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Taekwondo, to me, was like the last bit of lead left in my mechanical pencil — always thrown out without a second thought. Insignificant. I performed poorly at tournaments and as much as I pretended not to care, I did. I figured that if I simply disregarded the sport as something meaningless to me, the loss would hurt less. But it still bothered me, and I reluctantly learned to live with my own dissatisfaction. Yet somewhere between losing, winning, and sometimes losing again, I found that all of the hurt and disappointment I felt was necessary to find purpose and love for the sport that once seemed so unimportant to me. I discovered that even when all of the odds felt against me, perseverance alone could bring meaning into my expanding world. My growth helped me realize that the resilience I built in taekwondo was not limited to the dojang, but that it also followed me into the classroom, where it turned academic struggles into opportunities to become stronger.

I never enjoyed sitting in math class or reading three-inch-thick history textbooks, but I was always able to commit to my studies without being asked. One thing that did not come to me as naturally, however, was the unwavering determination studying demanded. I remember nights when my desk became a silent witness to my unraveling, overwhelmed by the impossible workload placed before me. As each day began, I waited for it to end, dreading the idea of overcoming new challenges and the failure I expected them to bring. But no matter how much I wanted to give up, I never did. Just as the corners of my lips twitched upwards when the referee stood behind me, shouting “first place!”, I quietly celebrated the one-hundred placed on the top-right corner of my paper in red ink with a smiley face drawn into the two zeros. These moments were bittersweet: I felt so accomplished, yet so burdened all at once. The expectations I

placed on myself were all the higher, and I would wake up again the next morning with the same aching intensity in my routine. And even still, each time I reflect on all that I have accomplished, I am reminded that each obstacle has refined, not restrained, my understanding of myself. I am not confined by what I think I cannot achieve, but liberated by my passions and dreams. Over time, my fear of failure transformed into acceptance of the process, and each mistake has come to feel less like a dead end and more like a stepping stone.

I have come to realize that taekwondo was more essential to my adoption of perseverance than I could have ever imagined. No matter how useless and insignificant the last bit of lead seems, it will never give out until every last bit is used. In the same way, taekwondo has shaped how I now approach every challenge, not only at school or in the dojang, but in life. I can be reassured that the strength and unbreakable resilience I have built through taekwondo and academics will continue to carry me forward, even when the road gets steep. Like the last bit of lead that carries me to the end of my test, I have learned to utilize every last bit of my perseverance to carry me to the end of each journey.