

Hope is not enough: my journey through concussion recovery

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A HOPELESS SERVE

Hope is powerful. It can calm adversity and fuel dreams. However, hope is not a game plan, a solution or a strategy. On 14 October 2019, I realised that 'hope' alone was not enough. While attending my high school volleyball practice, I was unexpectedly struck by a ball. The volleyball hit my face with such force that my world went dark. Despite this devastating injury, I managed to remain standing and walked out of the gym. As I stepped into the sunlight, the pain behind my eyes was unbearable as was the dizziness and ear ringing. That evening I hoped that I would wake up from this nightmare.

The next morning, my symptoms were unbearable, so I notified my parents who assisted in finding me a doctor. While at the doctor's office, I took a computer test to see if I had a concussion. Our team's athletic trainer had me do a baseline test prior to our season starting, which allowed the doctor to determine that I had a concussion based on the difference between these two tests. Before leaving the clinic, I was told that resting would allow me to recover, so I could return to volleyball. I knew concussions happened in football, but not in volleyball. While enduring the pain behind my eyes and in my head, as well as going against the advice to avoid screen time, I started searching the internet about concussions in volleyball players. I learned that volleyball is one of the top ten sports to be at risk for concussions.^{1,2} I spent the next five days in my bedroom feeling sorry for myself, but I tried to overcome this and instead focus on hope.

As I began my concussion recovery, the process was inconsistent and unfamiliar. I returned to the doctor two weeks following my injury and was deemed ready to begin the 'return to play' protocol. Not playing volleyball, even if only for a few weeks, felt like years to me. Although I was excited to return to volleyball, I was stricken with fear regarding the thought of sustaining another concussion. Volleyball was my world and knowing that a ball hitting me in the head could be so disabling had me worried about what the future held for me.

DIGGING FOR HOPE

Finally, my weeks of hopeful thinking and grit paid off. Without tears or a pounding headache, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The end of my return to play protocol had arrived and I was finally able to rejoin my teammates on the court. I busted out the door of my last class and headed towards the gymnasium as two students were playing around in the school hallway and slammed into me. I fell and hit my head on the ground. My world went dark again. My hope escaped faster than it had returned. Only hours in the clear, I was faced with the prospect of more devastating symptoms and missing volleyball again. I headed back to the same doctor and was diagnosed with my second concussion. Again, I was given a prescription of rest, but at a larger dose. A few weeks without volleyball had now become a few months.

FIGHTING FOR HOPE

Slowly but surely my symptoms decreased, and I was able to gradually return to playing volleyball again. I eventually made a return to volleyball, where I progressed back to my prior performance and confidence. While warming up for the last match of the last tournament of the year, I was hit again by a volleyball and that dreadful darkness dismantled my hope. I was diagnosed with my third concussion within 7 months. Unfortunately, while I eventually returned to volleyball, I no longer felt 'normal' and no amount of rest or hope was going to change that feeling or eliminate my fear. I struggled to track the ball and my reaction was slowed, not to mention the constant concern of another concussion.

With little hope, but a strong desire not for this to be the end of my volleyball career, I knew rest wasn't the answer. A family friend of ours recommended the University of South Florida (USF) Concussion Center. This evaluation was different than my previous ones, and my new doctor and her team discovered that I had vestibular dis-equilibrium, which would explain my headaches, balance issues and inability to track the ball. After completing various diagnostic tests to rule out other causes to explain my symptoms, I successfully completed a four month vestibular and visual physical therapy return to play programme. Even after getting back to full speed, I continued to research concussions. I have learned that drills using balls going in a single direction instead of drills

featuring convergence, like the one that gave me my first and third concussions, can help reduce the risk for other players like me. This coaching strategy should be more widely used to help prevent concussions. Having now been concussion free for over two years, my confidence has returned—as has my hope.

AN ADVOCATE FOR HOPE

While hope is powerful, it is not a solution for concussion prevention or recovery. Concussions are more complex than a traditional injury and can affect an athlete in ways that science does not entirely understand. I'm fortunate that I received advanced concussion care, which allowed me to return to volleyball as a physically and mentally stronger athlete. Not only am I heading to Oglethorpe University in Atlanta to pursue my dream of being a collegiate volleyball athlete, but as a concussion and mental health advocate I can bring hope and insights to other athletes. I became the first female high school athlete in Florida to sign a NIL (Name, Image and Likeness) deal and I donated my earnings back to the USF Concussion Center to show my appreciation.

To diagnose, treat and prevent concussions successfully, a team of athletes, coaches, caregivers, clinicians and the community are needed to support the physical and emotional needs of the athlete. Together, we can execute a playbook to keep our brains healthy and safe. While hope alone is not enough, it is a necessary component in concussion recovery.

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