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The Perfect Balance: How Competition has Pushed Me and Pulled Me Back

My interest in engineering originated at a very young age when my brother and I inherited our dad's LEGOs, of course adding a few Star Wars sets of our own. Playing with LEGOs became my favorite pastime; sometimes I would build with them, other times simply play around with the bricks. But the best part was the sense of freedom they posed. I could build almost anything, with the obvious limitation of the number of LEGOs we had, of which I kept reminding my mom. My brother and I could never keep the sets together, always ending up taking them apart for pieces. They were an outlet to my creativity, an expression of my imagination, a way to make my thoughts tangible. Castle? No problem. Spaceship? Of course. Fighter jet? Why not? Limitless possibilities.

As I grew older, so did my toys. Turning my imagination into reality with LEGOs became combining ideas with high school peers and creating robots and rockets with shop machines and 3D printers. Given a new found interest in engineering, I joined my high school's robotics and rocketry clubs, opening up a whole new world of creating. I was introduced to CAD (computer aided design), a software in which the only limitation to what you can design is your diligence and your computer's RAM. I was taught to use shop machines, such as a drill press, miter saw, band saw, jig saw, lathe, laser cutter, CNC, and more. Oh, I was in paradise.

My robotics club especially became a large part of my life. The club was focused around the FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC), of which we were Team 5549. Each year, FRC would announce a new, completely unique game to thousands of teams around the world. Each team would then rush to design and build a robot from scratch (some teams with a whole lot more money than others) to compete against others in a 3v3 game. The challenge could be shooting balls into a hoop, stacking cones on poles, shooting targets with Frisbees, or climbing monkey bars, to name a few examples. We came together with our ideas and experience to create a competitive robot. I poured hours upon hours of my time into this team, and in my senior year of high school I was given the role of Captain of Mechanical, the biggest sub-team in the club. Robotics club became my life outside of school, and I was committed. Nothing felt better than seeing what you had worked on for weeks come to life.

When I first reflected on these engineering literacies I believed they showed an aspect of my creative identity. However, looking further I found that underneath everything was not so much creativity but competitiveness. It had always been there, even from the start. In fact, I might not have gotten much into LEGOs and building if it weren't for my brother; I got into them because I wanted to follow what he was doing and compete with his creations. It was clear with robotics, as the whole club focused around the competitions, and when we neared them, all other aspects of my life faded away--I was completely focused on preparing the robot for the competition. In rocketry, too, I always wanted to build the highest flying rocket I could. My competitiveness was valuable, as it pushed me and my teammates in robotics to give our all.

In addition to LEGOs, I was exposed to skiing at a young age. I absolutely love skiing now, but my first time on the slope, age five, I was low to the ground and kept falling face first into the unforgiving snow so much so that I left the slope early as my father and brother stayed

on. When my brother came home later that day with a smirky grin on his face, he exclaimed “I got hot chocolate!” Hot chocolate?! If I had known that, I would’ve stayed on the mountain for the full day. Since then, I gave skiing a second chance, grew quite good at it, and obtained a few hot chocolates on the slopes. I loved our trips to the mountains, but whenever I saw the slalom gates set up, I yearned to use my skiing experience for something more: I wanted to race.

When in my final two years of high school I finally got the opportunity, I joined my local ski mountain’s race team. It was challenging, but exhilarating. I was able to advance my abilities along with very skilled peers, training hard in preparation for the big races. I remember my first race very clearly: what wasn’t clear was the visibility. Clouds coming in the night before wrapped the slopes in a cold, windy blanket. Since it was my first race, I didn’t have points from previous seasons, so I got put in the back of the pack. Preparing for my timeslot, I warmed up, jogging around with boots that felt like bricks covering my feet. The toe warmer stuffed in my boot fought hard against the wind pressing in. No matter how much I moved, the sharp air still made its way down my back. Part of me was wondering “Why am I here, it’s absolutely miserable?” The race itself wasn’t much better. I probably should’ve used ice skates instead of skis, since after 120 other people running the same course I was left with the worst snow conditions. In the moment after the race, I felt quite disappointed. I had paid for my gear, paid for my practice, and paid for the race, only for terrible conditions. But I pushed this aside; I had already committed, and I had a vision in my mind of a victorious race that I was dead set on attaining.

This competitiveness and determination helped me push through in other ways too, especially in school. In high school, grades became a center point of my focus. I strived to do the best I could in every project, test, and assignment for the gratification of letters on a report card. I

felt so much pressure, with the formidable process of college applications upcoming, as well as having my brother attending Thomas Jefferson, the number one magnet school in the country, and scoring a 1580 on the SAT. I felt like there was an expectation of me to be on par with my brother. Most of this existed in my head. My parents would remind me not to identify my worth with my grades, and to just “do my best,” but this didn’t make a difference. I still felt that my primary purpose was school, and that after all, grades would decide my future, so what was the sacrifice of a little mental health? I tried to keep a school/life balance, yet it sometimes felt like walking on a tightrope stretched between canyons. Focusing on my grades gave me focus, yet quite frequently it also led to overcommitting and stress. Life kept teaching me this lesson not to overcommit, yet my competitive character made me keep having to relearn this lesson.

Competitiveness is valuable, it has provided me focus, diligence, and inspired my passion. The whole world understands its value, and there’s a reason we love sports, club competitions, and games in general. Competition is ultimately what led humans to land on the moon. There are drawbacks, however; things we have to give up for the sake of competition. I gave up a lot of time for robotics club. Sometimes my competitiveness got the better of me in sports and would be detrimental to friendships. My competitiveness also led to an unhealthy school/life balance. And yet I don’t believe I would have been able to achieve what I achieved without it. Competition is useful and needed, but in moderation. Now college has introduced a new playing field for my competitiveness, as I join a rocketry design team, ski racing team, and more clubs, providing me with another challenge to set up this balance.