

## A Letter to Student Athletes

Have you ever felt defeated? So much so, you wanted to give up? Or have you had a recruiter in the stands watching you, when you were the one sitting on the bench, failing to cheer on your team? Whatever your situation, you are not alone. Every athlete struggles with the weight of an immense pressure to succeed. We all want to be on the varsity roster or win the state championship, but fail to recognize the anxiety that creeps in. However, when we recognize this burden and embrace it, our whole mindset will positively change. For the past six years of my life I have devoted my time to volleyball and have since battled with the constant competition, mental toughness, and the struggle to achieve my goals; but throughout it all I've persevered and never let anything or anyone stop me.

First of all, the hardships of a student athlete includes the mental challenge of competition. I can't even begin to express how pernicious competition was for me. I had been with the same coach and the same competition for the past 4 years and could never compare to her "favorites" (no matter what people say, it's true that coaches have favorites). I continually pushed myself in practice and workouts, hoping for one second she would see me. I stressed over her decisions, I was up at night thinking how I could be better. Moreover, I woke up to practice before school and was even working out at midnight! What would it take for her to play me? What made it even worse was that none of her "top" players planned to play in college. I was the only one who was actively getting myself recruited and I wasn't even on the court! On top of that, they were spreading rumors about the other girls in our program and would make fun of me when I recorded practices or thought of games to play with the program. As an athlete who's had everything going against her, these questions build up, "Why am I not good enough? Should I

stay in this sport? Should I even want to play in college?... Why not just quit?". To me, it always felt like the pressure never ceased. I was told to just let it all go, but I held my coach's opinion in such high regard that I still saved hope that when she saw me working hard in practice, I would play... yet, it never amounted to anything. My season was sitting on the bench, struggling to cheer on my team, and feeling depressed after every game. So where did I go from there?

I endured that season because I knew there was something greater waiting for me. There was a point I realized, that my goals are bigger than my coach's opinion. I wasn't going to give up because I. Am. Not. A. Quitter. Therefore, I stopped stressing over my coach and focused on achieving my goal to play in college and prove them all wrong. However, I knew it had to start with making the season better for myself; so I started with making a list of things I could control: beginning with shutting those rumors down. I took a leap of faith and stood up for those who were being gossiped about and became a friend to everyone who treated me with the same kindness I treated them. In the end, I became a leader off the court and made the season more fun for myself and for others.

Now, comes the next challenge. My goal is to play in college, but I rarely got playing time in school, I wasn't playing for the best club team, and I had little credentials to tell college coaches. Yes I believed in myself, but I also had to do it by myself and that made it even more of a challenge. I had a camera and my dad, so I recorded practices, games, and even workouts; then I edited as many as I could to make a highlight film. In addition, I sent emails to numerous colleges that interested me and waited for a response. At first it scared and excited me to have a phone or zoom call, but those didn't come naturally. I felt like I could've said a lot more, or done this or that, but as time went on I got more experienced and hit all the points I needed to. I realized how easy it is to just be myself and the summer before senior year, I had visits lined up

for colleges that were interested in me. My hard work finally paid off and I received multiple offers! By the time I needed to make my decision, another university reached out to me and in a matter of days I was committed to the top NCAA Division 2 school in Florida.

All in all, I've learned to let go of the fear of competition and embrace it. When you give yourself a new perspective, I promise it will change your mindset and attitude towards the sport. In addition, it's time to stop worrying about things that you can't control, and start focusing on the things you can. Also, know that there will always be people who love to spread gossip but the choice is yours to show kindness to everyone: the choice is yours to show determination in the midst of challenges. I hope throughout this essay, you saw the picture of hardships a Student Athlete faces and the toll it takes on them as they go... but I also hope you saw that you must never let anyone bring you down, or tell you you're not good enough, because I believe you can achieve anything with hard work, dedication, and perseverance.