**From Failure to Success**

I crawled out of my tiny maroon convertible; my eyes were squinted as I tried to shield them from the bright sun that was peeking through the gigantic fluffy white clouds. I reached back into my car, grabbed my duffle bag and started for the huge wall of windows that held the entrance to my school. As I opened the door to the gym, the familiar smell of week old sweaty gym shoes and freshly waxed floors swarmed in my nose. The smell was simply home. I walked to center court, dropped my gym bag, and started to put my volleyball stuff on. Nine years of my life that I had spent on volleyball all came down to these three days of tryouts.

I had a strange feeling in my gut since the beginning of summer. A feeling that told me I didn’t really enjoy volleyball anymore and I didn’t really know if it was something I wanted to do. I ignored this feeling however, and I decided to continue my volleyball career at Harper Creek. I felt very confident throughout tryouts, and after three long days, I was exhausted. I then found myself sitting in the mile long hallway outside of the gym. One by one girls were called into the coaches’ office to find out their long-awaited results. Some girls left heartbroken, others left feeling triumphant because all of their hard work had finally paid off. I was the last one to enter the painstakingly small room. It almost felt like a movie. All the coaches sat on one side of the table sitting a little too straight and smiling a little too much. They were all dressed in blue Harper Creek volleyball shirts and wearing leggings. There was one chair on the other side of the table and that was all I could focus on. I started hesitantly toward the chair and took my seat. This was it. Small talk was all that happened at first. The usual “How are you,” “How are you doing?” Coach King was the head volleyball coach. She had very dark hair and a strange color of blue in her eyes. Laugh lines were nowhere to be seen. Finally she spoke.

“First of all I just wanted to thank you for all of your hard work and dedication throughout the summer.” I nodded cautiously, unsure of where this conversation was going. “However, I don’t believe there is enough room for you,” she said in a calm tone. I couldn’t tell if she was trying to be comforting or just trying to get me out of her office as quick as possible.

Everything inside of me froze up. I felt a slight burning sensation well up inside of me. I didn’t say anything, just continued to stare blankly back at her. She asked if I had any questions and I replied that I did not. We said our goodbyes and I left the room. I didn’t know what to do or what to think. I drove home slowly, unaware of my surroundings and almost in a trance.

I opened the door to my house and walked in defeated. My shoulders were slumped and I know the look on my face was pathetic. I didn’t need volleyball.

Or did I?

I told my mother what had happened that day and she was really upset. Even more upset than I was. I tried my hardest to reassure her that it would be fine and that it was just a part of life that you have to accept and overcome.

Since the beginning of the summer, I had wondered why on earth I had put so much time and energy into a sport that I hardly enjoyed. I had told a few of my friends earlier in the year that I was thinking about trying a new sport. Swimming. I was a swimmer until eighth grade when doing basketball, swimming, and volleyball became too much for me to juggle. I had to drop one sport and at the time, I thought I had made the right decision by dropping swimming, but now I realize that was one of the biggest mistakes that I had ever made.

About a week after I found out the rather upsetting news about volleyball, I was done feeling sorry for myself. God has a plan for me. He knew that volleyball wasn’t my sport; He knew that my heart was located in a seven to fourteen foot hole in the ground somewhere filled with the everlasting smell of heavily chlorinated water. He brought me to my one true passion. He brought me to swimming.

I had been in contact with Coach Popps, the head swim coach, for a while. She was a swimmer in college, so she was very muscular. Her strong build may have been intimidating to some people, but not to me. Her medium length hair, and the way she looked over the top of her glasses when she got angry, and her extremely loud voice may have also had an effect on how all the kids at school viewed her as well, but to me she was just my middle school swim coach, she was Popps. She had been hinting at me for a while now about possibly joining the team. I told her that I wanted to come back to the pool. For sure this time. She accepted me with open arms and that made the transition ten times easier. I walked into swim practice the following Wednesday. My nerves were skyrocketing, I couldn’t contain my heart rate, and I couldn’t tell if the sweating I encountered was overwhelming excitement or pure fear.

I will never forget the first time I walked into that locker room. All the memories from swimming in middle school rushed back to me. There was a slight smell of urine mixed with mold, mixed with a distant smell of lemon Lysol that had failed to cover up the somewhat foul odor. We rounded the corner leading into the shower part of the locker room. Popps stood at my right as we entered and yelled to the other girls. She didn’t tell them that I was joining the team. A super tan girl with dark brown hair saw me first - her name was Kara. She was Coach Popps’ daughter, and I used to swim with her when we were younger. She dashed at me like a 300 pound linebacker and gave me a giant bear hug with an excited, “Welcome back!”

I trained with them for the next three months. Did I work as hard as I possibly could? No, I’m sure I didn’t, and I still regret that to this day. However each meet came and went, I felt myself getting stronger and stronger, faster and faster. Kara was a big part of my swim season. She is the current school record holder for the 100 yard backstroke and I yearned every day to be as good as her. I knew that was too much to expect out of myself, but I still tried as hard as I could to get as close to Kara as possible.

Hell week came and went. It broke me all the way down. I had never endured a more tiring week, and at times, I questioned whether or not I could make it through. Then I remembered volleyball, and all the rejection I felt when Coach King told me I wasn’t good enough and I used that as the final kick of energy that I needed for my season. After hell week, I kept hearing the phrase “league meet” swarm around at practice and I knew that it was a big meet.

Taper came and ended way too quickly. This was where our workouts became easier in order for our bodies to build back up after the excruciating week we had just endured and the long season we had been through, and allowed us to swim very fast at the league meet. This was the last chance to make the state meet. I had the goal of going to state stored in the back of my head all season. I wanted to go so bad. I didn’t tell anyone my far-fetched goal because I was afraid of what they might think. Everyone kept telling me that I would make state my senior year for sure, but I wanted more than that. I wanted to be a state qualifier my first year on the team as a junior.

It was time. We arrived at Lakeview early on Friday morning and a lot was at stake. If I wanted to make state in my 100 backstroke, I had to drop five seconds. It may not seem like a lot of time, but in swimming it’s close to an eternity. People told me that it was impossible and that I couldn’t do it.

They should have never doubted me.

We stepped up to the blocks and the referee calls us into the water. “Swimmers... place your hands and feet… take your mark… BEEP!” We’re off. I flew off the wall, adrenaline overpowered my entire body. I was swimming next to Kara, and I knew that if I stayed remotely near her, that I would make my state cut. As the race came to a close, I knew that I had it. My underwaters were ten times more powerful and effective than my previous races. I saw the flags that informed me that the wall was only five strokes away. I kicked so hard on these last five strokes that I couldn’t feel my legs. My whole body was going numb. One final pull. I slammed my fingertips into the touchpad. I looked up at the clock to see my time. 1:02.71. I did it! I beat the state cut time by almost three seconds. Relief swept through my body.

I’ll never forget my teammates’ reactions. They half helped, half dragged my limp body out of the water and ran to give me hugs and congratulate me. I was so happy that all of my hard work had finally paid off. Popps was elated. She had tears in her eyes, not only for me, but for Kara too. Kara took first and I took third. *Third*. Even though I had just swum the best race of my entire life, I still wasn’t satisfied. Jeny Reimer, a Lakeview swimmer, just barely out touched me and took second, robbing Harper of a one-two finish in the 100 backstroke. I couldn’t let my emotions get the best of me though; I still had the 400 yard freestyle relay to worry about.

We were going for the school record in this event, and all four of us were fairly confident we would get it. As we swam, we proved ourselves to be correct. We were all on, all having one of our best days of swimming in a long time. Madi led off. She was built exactly like a swimmer should be built. She was incredibly tall, extremely lean, and unbelievably muscular. She finished her leg of the race with an unbelievable split that only *the* Madi Vaive could pull off. Whitney dove in next. She was the type of girl that could just randomly make you die laughing in the middle of practice because she “accidentally” cut her foot on the lane line and desperately needed a Band-Aid or else her foot might fall off. Then it was my turn. As Whitney came into the wall, the adrenaline overpowered me once again. I entered the water and I don’t even remember what was going through my head. As I finished, Kara took on the rocky waves that six lanes of swimmers had just created. I got out of the water and joined Whitney and Madi who were already cheering their hearts out for Kara. When she touched the wall it felt like an eternity until the results were posted on the ginormous electronic board. 3:46.26. WE DID IT!

Nothing in life compares to that moment. I was officially a part of the new 400 yard freestyle relay record holding team at Harper Creek High School. This was something I would have never imagined three months earlier. As league came to an end, I was announced an all-conference swimmer, and I was on my way to the state meet.

Being rejected and using the hurt that volleyball had caused me to propel myself forward and to try my absolute hardest has made me who I am today. It has taught me that nothing is impossible, and the only thing stopping you from reaching your goals is yourself. If it wasn’t for volleyball, who knows where I would be today. Thank you Coach King for helping me discover my true passion, and making me push myself harder than I ever have before. Thank you Coach Popps for always believing in me, pushing me to the absolute limits, and for never giving up on me, even when I gave up on you after seventh grade. I am truly grateful.