

Something Broken

The crowd in the bleachers roars as the first heat of the boys 200-meter dash ends in a tight finish. I throw on my trainers as I sit on the turf in the middle of the track, peering at the finish line. My stomach begins to turn and the nervous butterflies in my stomach begin fluttering about - my usual pre-race anxiety. Luckily, I'm able to take that nervous energy and turn it into motivation because I'm at Regionals and this is my chance to qualify for Sectionals.

The pressure is on. I've been working diligently my entire Sophomore year for this moment, and I had to give it my all since my relay was one place short of qualifying. I'm determined, and the competitive nature of the sport is exactly what I need to push myself. The track is bright red with a fresh coat on the white lines, and my nose is filled with the smell of rubber. I shove my headphones into my ears and blast my pump-up race playlist as I begin my warmup.

High knees. Butt kicks. Lunges. Heel-toe drills. Sprinter's accelerations. Stretch. Repeat! I feel my muscles loosening up, giving me more power and speed, and it's time to put my spikes on. The adrenalin begins to course through my veins as the heat before me is called and the gun pierces the air. I lace up my neon pink and orange spikes tightly and grimace when I feel the familiar sharp pain go up my left leg. The little voice in the back of my head warns me, but I push it away with the reassurance from my father and doctor that it is tendinitis. Maybe even shin splints. Regardless, I was competing today.

My Homestead track and field jersey sits comfortably on my torso and I hike up my spandex so they don't slip down during the race. I do a couple of jumps in the air and smile when my friend Van surprises me by coming to stand on the back of the aluminum starting blocks. I'm

in the zone. The gun goes off and for a split second it's dead silent; I didn't realize that would be my last race for a while.

My entire life I have defined and identified myself as an athlete. Ever since I was four, I had played club soccer and ran. When I entered high school, I worked hard and earned a place on the most elite club soccer team in Wisconsin: FC Wisconsin Eclipse. The commitment was intense, with year-round practices and travel. Routinely, after school I would run cross country until five pm, eat dinner in the car on the way to soccer practice, play soccer until 9:30 pm, and then return home to a pile of homework. It was becoming difficult to balance cross-country and track against soccer, and I knew I would eventually have to make a decision. I was overworked. For the first time ever, my participation in sports was no longer making me feel better about myself but rather exhausting me.

On top of being overworked, I also felt the pressure from everyone around me, especially my parents – each pushing me in a different direction and trying to influence my decision. My mom, a runner her whole life as well, was obviously all for cross country and track and was my biggest supporter throughout my entire running career. She ran a half marathon while pushing me in a stroller and gave me my first pair of running shoes when I was six months old. My dad on the other hand, was the one who took me to every soccer practice and game and loved the sport as much as I did since he used to play. I didn't want to disappoint either of them with my verdict, and I fear failure; but I couldn't continue at the pace I was at.

I remember the night I called my soccer coach to tell him he needed a new left-wing. The disdain in his voice was evident, but when I hung up, I released a huge sigh of relief. I'd finally made the decision to commit to running with the goal of possibly pursuing track and field at the

D1 level one day. But for me soccer wasn't just quitting a sport, it was leaving behind a core part of my identity. I'd always been a gifted athlete; whether it was soccer, running, tennis or golf, I consistently surpassed my goals. I could really do it all! Except, I couldn't. Now, I'd define myself as a runner by giving it all of my time and attention.

I truly raced my heart out. It felt good to finally focus on one thing, and that one thing was what I loved more than anything else in the world. As I shifted my focus to cross country and track, my times drastically improved. It was the fall of my sophomore year was when I went to state with the cross-country team. During that same time, I was recruited by a club track team based in Milwaukee. The coach, Ray Hale, was impressed by my high school stats and saw a potential in me that motivated me even more, something I didn't know was even possible. Our team's motto "run like Hale" (run like hell) perfectly encompassed the goal, charisma and community of the team.

A club track team is extremely different than a high school track team. The intensity and competitive nature of the sport is significantly increased with a club team and it's a very humbling experience. You might be the number one runner at your high school and win all of your races in that division, but you could be one of the slowest on your club team. This forces you to separate yourself from the pack in new ways since the rest of your teammates are just as good as you, and in most cases, even better. Everyone running next to you has already gone to state and broken their school records, so what can you bring to the table to stand out? Only the athletes of the highest caliber are running for these select teams, so it truly is an honor to be considered one of the lucky few.

Perhaps the difference that made the biggest impact on me was how I was coached. High school track is flawed in the sense that the coaching is less successful due to the skill levels of each runner being so stratified. You don't get one on one training that is tailored to the technical skills you need to work on like you do with a club team, which is why the level of talent is so much lower in a high school program. Coach Hale knew exactly what I needed to do to become faster. This included a new, heavier weight training schedule, the addition of plyometric circuits (which I am convinced contributed greatly to my injury), and intense agility, core and sprint work. I had no doubt in my mind that I was on my way to becoming a stronger runner.

I will never forget the first day of practice with the Mustangs. I'd nervously parked my car by a fence surrounding Rufus King high school and turned off the ignition. As I looked onto the track, I quickly realized I was the only white runner there. My parents hadn't exactly been thrilled when they found out I would have to drive alone from my predominately white neighborhood to one of the most underserved areas of Milwaukee for practice, but I had zero concerns. The Mustangs offered me the opportunity of a lifetime to train with the best runners in the Milwaukee area, so it only seemed fitting to take my running career to the next level.

Coming from Mequon, a white, upper-middle class cookie cutter suburb, I immediately recognized the diversity and difference between my home and this area of downtown Milwaukee. I knew the moment I stepped on the track to meet them that they were looking at me with curious eyes. They were all most likely wondering if I, a short white girl, would be good enough to race with them. I felt a little nervous that I would not be accepted but was greeted with smiles and kind faces. Thankfully, I quickly made friends with the entire team, and enjoyed pushing myself to be just as fast as my newfound family. My team filled the hole in my identity I'd created from quitting soccer, so once again my identity was complete.

Months of training went by, and eventually it was the spring - aka Homestead track and field time. With the help of my club team, I was able to qualify for many events in Junior Olympics, and that was coming up right after my high school track season ended. But first, I had to finish this race at Regionals in order to qualify for Sectionals and possibly state. Only after that could I truly focus on the Mustangs and Junior Olympics. Let's get back to Regionals...

The gun goes off and I push off the blocks, whipping around the corner of the track. I was feeling golden. It was about 10 strides before the finish line was when I realized something was very wrong with my foot. As soon as I crossed over, I frantically searched for my parents. My coach runs over excitedly to tell me I absolutely killed my personal record – it was the fastest I ran the 200 all year. That was incredible, but I couldn't listen to her over the throbbing pain in my left foot that was running up my shin. I couldn't even hear her tell me the devastating news that I was, yet again, one place short of qualifying for Sectionals. My dad carried me away with a bag of ice on my foot while friends from my school ran over to congratulate me. A few days later I went to see my doctor for an x-ray.

I've been told I have a high pain tolerance. I guess that's why I was able to run on a foot with detrimental stress fractures for about two months before it officially could not take the constant pounding any longer and completely broke. The navicular bone is one of the hardest bones in your foot to break, but hey, nothing is impossible. I'm a textbook example right here. That's just my luck. I officially broke down when my doctor said he was unsure if I'd be able to run again. The realization of the severity of my injury finally hit and I started crying for the first time in a while. Surgery was an option, but my father, who is a physical therapist, refused to have

it done since I was still young and growing at the time. Five months in a cast and crutches followed that doctor appointment, and then another six months of wearing a boot followed that.

Even after I dropped out of soccer, I knew I was still an athlete. But now, who was I? No longer able to define myself as an athlete nor pursue my passion of running at the college level, I was unsure of who I was anymore or what my purpose was. At that point in my life, I was something broken: literally and metaphorically. My foot was broken, and so was my identity; although, the pain of my foot didn't hurt nearly as bad as the empty void of how I defined myself as a person.

Since that point in my life, my identity has drastically evolved. I've learned how to work within some of the constraints of my injury by taking on more hiking and increasing functional core strengthening. Focusing more on what I can do vs. what I can't has allowed me to put more emphasis on the direction of my career and what I want out of life. There's no doubt in my mind that the unexpected injury added a level of resilience and perseverance in my character that I lacked prior. I'm much more of a critical thinker and refuse to accept things at face value, encouraging my independence and confidence at the same time. Moreover, I realize I still have a lot to learn and that there will always be new challenges as well as opportunities to face straight on. In the end, I believe these disruptions and inconveniences in life have led me to the path that is or was chosen for me.

Making the decisions to leave soccer and running behind were two of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Before that, I had only quit things that I had no passion for, but by the end of my freshman and sophomore years of high school I was forced to quit two of the things I loved the most. It was always easy to take pride in winning and identify myself as an athlete. Now, my

successes don't come as easily. While my foot was something broken, I failed to acknowledge the fact that my identity didn't have to break along with it. This forced me to undergo my own internal journey with regards to my injury and identity; one that has proven to benefit me in many aspects of my life. The tenacity I gained from this experience is what sets me apart and made me who I am today. My new identity wouldn't have been my choice six years ago, but it's one I've grown into with self-acceptance, determination and maturity. Without a doubt, this has been the greatest accomplishment of my life: finding myself and realizing this is not my final transformation.