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Unbreakable

At five years old, you have no idea what your passions are, or what you are even good at. For this reason, my mom signed me up for piano lessons, gymnastics, ballet, and soccer. But even at a young age I knew my true passion. By five years old I found out I am a natural athlete and a very competitive person, and soccer became the sport I latched onto. Ever since then, I have wholeheartedly committed to making myself the best soccer player I can be.

Until eighth grade, I had always played “sweeper.” The sweeper is the last defender, a position that requires composure, judgement, and speed. Behind me was only the goalkeeper, therefore, if somebody got passed me, they would have a one-on-one with the keeper that and most of the time resulted in a goal. I was always nervous playing sweeper because I felt all the pressure on myself to make sure the ball did not end up in the back of the net. However, when I got to high school, my coach switched me to play forward. Playing forward is like playing a whole new game. As a forward, you still have to have composure and good judgment, but this time, you have to be fast with the ball at your feet. You have to be technical and quick-minded. But most importantly, you need to score. You need to know how to strike the ball correctly in order to maximize power and accuracy. Being able to rip a shot from any angle of the field, using either foot, catches goalkeepers and defenders off guard and gives you the edge on the field, which means forwards need to constantly be adding to their scoring repertoire. Scoring a goal is

not an easy task, and the process that goes behind connecting foot to ball, and ball to net, is truly an art.

“No more shots over the frame!”

My team had been doing a shooting drill for about three minutes and 99.9 percent of our shots were sailing over the goal frame. My coach, Carlos Escobar (who we all called “Esco”), was not happy with us. Halfway through the season, with hopes of making playoffs, we needed to be better than this.

“Every single ball that goes over from now on, will equal one round of sprints.”

Fortunately, we had already done a lot of sprints, and Esco would not tire us out too much the day before a game. Unfortunately, I was next in line to take the shot, which was a lot of pressure for a sophomore on the varsity team who didn’t want to be the one who messed it up for everyone. But luckily, I knew good tricks on how to keep the ball driven and low. When the ball is passed to you, it should be sent with pace. When your foot makes contact with the ball, you should strike it with your laces, keeping your head down and your chest over the ball. After you kick the ball, you should pop up a little with a strong follow through. I give myself a little pep talk and say in my head, “Okay, when the whistle blows, it’s time for action. Just remember the

fundamentals Veronica, you can do it. Laces. Head. Chest. Follow through.” It was my time to shine and in 3.. 2.. 1.. BAM!

I swung and missed. I guess my legs were going a little faster than my mind, and the ball, and momentum got the best of me. Maybe my head was looking too far down, or my chest was leaned too far over the ball because I found myself flipping over the ball and on the ground. Cue the laughter. At least I could alleviate the pressure at practice because not only was my whole team laughing, but Esco’s furrowed brows lightened up and a smile curled on his face, followed of course, by laughter.

My face was red and all I could do was laugh at myself... until I tried to stand up. A wave of nausea and immense pain went from my arm up to my shoulder until it hit my head and I collapsed to the ground again. The roaring laughter immediately switched to dead silence as if we were all put on mute. The only noise that filled the air were screams of pain. My screams of pain. I looked down at my wrist and my world seemed to spin. The soccer field was on its side, the sun was blazing down on me, and my wrist was crooked with the bone protruding outward.

“Someone run and get Marla! She’s in the training room!”

As crazy as it sounds, I wore my cast as a badge of honor. This was my first real injury. I had always played hard on the field and I thought, because of this, I would have injuries to show for it, but I miraculously always stayed safe. I wore my cast with pride, and continued to play with a fractured wrist. From my classmates I had the reputation as being tough as nails. On the

field, my nickname was the “Michelin Woman” because of the big white cushion I had to wrap around my arm. I felt that this broken wrist was almost a rite of passage into the physical sport. Little did I know that this “proud moment” turned into a pivotal point in my life. This broken wrist was the first domino to fall in a series of injuries that would occur in the years to come. These injuries tested my resilience and determination. From sophomore year to the end of senior year, I did not have a “healthy” period in my life.

High school is the time to try new activities and expand your horizons. After an exhilarating soccer season, I decided to play my second season of lacrosse. I only had one year of experience under my belt, but knew my passion for lacrosse could easily match my passion for soccer. After my broken arm finally healed, I made my way into lacrosse season in mid-March. I was so excited to play lacrosse and I successfully played one and a half games before my season was already over. Midway through my second game, I collided with another girl which resulted in a minor concussion. I was supposed to be out for two weeks, max, and after my recovery was over, I was eager to get back on the field and start playing again. But in warm ups, a simple jog turned into a twisted ankle. A twisted ankle that left me again, laying on the field, sun blazing down on me, screaming in pain.

I originally thought I just had a really bad ankle sprain. I thought I would be out three to four weeks, tops. But a few weeks later, after many doctors appointments, X-rays and MRI's, I found out that I tore the Calcaneofibular Ligament in my ankle. This tiny ligament connects the talus and calcaneus (heel) bone (Healthline Medical Team). I was unsure what any of this meant. My doctor told me that with eight weeks of physical therapy I could potentially avoid having

surgery, and so I eagerly showed up to all of my 7 a.m. physical therapy appointments before school. I was sure that by putting in the hard work I would be rewarded. However, after eight weeks of physical therapy, my doctor said that my ankle was still too loose and that I would need surgery. I was crushed. I was well into summer, and surgery halted all plans I had. I was devastated when I had to withdraw from all summer tournaments, which are key for any player who wants to play college soccer. Summer showcases allow college coaches to see players in action, and as I was heading into my junior year, my window to play in college was closing at a rapid pace. And, to put the cherry on top, I would not be able to participate in my fall season of cross country in September. Although I was devastated, I was also weirdly optimistic because I knew how strong I was and I was not going to let this injury define who I was. I bravely walked into the surgery room in July with a positive attitude and determination to be better than ever.

I eventually did make my way back onto the field the following November, just before soccer season. Physical therapy put me in great shape, perhaps the best shape of my life, and I was ready to make junior year my best year yet. But life had other plans for me. In practice, the day before our first league game, I was pushed by one of my teammates and rolled my other ankle. Again, laying on the field, screaming in pain, I thought to myself, “No, this can’t be happening again. I worked so hard for this. This was supposed to be my season.”

A week later, I had the same exact surgery on my right ankle, but this time I did not bravely walk into the surgery room. I was angry. I felt like I was being punished. My mom always told me that everything happens for a reason, but I could not pinpoint what this reason was. Why was the one thing that I loved and worked so hard for taken away from me? After my surgery, I went through the same rigorous physical therapy appointments for many months. My

body was being pushed to its limit. Every morning I would run ten minutes on the treadmill to warm up and every morning I would be angry. I felt myself fighting back tears because I hated the fact that I had to go through so much physical and emotional pain just because of an injury. I felt myself wanting to quit altogether, but because of my competitive nature, I was not going to let an injury get the best of me. When I watched my team practice every day, I saw how happy and competitive they were and I knew that was how I once felt and I wanted to get back to that. Eventually, my mentality did a complete 180 and I found myself working harder than ever in physical therapy. This time on the treadmill I would envision myself playing and running down the field to score a goal. I knew what I was striving for when I got back on the field in the beginning of summer. I was motivated and determined, and after playing for a few weeks, I felt like I was, finally, back to normal, something that I had not felt in a while. I was happy on the field again. I was running for my school's cross country team and playing soccer for my club team. This was who I was supposed to be. This was what I had worked so hard for, ever since I was five. But just when everything seemed to be great, I was hit with another setback.

After my second ankle surgery my doctor gleefully exclaimed, "Well, on the bright side, at least you only have two ankles!" I don't think that either of us anticipated that I would go on to hurt my knee. I had been in my element, playing in a summer tournament, when I collided with a girl as we were both going for the ball. The injuries seemed almost routine by now. In the weeks to come, I would find out that I had torn my meniscus, partially tore ACL and MC., and sprained my PCL and hip muscle.. The result - another surgery. I was practically a gold star member in the doctor's office. I was greeted (by name) with, "I'm happy to see you, but not happy that it's in the doctor's office again!"

My friends and I had always joked I was the “Derrick Rose” of my school. Beginning in November 2013, Rose has had 21 injuries ranging from sprains, pulled muscles, and muscle tears that required surgery (Fox Sports). I empathized with him, because every time he was ready to play, something knocked him back down. My crutches were my best accessory throughout the latter years of high school. Freshman year I had the reputation of being “that freshman on two varsity sports,” but by the end of senior year I was “the girl who was always injured.” It became a part of my identity, and in a way, I never really looked at soccer in the same way as I had before. Soccer was always my outlet and my happy place. But after all of my injuries, the memories and the pain flooded me with feelings of anger, confusion, and hate for the sport that I once loved with every ounce of my body. I still do not know the “reason” for why I got hurt so much, or how these injuries have impacted my life in a bigger way, but I will say one thing: these injuries made me resilient, determined, and hardworking. I pushed my body and my mind beyond its limits. I had to overcome many obstacles and hurdles in order to get where I am today. My injuries altered my body but they also altered my outlook on life. I found myself always upset and bitter at other people’s success. I was upset that I did not have it easy like other people who just got to get better without any major setbacks. However, over the years I began to see the meaning behind my injuries. I now know how good I can be and I know I have what it takes to bounce back from adversity that comes my way. Maybe these injuries were the blessing in disguise that I needed to show me just how strong I am.

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