

The Art of Falling

Getting rammed with the side of a metal rod isn't the ideal way to start a Saturday morning. I can tell you from experience that it feels about as good as it sounds. You get the wind knocked out of you, and when you hit the ground all the dead grass from within a yards radius will get tangled in your hair. If you're lucky like me, you'll probably skin your knees on the way down as well. The thing is, when you are lying on the ground in a lacrosse game, sharp cleats thundering around your face and a crowd of overbearing sports moms and country dads screaming to "git the bawl!", you can't stay down. You have to sit up, grab your stick from wherever it landed when you got hit and sprint towards the opposing team like a pack of hell hounds is coming to bite you in the butt.

Around this time last year, I read a novel called "Six of Crows" by Leigh Bardugo. The book was good and all, keeping me hooked enough to finish the 496 pages of questionable cunning and cleverness but nothing to write home about. Yet even though I couldn't recall a majority of the plot for the life of me, I can recite one specific quote that has stuck with me for much longer than I like to admit.

"Inej had once offered to teach him how to fall. "The trick is not getting knocked down," he'd told her with a laugh. "No, Kaz," she'd said, "the trick is in getting back up." I like this one because it can be applied to all aspects of life. It doesn't have to be literal, like getting thrown to the ground over a small rubber ball by a girl who is twice your size. Sometimes it can mean failing a test and studying extra hard for the next one. It can mean suffering the loss of someone close to you and to keep pushing on because that is what they would want. It could even be as simple as having a bad day and still going into the next with an open mind.

For me, being knocked down has been mostly in a metaphorical sense (aside from when we played Owasso high school, you guys are like trucks). Falling down meant losing, whether it was in lacrosse, speech and debate, or some other thing. And when I say I mastered the art of falling I do mean *Mastered*.

I picked up speech and debate freshman year because my dad said it was the most important class he took. I thought maybe, since it wasn't something that required me to be an athletic prodigy that I should at least give it a shot. I started my first semester doing debate because it was what my dad had done. Trust me, if you aren't good at thinking on the spot, don't do Lincoln Douglas debate. I won a single round against a kid who was definitely not fluent in English and lost the rest. After that total decimation of my pride, second semester, I decided to take up an acting event. Take a guess how that went. I would rather have been tossed to the side with a metal stick than sit through those awards ceremonies again. Regionals didn't go any better. My duet partner and I didn't even get top eight. I felt like I had been falling since the moment we started performing the piece, I suppose it was only then that I really hit the ground. I was in a place where after losing so many times, I wasn't sure what made it worth it to get back up again. Why keep trying when I would find myself back on the ground in a matter of moments? At that point it was just embarrassing. Every sport I played, every team I joined I was simply mediocre.

Two days later in class, my coach said,

“I think next year you should do an OO (Original Oratory).” I don't know why that helped, but it did. He was sure that next time would be the one, I just needed to try something new and I had to believe that as well. It was like he offered me a hand , and all I had to do was take it.

After the shame that was freshman year's career I needed to up my game. I was going to write a winning speech. I sat down at my desk, sharpened a good #2 pencil, opened my notebook to a fresh page and...

Nothing. What made something an award winning speech anyway? Something interesting? Something unique? For weeks my notebook sat empty. Occasionally I would jot down an idea but it just never felt right. My friends were collecting pieces to perform like pokémon and I still had no ideas.

"So... when are you going to write that OO." My coach would ask me during class.

"I'm trying! I just can't find something that is different, everytime I think that I've found a topic it's already been done." I sighed, maybe speech wasn't going to be my thing either.

"Well, it's not about how original the topic is, it's about having an original take on it." I needed something controversial. A hot take that would get people's attention. After school I sat down and took to my keyboard. Drafting and writing and citing and editing till my hands hurt. Sitting back in my chair, I looked at what I had done. This was it.

On the morning of the tournament, we woke up at the butt crack of dawn, the ice freezing our breath and fingers as we got in the car. It wasn't ideal to drive two hours through the arctic to go to *any* tournament, but it was better than being in a lacrosse game for sure. I recited my speech in my head till they were the only words I knew.

The couple hours I spent waiting for my event were excruciating. I talked to walls, walked people to their rooms and read a few books that I didn't really pay attention to. When it was finally time, I thought I was going to throw up. What if I forgot everything? What if I stuttered too much? What if I *actually* did throw up? That would definitely make a first impression with my judges. I watched person after person give their speeches and when it was

my time I stood up, smiled nervously at my friend, and walked to the front of my room. I could make the whole thing up if I needed, as long as I had confidence I had already won. Taking a deep breath, I started my speech.

“You know what's overrated? Changing the world.” That got their attention. I made an uncomfortable amount of eye contact and mustered up all the charisma in my body. A few jokes, good posture and the next thing I knew, these judges were in the palm of my hand. I had never felt that way before. Like I wasn't even saying the words they were just coming out. I didn't have to think about what happened next, I just said it. Before I knew it, I was taking a quick bow and hurrying off to sit next to my friend. I had lost plenty of times before but this didn't feel like I had done badly. I felt... proud?

At awards our team waited anxiously. All of us wanted to crush these other teams, show them what we were made of. Anytime someone got a medal we screamed our heads off.

“6a Original Oratory.” They announced, my friends and I straightened up, sharing anticipating glances. I hadn't even realized I was shaking until my leg started to get sore from bouncing my knee.

“Third place-” One of my friends. We all clapped.

“Second place-” my other friend. Holy crap. This was going to be a clean sweep if I just-

“First place-” One of my teammates literally grabbed my arm as I got up, almost tripping over my backpack. Our team roared like we had just won olympic gold. For me, that's how it felt. I hurried up to the stage and grabbed my medal, grinning so wide it hurt my face. Walking back to my team, I caught the gaze of our coach who just gave me a thumbs up.

As fun as it is to tell this story of me winning, the point isn't that I did well. The point is that I did absolutely god awful before I actually got anywhere. I lost for a whole season (and

beyond) before I found something I was good at. So take this to heart next time you're in a bad place; The art of falling isn't about not falling down, it's about getting back up.