In early December of 2004, I sat on the floor of the first apartment I ever rented entirely by myself and held my head in my hands as I told my older sister over the phone that I thought I was wasting my life trying to pursue my dream of going to the Olympics.

I had sacrificed everything in my life to pursue this dream: a secure fulltime job, a couple of relationships, social outings and the freedom to explore. When you’re an athlete, risk is very calculated. You don’t participate in 4th of July waterskiing for fear of injury. You don’t spend a semester studying abroad unless the training circumstances are better in the other country. You stifle your worldly interests in order to focus on one goal.

My sister calmly said to me, “Kid, athletes inspire others. That is their purpose. You are setting an example for others by dedicating yourself to a goal. That transcends just sport. Think about the Olympics – people pushback against the thought of boycotting the Olympics for a political reason because it is supposed to transcend political and social divides and bring everyone together with a common denominator.”

She was right. Sports are powerful. I got to talk to Liz Kritza a few months ago, the current volleyball coach at Colorado. In 2005, Liz had just taken over as head coach for Tulane University in New Orleans. Guess what happened next – Hurricane Katrina hit. When I spoke to Liz about bringing her team through this tragedy, she reiterated over and over that the simple act of playing the game of volleyball allowed her players to feel like everything was normal again, just for a little bit. It also allowed them to bond together without having to necessarily talk about what exactly was bothering them. Everyone knew people had died or were missing. Houses had been destroyed. Playing the game was cathartic, it was an outlet. They were welcomed by Texas A&M University, who housed them, gave them uniforms and even learned their cheers so they could support them at their “home” games. Sport was a medium through which they comforted people that had suffered a terrible tragedy.

Look at the New Orleans Saints. In 2004, they had had a streak of .500 seasons, the owner had an ever-growing ego and his antics were ticking everyone off. Then Katrina hit, and things changed. Fans actually bought MORE tickets. Team officials started to get along better. And 5 years later, they won that Super Bowl. What a fantastic story. Sports was one significant way that community was able to cope. That team winning the Super Bowl symbolized to so many people that NOLA was back.

A similar phenomenon happened in South Africa in the 90’s. Nelson Mandela believed that he could unite his country, a country wrought with racially charged violence, with rugby. He lobbied to bring the World Cup to South Africa and began his campaign of “One Team One Country.” Rugby was the white man’s game. The green Springbok jerseys bore the symbol and the color representing oppression. But Mandela first won over the players and then, throughout the World Cup, he won over the black South Africans. When the South African team won the final game, the crowd chanted Nelson, Nelson, Nelson. It had worked.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Twan Russell, the director of Youth Programs for the Miami Dolphins on Sunday. I was floored by the dedication they have to serving their community in South Florida. They hold girls football clinics and a girls only tournament in addition to their boys camps and tournaments. They also implement the NFL’s Atlas and Athena Program, which brings high school boys and girls in from all different sports and works with them on different topics, from steroids to eating disorders, both together as a group and separated by gender, depending on the topic, the idea being that they are cultivating the next generation’s leaders – the students that are influencing others in their schools. I had to ask him, “Why do you care? Why do the Miami Dolphins care? Why does the NFL care? Isn’t sports a business? Isn’t it just about money and ticket sales and ad revenue? Why does this stuff matter?” His answer was, “We don’t exist without our community. Therefore, we want to see the members of our community succeed.” It is as simple as that.

Lance Armstrong said, “Sports provide a powerful vehicle to effect positive change in the world.” He should know. His Livestrong Foundation has raised more than $325 million since it’s formation in 1997. It’s no secret that the nucleus of the success of this foundation is Lance’s STORY. Even if you didn’t read “It’s Not About the Bike” you know that Lance had serious life-threatening cancer and overcame it to win 7 Tour de Frances in a row. That’s inspiration. That moves people. That makes them believe in themselves and in others.

Rob Heineman gave away the naming rights to Sporting KC’s $200 million stadium. Rob, what were you thinking??? But guess what, he has set a precedent for this community. Going to a game or a concert at that stadium is no longer just fun, it’s effecting CHANGE. He has given the people another reason to get out and have fun and spend some money to keep our economy going. It’s brilliant.

In this day in age, this is the kind of marketing we have to do. It’s no longer about mass marketing and telling people what they should like and forcing it on them. It’s about leading the community. It’s about challenging the status quo, changing things up, inspiring people. Giving them a place they are proud to call home. Let’s keep the best and brightest around by giving them what they want, and I think sports is a major part of building that attractive, sought-after community.

Our youth learn people skills, loyalty, leadership, confidence, teamwork and ethics through participating in sports. They learn how to dream, aspire to lofty goals and find role models through spectating sports. People bond with friends and family through sports. They use sports as a release, a break from reality, an outlet for emotion. Sports is a place where common ground is found.