

SJU senior overcomes obstacles on and off the track



Julia Eckart – jaeckart@csbsju.edu

At his final home meet for the SJU track and field team, Daniel Zoltek, '17, confronts the steeple chase race with optimism and resilience after overcoming a life-altering injury his sophomore year.

By Julia Eckart

jaeckart@csbsju.edu

The thought of running 1.8 miles wouldn't intimidate most runners. Throw in 28 hurdles and seven water jumps and you have the steeple chase race, a track and field event that isn't for the faint of heart.

"It's a horrifying event with all the barriers," SJU senior and track team member Brandon Franta said. "The fact that he did it shows, you know, immense courage, immense bravery, and the fact that he's not scared to try something that he's never done before."

Franta is referring to his friend and track teammate Daniel Zoltek, an SJU senior who competed in the steeple chase race for the first time this spring.

Zoltek's decision to take on the challenge was personal—a promise he made to himself after a life-altering injury his sophomore year.

Late August of 2014, Zoltek was playing with the SJU rugby team when he was grabbed and dropped on his head—hard. In most rugby games, officials don't stop the game for injuries. However, this time was different. Zoltek had lost consciousness.

“Apparently, it was bad enough that they stopped the game right away because they thought I might've broken my neck,” Zoltek said. “I just hit the ground and didn't move.”

The next thing he remembered was opening his eyes and seeing his brother and coach hovering over him. Zoltek thought to himself, “I'm perfectly fine, what's going on?” Then, everything was a blur.

45 minutes later he regained composure. He didn't gain everything back, though.

“Ever since then, [I] just never felt the same,” Zoltek said.

He had suffered a major concussion and was about to embark on a long, difficult journey of rehabilitation and self-discovery.

A Low Point

CSB senior Reina Nelson met Zoltek in First Year Seminar and shares a close friendship with him. She has witnessed Zoltek's continuous recovery after the injury and seen how the concussion impacted him.

“He told me that before his concussion he could do everything easily and was happy...it was effortless to be happy and to practice his sport,” Nelson said. “After the concussion, I know he struggled a lot with being emotionally healthy and it just kinda got worse and worse.”

Things did get worse.

“I went through a really heavy depression,” Zoltek said. “It was weird because at moments I just, I didn't want to be around anyone anymore...I didn't want to be present in time anymore.”

He may not have broken any bones, but a broken spirit was just as difficult to heal.

“I think the toughest thing about the concussion was wanting to try so hard to be who I used to be—to get back to that normal phase but just not being able to. No matter how hard I tried I never felt the same and that was the toughest part.”

Setting Goals

It took time, but Zoltek eventually began to emerge from his depression. He started biking, hanging out with new friends and regaining control of schoolwork. However, something was still missing.

In high school, Zoltek had goals of becoming a professional figure skater. In fact, he was training to go to the Olympics.

“I’ve always been used to that really, really high level of training, so that’s always what has kinda made me happy.”

Zoltek missed this high level of training and felt a desire to pursue a new goal.

It was in the midst of his concussion that Zoltek saw the steeple chase race for the first time. He recalls seeing all the red jackets lined up along the edge of the track and watching the runners jump over the water pit. The energy of the event inspired him.

Zoltek ran track his freshman year but had to quit after an injury. Understanding that a return to rugby wouldn’t be possible after the concussion, he realized his new goal of re-joining the track team.

“I started cheering for them and everyone else was running really fast, and I realized kinda in those moments I was like, ‘ya know this is what I want to do, this is where I’m supposed to be and so I’m gonna start working towards this.’”

However, his new goal was met with skepticism.

“Some people [were] telling me like, ‘Oh my gosh, why are you doing this? You’re gonna get hurt,’ and I mean, it means so much more to me than like just a race,” Zoltek said. “It’s like—this is like, the peak—this is the pinnacle, this is where I’ve wanted to be. I’ve worked so hard for this, and I know that no matter what, I’m going to be super proud of myself and where I’ve come from.”

Despite his peers’ skepticism, Zoltek was ready for the challenge. He felt that taking on the steeple chase would prove to himself that he was capable of overcoming obstacles—on and off the track.

“I [thought], ‘I want to work so hard, I want to show to the team I want to do that for the team, for myself, for my family, and you know, just show that I’ve come back from such, like, a dark past to being on top of where I was even beforehand,’” Zoltek said.

Fortunately, Zoltek found support from the track team, making his goal seem more feasible.

“It was like just I came in and everyone had open arms,” Zoltek said. “Without them, I definitely wouldn’t have the same motivation to succeed.”

The Race

It’s 11 a.m. on April 8, and a crisp spring breeze greets spectators entering Clemens Stadium from the fieldhouse. The sun makes brief appearances through the clouds, casting momentary spotlights on the runners. While many college students are still in their beds after a Friday night out, Zoltek takes his place at the starting line.

Standing six feet back from the line, he closes his eyes. When they open, determination is plastered to his face.

“On your mark,” the clerk says, followed by a synchronized scuffle of legs as they approach the starting line.

For a brief moment, Zoltek grins.

“I’ve always loved the crazy mess of emotions right before the start of a race,” Zoltek later recalled in an email interview. “In my head I told myself, ‘here we go,’ and then the sound of the gun went off.”

Zoltek begins the race in the middle of the pack, finding a spot near the inside curve. When he approaches the first barrier, he soars over it with ease. The second barrier with ease again. He greets the third barrier with excitement—a bit too much excitement.

The next obstacle is the water jump. A three-foot-high barrier with a foot-deep pool on the other side. A quick lapse in concentration results in a slow approach and a premature landing two feet shy of the mark. Zoltek lands hard on his left leg.

It was at this point in the race that he lost momentum.

“That’s when I realized I was in trouble and quickly felt my knee tightening up.”

The next six laps of the race became a battle between Zoltek, 24 barriers and six water barriers. Each one was a bit tougher than the last.

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No Regrets

Zoltek didn’t place in the steeple chase race. In fact, He doesn’t even remember where he placed. For Zoltek, this didn’t matter. His goals were different, and he has zero regrets—about anything that happened during his college career.

“I wouldn’t go back. I wouldn’t change a single thing, um, because I’m here where I am now and I’m happy and I know that’s for certain,” Zoltek said. “And you know, as much as I can say ‘Oh, I should’ve done this differently,’ I don’t know how that would’ve ended up but I know that right now I’m content with the person I am. I’m genuinely happy and I don’t want that to go anywhere.”

His friends agree. Both Nelson and Franta are proud of Zoltek and the obstacles he has overcome. They believe it's his character that makes him a true champion.

"He knew he wasn't gonna like place or anything, but he wanted to finish the race and he wasn't gonna like not compete his last race at St. John's, and I think that says a lot about his ability to accept failure or something that's not going to turn out as well as he thought it was going to—that he'll still follow through and he'll still put forth his best effort even if it's not going to be No. 1," Nelson said.

"I think Dan will take a stab at anything that, you know, like that he puts his mind to," Franta said. "Whether that's you know doing research, going to grad school, you know academics...obviously with the sports. I think, yea, it's seen throughout his day no matter what he's doing."

Zoltek may not have won a medal, but he gained something invaluable.

"I crossed the line and I was so incredibly happy because I realized in those moments, like, I had made it so far. I had come from, you know, not running at all, hiding in my room not being social, to now being at the highest point I had ever been in running and knowing that I had done that all completely for myself," Zoltek said. "That really was kinda like the point of realization where I saw that I had come out of such a hard place and that I was finally genuinely content with myself."