

Blue Shoes:

A Letter from the Field

Crystal Campbell
University of Kentucky COSW

Dear Coaches, Trainers, Social Workers, Administrators, and Anyone Who Says They Care,

You call me Blue Shoes. I picked the cleats to stand out. I wanted to be remembered. And I guess I am, but not always for the reasons that matter. You see me on the field and think, “There is a winner. That kid gives it everything.”

But you do not see what it took to get here. You do not see the nights I stay up late trying to finish homework after practice. You do not see me wondering if I will ever get the same shot as kids from big schools, with better gear, better fields, better cameras to make highlight reels. You do not see the pressure to keep playing, even when I am hurt. Because if I sit out, I might get passed over. You do not see the fear. The fear of your own thoughts. I have seen how fast things can change. One day you are playing. The next, it could be your last game. That is what I think about sometimes. Not because I want to, but because I have to.

When I first joined the team, I did not know if I would fit in. I was quiet. Unsure. It took time to feel like I belonged. And even now, there are things I do not say, like when I am in pain or when I am overwhelmed.

Do not get me wrong, I have always had someone to talk to. My mom has been there for me. But I know not every kid has that. And even if they do, football does not make it easy to talk about what you are going through. You are expected to be tough. To push through. To keep quiet.

I have learned how to hold things in. How to play through pain. How to stay focused even when I feel like there is too much going on at once. That is what the game teaches you. And sometimes, it is not just the game. It is the world around it.

I have not felt racism from my coaches; they have treated me with respect. But outside the team? It is different. Around here, there is an unspoken rule that people stick with their “own.” People see you a certain way before you even open your mouth.

So maybe some of that hard work is so that “they” do not see me *that* way. Maybe it is my way of rewriting the story before they write it for me.

I have not had to speak up in front of a crowd yet. But I am the kind of person who will welcome the new kid without being asked. I admire athletes like Mack Hollins, people who use their platform to remind others they are not alone. If I ever had a voice like that, I would use it the same way. Sports reaches people.

Out here, in small towns like mine, the quiet is not empty, it is full of what we carry. The pressure to perform. The pain we do not name. The fear we do not show. Sports teaches us to push through, to stay focused, to keep quiet. But that silence does not mean we are okay. And it does not mean we do not have something to say.

So, if you are reading this, if you are a coach, a trainer, a social worker, or someone who says they care, do not wait until we are broken to show up. Do not wait until we are headlines or hashtags. Listen now. While we are still here. While we are still trying.

Sincerely,
Blue Shoes

This letter was written by a rural high school football player who chose to remain anonymous to protect any future opportunities he may have in sports. We worked in collaboration through conversations and reflection to create this manuscript so that his words could be heard. His words reflect the emotional truths many young athletes carry, truths that are often overlooked until it is too late. As a social worker, I offer the following reflection not to speak over his voice, but to amplify what it reveals about the systems surrounding him.

I have read countless articles about the role of social work in sports. Most of those articles discuss college and professional sports. These conversations are important, but they often begin too late. By the time an athlete reaches a university or the league, they have already spent years navigating systems that reward silence, punish vulnerability, and ignore the emotional toll of performance. If we want to support athletes holistically, we must start earlier. We must start in high school. We must start in places like Blue Shoes' rural high school's sports programs.

His letter is not a crisis report. It is a quiet warning. A 15-year-old should not be thinking about his "last play." He should not be choosing between his body and his future. He should not be navigating the racialized assumptions of school discipline systems alone. And yet, like so many young athletes, he is.

What strikes me most is not what he says, but what he does not. The way he downplays pain. The way he normalizes pressure. The way he protects his coaches, even as he names the silence around injury and mental health. This is not a failure of character. It is a survival strategy. It is what sports has taught him be tough, be quiet, be grateful, and to be good.

But what if we taught something else? What if social workers were embedded in high school athletic programs, not just to respond to crises, but to build relationships, normalize emotional expression, and advocate for systemic equity? What if we trained coaches to recognize trauma responses, not just missed tackles? What if we created spaces where athletes could speak without fear of losing their spot?

Blue Shoes story is not unique. It is, in fact, painfully common. And yet, it is rarely heard, especially in rural communities where resources are limited, and visibility is low. His voice reminds us that athletes are not just bodies in motion. They are whole people, shaped by race, class, geography, and silence.

Changing sport culture means listening to athletes at every moment, not only in triumph or crisis, but in the spaces where silence is mistaken for strength. Blue Shoes reminds us that athletes are not just performers; they are people navigating complex systems that often fail to see them fully. As social workers, we have a responsibility to show up early, listen deeply, and advocate fiercely. If we wait until they're broken, we've already missed our chance. Let his letter be a call to intervene, not at the finish line, but at the starting block. Because if we wait until they are broken, we have already missed our chance. We must show up, before they break.

Author ORCID ID

Crystal Campbell  0009-0006-0429-8846