

To the Ones Who Saw Me:

A Letter to the Coaches Who Saved My Life

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True Fish Tales

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Dear Coaches,

I am writing this letter to you, but also to the people who will read it: administrators, social workers, coaches, policymakers, anyone who shapes the environment that young people walk into when they lace up their shoes or step onto a field. This journal asked athletes to tell their truths, and as I sat with that invitation, I realized that the truths I carry, the ones that taught me what care, safety, and belonging feel like, came from each of you.

So, while these words are addressed to you, they are also being offered *through* you. They are my attempt to honor the lessons you lived out, that coaching is not just about performance, it is about presence. Because if I can offer anything to this journal, it is the truth that the most life-changing coaching moments are not loud or dramatic. They live in the quiet choices a coach makes: to listen, to intervene, to tell the truth, to stay steady when a young person is coming undone. To see the whole human, not just the athlete. You each did that for me. And this letter is my way of passing that wisdom forward.

Coach B,

I joined your basketball team the year before my dad died. At twelve, I did not know how to name grief before it arrived. I did not know how to prepare for the slow disappearance of the strongest person I knew. Watching my father fade from cancer was like living inside a storm without shelter. Everyday life continued around me, but internally, everything felt fractured, suspended, and unreal.

You did not fix it, you could not, but you saw it. In your steady way, you made space for a kind of quiet witnessing I did not know I needed. You were not effusive or overly emotional; you were grounded, observant, and direct. You paid attention to the small shifts: the days I lingered after practice, the mornings I arrived withdrawn, the way my leadership dimmed even when my performance did not. Grief was hollowing me out, and you were the first person who registered what was happening beneath the surface.

You were also the first openly gay adult I ever knew in my small South Carolina town. Without knowing it, you expanded the edges of my world. You existed with an authenticity and steadiness that modeled a different possibility for a life than the rigid one I grew up inside. Only years later, after coming into my own queer and non-binary identity, did I realize how profoundly your presence had shaped me, simply by being yourself.

When my dad died, the grief cracked me open completely. My pain came out sideways: drinking, acting out, pushing boundaries, pushing people away. I was spiraling, but silently. The world around me praised toughness and grit. You, quietly and firmly, gave me permission to be a human being, not a machine.

The day you sat me down and offered me that choice, to continue the path I was on and be cut or choose accountability and a future version of myself I could be proud of, you were not punishing me. You were extending a hand. The contract you presented for me to sign was not about control; it was about care. You saw me dancing with addiction, and you offered me a way out. It was a structure sturdy enough for me to hold onto when I could not trust myself.

Fifteen years later, returning home with you by my side as a mentor-turned-family member made the full arc of your impact unmistakable. As I kneeled between my father's and brother's graves, my brother, who had died from an overdose the year prior, I felt both the weight of loss and the miracle of survival. My brother's death was not a failure or a moral flaw. It was a pain too heavy for one person to hold alone. I saw myself in him. I saw what my life could have become if you had not come into my life, in the way you did.

As I sat there, I came to understand you differently. You had not just coached me. You had saved a version of me I did not yet know how to protect.

Coach T,

You came to lead our collegiate team during my redshirt sophomore year. I had just come back from two ACL tears back-to-back, and a deeply toxic and soon-to-be-abusive relationship with a teammate. My body was healing, but my sense of self was not. On the surface, I was performing; returning from injury, playing well, leading. But inside, I was unraveling in familiar ways, binge drinking, shutting down emotionally, surviving instead of living.

The way you coached was unlike anything I had ever experienced. You led with positivity, clarity, and consistency, never intimidation. Your values were not slogans taped to a locker room wall; they were a lived culture. "We before me." "Attitude of Gratitude." "Exceed Expectations." You did not just preach them, you modeled them.

When the referenced relationship with a teammate imploded, and I could not breathe inside the environment anymore, I took three months away from the game. I told you I was done. You did not guilt me, punish me, or question my integrity. You asked what I needed. And then you honored it.

It was not until those months away that I rediscovered my love for myself, soccer, and my desire to return. I was terrified to tell you. I expected conditions, skepticism, or consequences. Instead, you opened the door without hesitation. You did not hold my absence against me. You held space for my humanity.

You also recognized something in me I had not fully seen in myself yet: a calling to use sport as a force for social good. You connected me to one of your former national team teammates who ran Leadership Academies built on empowerment, character, and justice. That experience changed everything. It planted a seed that has grown into the entire foundation of the work I do today. You did not just coach me. You cultivated the person I was becoming.

Mrs. J,

You were not a coach in title, but you lived out what every sport administrator should aspire to be. On that service trip abroad, where we used sport to empower youth to pursue their education, you did not treat us as representatives of the athletic department. You treated us as young people on the brink of discovering who we could be. You asked questions that reached beyond surface-level small talk. You noticed what lit me up. You saw how that work resonated with something deep inside me, something I did not yet have the words for.

When an opportunity arose to nominate one student-athlete to attend the Olympism for Humanity Conference in Greece that summer, you chose me. You did not choose the most decorated athlete or the loudest leader or the person with the cleanest résumé. You chose the person whose heart you had taken the time to know. That single nomination rerouted my life. It broadened my world, connected me to purpose, and confirmed what I had long felt but never articulated: that sport is far more powerful as a tool for humanity than it is as a tool for performance. You did not just open a door. You transformed the horizon I could imagine.

To All of You,

I now understand how rare my experience was. I was raised by female coaches who led with confidence, empathy, strong boundaries, and unwavering belief in the potential of young people.

Today, I identify as a non-binary and queer human. Coming into that truth has been liberating, but it also sharpens my understanding of the young people who are being pushed out of sport simply for being who they are. When I think of the trans kids whose existence is being debated, who's right to play is being politicized, I think of my younger self. If I had known who I was then, and if I had been excluded because of it, I would not be writing this letter today. I know exactly where I would be: on the path my brother could not climb out of, or in a grave beside him.

Sport was my lifeline. Not because of wins, rankings, or accolades, but because of the adults who held onto me when I was losing myself.

To the Sport Professionals Reading This:

What saved me were not systems or policies. What saved me were people. People who understand that coaching is not just instruction, but also stewardship. If you want to change sport, change the way you see the humans in front of you. Choose connection over control. Choose presence over performance. Choose to see the whole person, not just the athlete. Because somewhere in your program is a young person holding more pain than they know how to carry. And you may be the one adult who notices before they disappear.

I am here because three people did.

With gratitude,

A former athlete shaped and saved by sport