

# **The Game of a Lifetime:**

## **Supporting Athletes Across Multiple Identities, Multiple Truths**

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It was a Monday night home game against a fierce competitor. I was a senior in high school, a power forward and captain on my varsity basketball team. The energy in the gymnasium was electric, the enthusiasm infectious. Family, friends, community members and scouts filled the spectator seats applauding and cheering from the moment we stepped onto the court. The tip-off sent the ball to our point guard who threw a quick outlet pass to me, and I drove down the left lane and scored the first points of the game. The reaction from the crowd was immediate and explosive, and it propelled me into action. I scored 38 points in that single game – a personal and school record. To the dismay of our opponent, we won the game by a slim margin, the final score was 52-49.

I remember my coach offered to bring several of us home that night. I sat in the backseat staring out the window. I was the last one to be dropped off. Looking back, I recognize I could have felt an array of positive emotions in that moment – pride, joy, relief – but I felt exhausted, anxious, and afraid. I knew what was coming. Alone with my coach, he asked me an all-too familiar question, “How do you think you played tonight?”. I gave an all-too familiar answer, “Okay”, I said simply. That single syllable belied multiple truths that I was not allowed to name: the pressure of performing for the scouts, the fear of disappointing people, the crippling panic connected to an uncertain future, the searing shoulder pain I ignored because strong athletes “push through”, the stress of my broken family as my father packed his bags to leave for the final time, and the cacophony of voices whispering and screaming simultaneously that nothing I did would ever be enough. And then it came, like a lighting cue for an actor walking on to center stage in perfect time: “You missed that early shot in the lane. Why did you not use the backboard?”

Years later, after my collegiate basketball career was cut short by successive shoulder injuries, I found myself reflecting on that night in the backseat of the car staring out the window in anxious and dreaded anticipation. I was curious to understand how a night that might have been such a singularly celebratory one was filled with such profound sadness. I realized that even triumph rarely exists without pain, loss, sacrifice and suffering. It was the beginning of understanding a deeper fracture that moved beyond a broken body and a broken heart and encompassed a broken sense of self – a fractured experience of my athletic identity that stood somehow separate from other social identities, complex emotions and lived experiences.

I recognize that my privilege is woven throughout my intersectional self. I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual female, the second of four children, born in the United States and raised in a middle-class family. Playing sports was always a central part of my life. I had access to health care, mentors, athletic opportunities, year-round skills-building sport programs, and a network of people who rallied around me to succeed on and off the court. And still, I struggled to perform. My early family story was marked by chapters of parental addiction and physical abuse that cultivated perfectionism and a searingly determined drive to hide the pain. To the world, I was disciplined, tenacious and unrelenting; yet, inside I felt fragile, and I was falling apart.

Sports provided me with a community that functioned like family. However, no one – no coach, athletic trainer, nor sport administrator – ever asked me a question that moved beyond statistics and metrics: “How did you do?”, is very different than, “How are you doing?”. My sport experience also fostered a culture that prized showing toughness over softness which translated into silence over displays of emotion. It prized playing through and with injury over resting and prioritizing full recovery. Sports provided me with a place of belonging and a clear purpose; yet it also taught me to bury my pain, demanding that I “leave it off the court”.

Becoming a sport social worker who supports Division I athletes has required, in many ways, that I return to my former athletic self. I struggled in my own athletic career with the invisible weight of my fragile mental health and its impact on performance in the presence of my privilege. As sport social workers, it is critical that we understand more deeply how to support and advocate for athletes navigating the visible and invisible weights of racism, poverty, immigration stress, gender-based bias, pressure from family and fans, trauma, injury and chronic health conditions. We are charged with deepening our understanding in contextual ways that frame the struggle within the rigor, and at times ruthlessness, that often underscores intercollegiate sports.

For the past fifteen years, I have worked with a diverse population of Division I collegiate athletes. Some are navigating chronic racial microaggressions that complicate performance stress. Others are first-generation college students who are trying to balance pressure from family members to preserve their scholarships while facing crippling imposter syndrome. Others are trying to manage anxiety and depression without showing vulnerability or asking for help. Others are working to recover from physical injuries and worrying they will never play with the same intensity or agility. Still others are afraid to share the full truths of their racial, ethnic and gender identities and expressions for fear of threats to their personal safety or standing and belonging within their teams.

Sport social workers are uniquely trained and well-positioned to see both the intersecting truths and identities of athletes and the larger context within which they exist. When coaches, athletic trainers, and sport administrators dare to ask different questions they invite multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing and understanding athletes. When we move away from asking, “How do you think you played?”, or “How is your knee?”, to questions that cultivate curiosity and invite more truths such as, “How did you celebrate your birthday back in Africa?”, or “What is going on in your head right now?”, or “What are you carrying onto the court today that feels hard or heavy?” we can transform the experience of the person who is also an athlete. Instead of saying, “Leave it off the court”, we can talk with athletes and coaches and struggle with a question that is curious to know, “How can we play our best when we inevitably carry everything onto the court?”.

We can also support athletes by operating from a strengths-based perspective, one that notices and affirms the successes that come with missed plays and team losses. We can maintain a posture that seeks to understand before it corrects, that asks questions and invites deeper ways of knowing to provide opportunities for more creative, compassionate and synergistic problem-solving. We can approach the work by inviting conversations about race, racism and power into team conversations and individual encounters with athletes who may carry the weight of multiply burdened identities. We can work to build relationships, a core value of the social work profession, to establish connections that promote safer spaces and invoke greater truths.

My work as a sport social worker requires that I continue to develop a more profound understanding of the athlete I was so many years ago. Her story informs the way I understand the complex truths and intersectional identities of the athletes and coaches I support today. I sometimes think back to the athlete in the backseat, the one staring out the window after the big game, carrying the invisible weight of grief, fear and shame. I wish someone had told her that strength doesn't come from silence, and that truths are welcome and rarely revealed in a single word. I wish someone had told her that she did not have to earn her place on the team by pushing through the pain. I wish someone had told her that her mental health mattered as much as her performance, and that addressing one would help the other. I wish someone had said that she had permission to feel

terrified and tenacious, to make mistakes and recover from them, to be broken-hearted and never be fully broken.

Research-informed sport social work practitioners value the importance of engaging with athletes' multiple identities, possibilities and truths. The healing encounters that promise to be the most transformative involve seeing and affirming all parts of the athletes we support. It is an honor to journey with athletes as they witness and acknowledge their histories, examine their environments, and bravely reflect on who they are, who they refuse to be, and who they hope to become. This level of authenticity and allyship, partnered with radical social work practices that seek structural change, is required of sport social workers to support athletes in the process of becoming more holistically healthy and hopeful. When I look back to that momentous night during a tender and transitional time in my athletic career, I wish someone had turned to me and said, "Wow, that was the game of a lifetime," simply because that was the truth, too.