

The first thing you need to know is that I am not a big runner. I used to say that I needed a reason to run, get to the next base, get down the court or open for a pass. Running just to stay in shape has never appealed to me. My brother on the other hand runs just about every morning and his children have run quite a few races. Even my oldest daughter Emily has successfully completed a marathon. But not me.

Watching other people run has only been slightly more tolerable. Until this year when my youngest son Ben participated in 8th grade track. Ever since Ben was a little kid, he liked to run. He was never really slow, but he was never one of the fastest kids in a sprint. When it came to running distances, he was at his best. Other kids would tire out after one trip around the track and Ben would keep going and going. One of his favorite days in elementary school was the day when they ran the mile in gym class. Not at all like his dad, his brother or 2 of his sisters.

So when it came to 8th grade track, we all knew Ben was going to be a distance guy, we just didn't know how good he would be. His time in the mile for his first practice was just over 6 minutes. To give you some perspective, the winning high school time in the 2012 Drake Relays was 4 minutes, 15 seconds and the current world record is 3:43. At 14 years old, Ben is not an elite miler.

But he enjoyed running the mile and the 800 meter run (1/2 mile for all you non-metric people, like me), and kept working at it. Unlike most races at track meets, these runners do not use starting blocks nor are they put in the lanes. Basically they all bunch up at the starting line and take off in a pack. One thing I have learned from watching Ben run this year, especially in the 800 meter run, in order to get a good time you do not want to get caught up in the pack of runners. This presents a dilemma for the participants. If you sprint as fast as you can to get away from the pack in the beginning, you might not have enough energy left at the end of the run to finish strong.

On the other hand, if you get caught in the middle of the pack, you might have to spend a lot of energy getting outside and running around slower runners. Which essentially forces you to run longer than a mile, and potentially slower. Plus with so many feet trying to move in the same spots, the likelihood of falling is greater in the pack and that really hurts your chances of getting a fast time.

As small business owners and managers we are faced with somewhat the same dilemma. Do we stay in the middle of the pack with our other competitors and try to win at the end, or get out to a fast start and hope to hang on? It depends too much on your industry and your personal style. What is important is improving your position, constantly moving toward the lead or maintaining the lead.

The good news is that Ben did get faster. In his most recent meet Ben was able to get his time down to 5 minutes, 35 seconds! While that would not win anything at the Drake Relays, it is a huge accomplishment for him, and he is enjoying track season. Who knows, maybe with Ben as my inspiration, I might try running.

Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.