Reflections of a Basketball Player:

To the casual observer, basketball may be nothing more than a pointless sport. A dizzying display of athletics where tall people with long arms run back and forth to try and put a ball through a little hoop. The shorter people spend their time bouncing the ball off the ground, randomly moving side to side, maybe throwing in the occasional spin to get around the opposing team. To these people the sport can be summed up in a single word – boring – save for the occasional dunk or three-pointer.

*Ignorance* would be too harsh of a word to describe this viewpoint. In the words of my grandfather, “you don’t know what you don’t know.” This same idea applies to most anything, and basketball is no exception. To truly understand anything, you must commit to an intimate relationship with it. I committed to a relationship with basketball. Little did I know, but my relationship with this sport has helped form me into the person that I am today.

Like all new relationships, the initial honeymoon phase is filled with a fresh excitement and vigor that can leak into all aspects of your life. I remember this feeling. With each passing day I could feel the steady improvements. The movements become more natural. The game became easier to play, to watch, and even to understand the complexities of it. There was a tangible energy that surrounded me, and to the outside world, I was exuding confidence because of your relationship with the game. My identity became deeply entangled with the sport of basketball. If only the honeymoon phase lasted forever.

Enter the antagonist. As quickly as confidence can be built in the honeymoon phase, it can be torn down when faced with opposition. The antagonist can take a different form for many people. It could be the coach that “has it out for you.” It could be the teammate that you may not see eye-to-eye with. In my case, this antagonist was myself, or my self-perception, rather.

After trying out for the DIII team at my small undergraduate institution, and subsequently getting cut, I struggled. I had dedicated so much of my life to this game – offseason skills workouts and AAU, staying late after 9PM practices during the season refusing to leave until I made 50 free throws, and even studying college and NBA basketball to build basketball IQ. In high school, if you asked me what I did, who I was, I would’ve said “a basketball player.” Getting cut from the team didn’t really feel like losing the chance to play basketball at the college level, it felt like I lost my identity overnight.

Identity is a fragile matter. At the time, fall of my freshman year in college, and even though I was surrounded by hundreds of my peers also searching to define their place in the world, it felt like a crisis. I should’ve known that this was all part of a bigger plan. Almost poetically, I found my identity once again through the sport that was at this point a part of my DNA, only this time, I understood what it was about basketball that was so important to me. The reason that I found myself drawn back to the sport wasn’t entirely wrapped up in the sport itself. It was for all the ways that the sport touched my life – mentally, emotionally, and socially.

I didn’t start playing basketball for the mental benefits (I was only 10 when I started, 555), I played because it was fun, but as I grew, so too did the way I experienced the game. I used to think that basketball was purely a physical game. The best athlete, the tallest, the quickest, would always win, and that was that. To some degree, of course, that is true, but not always. What isn’t seen by most, and understood by even fewer, is the mental toughness it takes to be successful with the game of basketball. Some possess this mental toughness from the beginning, others must train it; I fall in the latter category.

Admittedly, I have been extremely competitive my entire life – I hate losing as much as I love winning. When I was young, this was crippling. Rather than lose a game, I would quit. Even worse, if I thought there was a chance of losing, I wouldn’t even play the game to begin with. It wasn’t until I started playing basketball that I began to channel my competitive nature into something productive rather than obstructive. The change didn’t occur overnight. It took losing, and a lot of it. Slowly but surely, I began to use negatives as motivation for working harder. Turnovers became opportunities to improve my passing and ball handling. Missed shots became another round to add to my shooting drills. Defensive lapses became a reason to improve my speed and endurance. Making this change wasn’t easy, and most definitely wasn’t the most comfortable, but it has been integral for improving my mentality in all facets of my life. If something doesn’t go my way today, I know that with the proper mentality, nothing but positives can come of it.

When I first started playing basketball, nobody ­­­prepared me for what was to come, but then again, how could they? I can’t even begin to convey with any justice the range of emotions that basketball has led me to experience. Some of the highest highs – the anticipation of running out onto the court with my best friends at my side, the elation of hitting a game-winning buzzer beater during the playoffs in front of our home crowd, and the satisfaction of giving Madison its first sectional title in 25 years, but also some of the lowest lows – the helplessness of losing to the same team for a third time in a season despite all our hard work, the shedding of tears as our dream season came to crushing halt, and the despair after being told I just wasn’t good enough. No other experience in my life has ever led me to feel such raw emotion. It wasn’t until I stepped back, reflected, and looked at the bigger picture that I understood how blessed I have been to have these experiences.

What truly fascinates me about basketball, like many sports, is the vast range of meaning that it can take. For many

Fast-forward to today. Basketball continues to hold a very special place in my heart.