

From Sidelines to Frontlines: Transforming Adversity into Advocacy

The moment I heard the snap and looked down at my misaligned leg, I knew my season was over. The collective gasp of the fans and the look of horror on their faces are still etched in my mind. An ACL tear, later confirmed by an MRI, shattered my roles as a varsity soccer, basketball, and track athlete, as well as a devoted CrossFit enthusiast.

Sports had become my identity as well as my escape, and, in that moment, it seemed all over. My father, a former administrator of my high school, was incarcerated for sexually abusing students, and I carried the burden of having his last name on the back of my jerseys each game. However, I wanted that last name to be associated with something good, not just with criminal activity. I wanted my athletic successes to be what appeared when the name was googled, not my father's mugshots. Sports became my refuge, and I feared it was all over.

Despite the setback, I had a choice: wallow or evolve. The following soccer season was the toughest of my life. I attended every team practice and every game in my knee brace and on crutches. I had gone from being the top scorer on the soccer field to the one sitting on the sidelines. On the outside, I was the biggest supporter of the team. I smiled, cheered, kept track of the books, and fetched water bottles, but I was in such a dark place on the inside. I often cried myself to sleep. Then, I received a call asking if I could coach a team of five and six-year-olds, many learning soccer for the first time. I readily agreed. Seeing the growth in these kindergarteners and their love of soccer was contagious. Those little ones inspired me to do everything I could to get back on the pitch. I did physical therapy six days a week; I lifted weights, watched drills, and never gave up. The week after I was cleared to return to sports, I ran in a high

school track meet, taking first place in all four events I competed in, including the 100 hurdles. I tried out for, and made, a club soccer team three weeks later. I was on the local news as an athlete to watch out for that fall. I was back in the game. Here is where one might expect me to end my story, but, in fact, the season I was sidelined would end up being a catalyst for my future career.

I had always been passionate about making a positive impact on the lives of others. The year of my injury, I realized that although I could not contribute to winning games that season, I could channel my emotions into positive action. I was able to attend events at the sheriff's office and go on ride-alongs. After much research on ways to actively promote positive change, I decided to study public health and criminology in college, focusing on the health of individuals and how issues such as crime, substance abuse, and incarceration can impact communities. By dedicating myself to this field, I aim to address critical public safety issues, promote wellness, and give back to the community that has shaped me.

Throughout my academic journey, I have maintained a 4.3 GPA, a testament to my dedication and hard work. As a track team captain, vice president of the National Honor Society, and senior class secretary, I have learned to be a leader within my school community, a trait that will help me in my future career. Moreover, I have seized every opportunity to serve my community, recognizing that real change starts at the grassroots level. Working at a daycare five days a week and coaching youth sports has allowed me to witness the impact of early childhood education on the overall health and well-being of children. It solidified my belief in the power of positive connections within a community.

The year I spent recovering and coaching not only healed my body but also reshaped my understanding of resilience and community. I am determined to be a voice for those affected by the criminal justice system and to work towards fair and equitable policies. Through education and advocacy, I hope to empower individuals in my community to break cycles of adversity and pursue brighter futures.