied in Essen, Germany, not once did I feel a sense of school pride or comradeship. School alumni and parents of students never returned to be part of the school again. The athletes were not as motivated to shine in the classroom. Although sports were not missing in Germany, school sports most definitely were.

When I returned to the United States and joined the high school football team, I was overcome with appreciation for what I once took for granted. In addition to feeling bonded with my teammates, I felt attached to the community. High school sports have a knack for inducing new and stronger relationships. One might say that high school sports come at a cost: time. However, the hours I spend practicing and competing is compensated in full by the time efficiency and organization that sports develop.

As a host brother of two exchange students, I have gained their perspectives as well. Patrick Runkehl, known as "Germany" by the Barlow football team, made some of his favorite memories on the turf. Although he may not have played very many minutes, to him the camaraderie was worth its weight in sweat. In fact, Runkehl purchased his Bruin helmet and showcased it in Germany as one of his most prized souvenirs. His experience with high school American football was so great that he even sought out a team in Hanover. The club team, however, was missing everything that he longed for in high school athletics. Our Italian exchange student, Mattia de Michel, sprinted for the track team and eventually became the most popular kid at school. When I asked him his favorite part of living in America, it was not eating big tender steaks or visiting California. He candidly responded, 'high school sports'. I feel the same way.

When asked about my favorite berry, vegetable, or sport, I commonly reply, "whatever is in season". Whether I am participating in football, basketball, soccer, cross-country, or track and field, high school sports enable me to develop something more important than just athletic skill. They teach me hard-work, leadership, humility, diligence, tenacity, sportsmanship and teamwork. Most of all, they train me how to lose with dignity and to win with grace. Those are essential life lessons, on and off the court, or field, or whatever surface on which I happen to be playing.

How have high school athletics impacted my life? They have developed my character and body, fostered lifelong friendships, created unforgettable memories, instilled school pride, and fueled my high gear college aspirations. What more could I ask from something I so thoroughly enjoy?