Unrecognised coach: medical professionals and their impact on student-athlete success beyond athletics

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Everyone’s path in life looks different. The road that leads them to achieve their version of success is unique. What did mine look like? An oval with eight lanes that required spikes to tread upon.

Fourteen years of 0600 wakeups, practices that I nearly passed out from, and competitions where tensions were thick enough to cut with a butter knife. I was tunnel visioned to sprint my way to fame and fortune. That vision became obscure, however, after a series of injuries that went from bad to worse.

Every year, I sprained, strained, rolled or stressed something in my body. Hip bursitis, ‘jumper’s knee’, shin splints, tendonitis of all kinds. My worst injury? A grade two partial hamstring tear.

In my senior year, I was set to compete in our state’s championship. I was ranked second in both the long and triple jumps among every athlete in Maryland. My teammates, however, were not as secure. Desperate to send a relay team to the competition, my coach asked if I could anchor them to a qualifying position (either by time or by rank). My valiant efforts would later turn into a sacrifice, as I skid across the track in the last 10 m of the race.

Ironically, the team would go on to compete in the state championship after I had hobbled across the line in time, while I stayed home to recover. Though, my recovery was accompanied by a myriad of disappointments.

TURNING POINT

University recruiters cared not for my athletic heroism. They only saw me as a ‘high risk’, ‘injury-prone’, gamble that they were not willing to take. As such, my scholarship offers were rescinded one after the other. Each letter that began with ‘we regret to inform you’, deteriorated my hopes and vision for the future.

No one in my family, except my mother who completed her degree online, had a college degree. As such, none of us knew the steps, protocols or procedures to successfully attend—or pay for—higher education without the backing of my athletic career. As such, both my identity and path to success were left non-viable. My hamstring tear did more damage to me internally than it ever could physically.

FINDING A NEW PATH

I spent a year and a half after high school graduation struggling to determine my next steps. I worked odd jobs and came home to my family while my friends moved out of theirs. I was left questioning how my vision for the future was so narrow for so many years. A reality that is often overlooked by student-athletes and medical providers alike.

I was fortunate enough to be taped, wrapped and rehabbed to earn a full scholarship for track and field at my alma mater, where I successfully competed for three years (figure 1). But I was demoralised and anxious. In hindsight, it is better that my blinkers were forcefully removed by my athletic career stunting sprains and strains—yet this is not the case for other athletes. Some student-athletes will run themselves into a dead end because they were never spared moments to look at other career routes.

THE IMPACT OF MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS ON INJURED ATHLETES

Medical professionals are not just repairing damage done to the physical body; they are often restoring the hopes of an injured student-athlete. My ask is for medical personnel to not only ‘restore’, but to ‘enhance’. Inquire about the postgraduate plans of your student-athletes. Ask about their interests outside of athletics. Offer resources and recommendations to support those interests. And most importantly, empower them to pursue those interests and state your beliefs that they will achieve them. That is exactly what I would have wanted.

As a molecular biology and psychology major, I often took courses with declared premedical students. As I interacted with them and gained the knowledge of concepts like negative self-perception, self-fulfilling prophecies, and learning the actual mechanics of my mind; I began to believe that I, too, could study medicine and desired it. Overtime, my confidence grew strong enough to set academic goals and be an example of an excellent student and athlete. I would go on to graduate as valedictorian of my class.

Yet, this determination and achievement was not developed under the guidance or encouragement of any medical professional. I can only imagine what else I may have accomplished with the insight and direction of someone with years of expertise in a field I just became exposed to. Besides practices and games (or in my case, meets), student-athletes deserve to have direction and purpose in life beyond athletics. And that purpose can be instilled
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by the medical professionals who work so closely with them. As such, my path to success still involves the love and passion I applied to that oval with eight lanes, but instead of spikes, I have a stethoscope.

TAKE HOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

► I viewed my life in one dimension, starting at the age of 7. My athletic career was all I knew, or rather, all I wanted to know. As medical professionals, you all hold a plethora of experiences and relationships that could quite literally expand the world of your student-athletes. Do not be so focused on repairing what is already there. And instead, consider what is missing and what you could add.

► For the student-athletes who may see this, you are much more than a jersey number or name on a roster. You are someone’s doctor, lawyer, pharmacist or engineer. Sport may be all you know now, but it is not all you are limited to.

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