

Positively Speaking

By Mark Wilson

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Towards the Finish Line

For the past seventeen years, on the fourth Thursday of February, I'd feed my kids spaghetti, bundle them up, strap on the racing bibs, and then take them to the Barnebirkie starting line.

At the kickoff festivities, a sea of eager little faces anticipate the daunting wilderness trek before them -- a whole kilometer or two -- all the way through the golf course, by the armory, past the school and down Main Street, amid a cheering throng of spectators ringing cowbells.

Yep, I'm a Barnebirkie veteran -- 17 years worth! Most of those years, I've accompanied at least one of my children all the way down to the finish line -- shouting little encouragements all along the way. "Way to go! You're doing great!! Keep it up!! Don't quit!! Look! Look! All these people are cheering for you!"

My fondest memories are when I've taken my pre-school aged children on this pilgrimage for the first time. (with five kids, that means multiple firsts!)

For a three year old, the Bernie is much larger than life. Overwhelming at times. Impossible. There are so many big kids -- and it's such a long way to go! (Especially when the mercury is hovering at around five or ten below zero) There are falls -- and scrapes -- and shovers -- and bumps -- and runny noses -- and tears. It's loud. It's crowded. It can even be a bit frightening (Why, there are even a couple of huge Norsemen with spears skiing around.)

For the three year old's Daddy, the race becomes bigger than the Winter Olympics -- and far, far more important than how the Italians fare on Saturday. The only thing that matters is getting the kid to the finish line.

I'll never forget, after a few shaky starts, rounding the bend onto Main Street, with my little ones, and seeing hundreds of friendly faces: waving, smiling, cheering, and clanging their cowbells. "Keep going! Keep going! You're almost there!"

Once we hit the final stretch, it's a fresh burst of inspiration all the way to the finish line -- where every kid gets a medal, a cup of hot cider, and a big cookie.

Everyone goes home a winner.

Unstrapping the skis, I can't help but wonder if there just might be a lesson in life tucked away somewhere in that experience.