

THE MENTAL STATE OF SPORTS

I grew up in a two-parent home, a beautiful home that seemed bigger than life. All of the family photos showed natural smiles of happiness and joy. My father was the camera guy, so there were tons of pictures that captured what seemed like every stage of life with me being the first born and my beautiful mother. The memories of family time - family members temporarily staying over, playing outside with my cousin and brother, my parents ensuring we had the best Christmas and waiting up at night for my father to get home from work so he could tuck me in bed – were all fulfilling. I enjoyed life. Then one day, at the age of four or five, there was a knock on the door, and like a fool I answered. It was the other face to life. The side that brought tragedy, trauma and sadness. I was completely lost. My brain was a long way from being fully developed, so cognitively, I could not figure out why things were happening the way they were. I witnessed and partook in my father being locked out. After trying to unlock the bolt on the door, I could hear him ask me to

unlock the door after his attempts to turn the key no longer worked. After all the commotion, I finally heard silence, followed by the sound of my father's car. I rushed to the front window and watched him drive away. I felt helpless. My father no longer stayed in the home that once accommodated two parents.

At that moment, I became a "daddy's girl," who was worried about her father. The smiles were hard to come by because questions were unanswered. I blamed everyone, trusted no one and had rage towards people. I struggled with why he wasn't home anymore or why I couldn't stay with him. Why was life like this? I felt so alone, unwanted and cried silent tears on my pillow every night it seemed. Two years later, at the age of seven, my mom did the best thing she could ever do. She signed me up for softball and basketball, and at that point, sports became my way of expression, my best friend of sorts.

With softball, I expressed my hurt and frustration with the swing of a bat. With every pitch, I imagined what was hurting inside me the most. If I could swing to have my father back in the home, then I would swing as hard as I could. I dare

not strike out, and we dare not lose. I met Andrea, my first (girl) best friend, playing softball, and I thought I scared her away after our first loss. I cried and cried hysterically because of that defeat. I was connecting sports with pain, and the loss was an indicator, in my young mind, that my father was not going to return home.

But with basketball, there was a different type of fervor. I was determined to learn the game because my dad played years ago. I shot air balls from the free throw line, dribbled higher than my face and was pushed around because I was thin. Actually, it seemed like all of the girls did those exact same things. In addition, I was skinny, somewhat coordinated and weak. Eventually, I decided to put the focus back on myself and live out my emotions through either of those sports. To be perfectly honest, they were my best friends, the loves of my life. They were the only thing that controlled my happiness, as long as we were winning. It worked out that the teams I was affiliated with, were winning ballclubs. Yet, by the time I'd reach the eighth grade, I realized my talent level would be best suited for basketball. Once I grew into who I was becoming as an athlete, I soon forgot about the connections I made between sports and

the repercussions of my parents' divorce. The pain of reconstructing family and the lack of understanding was still present, but I found my happiness in basketball. I gained an understanding of my talent level, which also made any pain I felt a numbing memory.

By the time I reached high school, I thought less of how my parents' divorce affected me, and my strength came from internal challenges. I learned to become resilient. For example, if I were blocking out at the free throw line, I would imagine someone talking about my father in a negative light (complete imagination), but on the release afterwards, my strength was explosive. I learned to effectively strategize and decided that I would master the game in my own way. Eventually, I let softball go, but I reached two of three goals I set out to achieve and found my way to college via basketball. The experiences as a college student-athlete are irreplaceable with great times, relationships, laughs, cries, mistakes and lessons. Consequently, I was still not prepared for life after sports. I used sport as a coping mechanism to begin with, and the only thing that helped me initially wasn't there. I was yet lost again, just like my 5-year-old self, feeling

alone. No one would allow me to express my frustrations as much as sports did, and that led to me beginning a grieving process.

I like to call this “The Mental State of Sports.” I define that as athletes using sports as an integral strategy and functioning adjustment through a physical impulse to find purpose in a lost happiness. It also addresses mental factors surrounding the athlete; it is not limited to athletes but also extends to the parents or guardians of the athlete, as well as the coach. In this book, we will look at the mental challenges that athletes encounter throughout their sports career.