

The whistle blows. The ref points to the spot. It's time to rise.

I swivel the ball in my hands before resting it just left of the PK spot. Remember. Take three strides back, breathe, look the keeper in the eyes. I've done this hundreds of times, I'll nail this top right corner. But... what if I don't. Even though I connect with the sweet spot and follow through, it zooms past the target inches wide.

I'm defeated.

After a few long minutes of hopeless playing, Coach pulls me out. I lay in the grass with burning hamstrings, and my stomach tied in a knot. I'm done fighting.

I need to take a minute to myself, so I go on the long hike around the field and up the hill. My dad waits for me at the top. I break down in his arms. It wasn't that I missed the PK, it was what led up to it.

This was my first game back from an episode of my mystery sickness. My episodes consist of endless vomiting, fevers, stabbing stomach pains, loss of appetite and much more. I lost twenty pounds. It was a miracle I was even playing, thanks to Advil. But I felt as though I was letting down my school, my coach, and my teammates. I knew how much better I could play and it felt like I wasn't living up to their expectations. I wasn't living up to *my* expectations.

Then my dad shared this quote his father shared with him.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

My fight is hidden from the critics. It's a lonely fight where no one can change what I'm feeling; where no one can relieve my pain. Only my loved ones know the backstory. The rest just see a defeated player.

I am the man in the arena.

The man in the arena knows his worth. He stands back up no matter how many times he's knocked down. He dares greatly no matter how many times he fails. He reaches for what seems to be unreachable.

He's patient, working towards his day of salvation.

We all have our fights. Whether it's speed-reading Les Mis or being forced through Coach Kemper's nine circles of hell, we should battle our way to victory. Even this year, I've witnessed battles. Dustin and Anton are both recovering from their ACL tears. Friends have lost family members and deal with depression and anxiety.

On Monday, I went into surgery. Dr. Watts opened me up to find an infected ruptured appendix. Yes, I had a ruptured appendix for eight months. That's unheard of. My body reacted in an incredible way that saved my life. My abdomen walled off the infection from the rest of the body saving it from going septic. Going septic causes blood clots, blocks oxygen from going to vital organs, and potentially leads to death. Death becomes a scarier word once you get close to it. I'm happy to say that my fight is nearly over. I'm expected to fully recover from surgery.

Through my long, mysterious, and frightening journey, I learned that the fight is often hidden. People hide their challenges, just like how my body hid the infection. And each one of us battles something different. Be kind, for everyone you've met is fighting a battle you know nothing about. I know that you, too, are fighting challenges, and I'm telling you that the fight is worth it. That's where the growth is. The result is meaningless unless you work for it.

Life may not be what we hope for. My senior year was nothing like how I imagined it.  
Unseen battles come our way, and you have to decide. Are you the man in the arena?