

Purpose through Pain:

A Letter from an Incarcerated Athlete to Coaches, Trainers, and Mentors

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Cortez Rice

Dear Coaches, Trainers, and Mentors,

You ever had so much pressure in your chest you feel like you might explode? That is what it was like for me before I started working out in prison. I was heavy, not just my body, but my mind too. Two hundred and fifty pounds of pain, anger, and not knowing who I was. I could not even run right. My posture was off. My spirit was off.

I am writing this from inside a youth prison. There is no view out my window, no fresh kicks squeaking on a gym floor, no sunlight warming your back when you are running drills. In here it is concrete. Hard, cold, and always gray. Time moves slow. Every sound echoes. The slam of a door. The metal clank of keys. The shuffle of feet in chains. It is a place where mistakes follow you everywhere, like a shadow that will not leave. But even in here, I found movement. I found a piece of myself that refused to stay locked up.

Finding Confidence in the Weights

When I first started working out, I did not know what I was doing. I just knew I did not like who I was anymore. My homie, another guy locked up with me, looked at me one day and said, “Bro, what is you doing?” He was talking down on me, clowning a little, but something about it lit a fire. I told myself; I am going to prove him wrong.

So, I got up. I started moving. At first it hurt. Everything hurt. But the pain felt different than before. It felt like progress. Every set, every rep, was me pushing back on the weight of everything I had done and everything I had lost.

Now I am 170 pounds. I lost 80 pounds in here. I move different. I think different. The first time I looked in the mirror while I was working out and saw my chest tightening and my veins popping, I felt a rush, like my body was finally catching up to the man I was trying to become. Fitness gave me confidence, but it also gave me something deeper. Control. In here, you do not get much of that. But when I work out, it is my time, my body, my grind.

Brotherhood Behind Bars

There is another dude in here, Cortez. He is older, more disciplined. He became like a big brother to me. When I was seventeen, he told me straight up, “You are fucking up, bro. You gotta get your health right.” He did not sugarcoat it. At first, I did not like hearing it, but I needed it. When you got someone who believes in you, even when you do not believe in yourself, that hits different.

We built a bond over workouts and long talks. He would spot me on the bench, tell me to keep my form right, and later we would talk about life. How to be better men. How to stop letting the world tell us who we are. Cortez said something once

that stuck with me. “When you water your plants, they all grow.” He meant that when you pour into people, when you show them care and consistency, they will blossom. That is what sport can do. It connects you. It helps you grow.

So, thank you, Cortez. I know we bumped heads. But you helped me find discipline. You helped me see that even behind these walls, I could still become somebody better. You helped me find purpose through pain.

The Mirror

Every day when I look in the mirror, it feels like a metaphor. It is small, scratched up, and foggy. But when I look in it, I see everything. The man I was. The crime I committed. The kid I used to be. I was sixteen when I came in. Sometimes I still feel sixteen. Like no matter how much time passes, I am frozen here, a boy in a man’s world.

When I look at myself, I see the weight of what I did. I took a life. I did not understand what that really meant back then. How permanent it was. How deep it cut. I think about that person’s family. It messes with me every day. I cannot take it back, but I can try to move different now.

Working out keeps me from breaking down. When I feel anger building, I hit the weights. When I feel sad, I do pushups. It is how I escape. The pressure builds in my chest, my veins start to bulge, and I can see the future. Like a crystal ball showing me that if I keep pushing, I can still become someone worth believing in.

The Reality of This Place

Being locked up at nineteen feels like the world pressed pause on your life. I missed prom. Missed college. Missed all the things people my age should be doing. In here, you learn to grow up fast, or you do not grow at all.

Prison is a constant reminder of the worst moment of your life. Every locked door, every loud command reminds you that your freedom is gone. Some people think they understand, but unless you have felt what it is like to be racially profiled every day, to feel eyes on you just for being a Black kid, you do not really know. It is a feeling that runs down your spine like electricity. Uncomfortable. Always there. You cannot even laugh too loud without someone thinking you are up to something.

But I try to stay level-headed. I tell myself I am not going to let my past harden me completely. Yes, the world can be cold and cruel, but I still got warmth in me. I am trying to keep it alive through movement, through fitness, through helping others grow too.

Redemption Through Movement

When I am lifting, it is not just about muscle. It is about forgiveness. Every rep is like I am saying I am sorry. Every set is a prayer. I remind myself that I am not only working for me. I am working for the person who is not here anymore. For her. For the life I took.

When I feel that burn in my arms and that rush in my head, it fuels me. It is pain, yes, but it is also hope. It is me saying I can still do something good with what is left. Maybe I cannot undo the past, but I can help someone else not make the same mistakes.

If I ever get the chance to be out there again, I want to show young kids what I learned too late. That movement can save you before the streets break you. That aggression does not have to turn into violence. You can fight your demons in the gym instead of on the block.

That is what redemption through movement means to me.

To Those Who Work With Us

To the coaches, mentors, and trainers reading this, I want you to really understand something. A lot of us in here never had fathers or stable homes. We learned from each other. From the streets. From pain. We do not need pity. We need people who will tell us the truth and still believe in us when we fall.

Do not overpressure us, but do not baby us either. Tell us it is okay to mess up but stay by us while we figure it out. Be that person who helps a child see himself different. You never know how far that belief can reach. Cortez did that for me, and now I want to do it for someone else.

Sports can be more than just competition. It can be connection, transformation, healing. It is what keeps me sane in a place designed to break you.

Still Growing

Sometimes I think back to when I was four or five. I would wake up early, crawl into bed with my mom, and she would smile when she saw me. That was before the world got complicated. Before guilt. Before fear. I miss that innocence.

Now when I look in the mirror, I still see the boy I used to be, but I also see the man I am becoming. A fierce, unstoppable, determined athlete. Someone trying to learn from his mistakes. Someone trying to find light in a dark place.


I am locked up. But I am still moving. Still growing. Still fighting to become better than I was yesterday. You have the power to tell someone those words. To show up when everyone else forgets about us. To help me turn my mistake into redemption. To show me that weights can be picked up, not held down.

And if my story can remind someone out there, a coach, a teacher, a trainer, to never stop believing in children like me, then maybe that is a kind of freedom too.

With discipline,

A 19-year-old athlete from Joliet, IL

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