

August 17th, 2015. That was the first day of high school, freshman year. When I walked into this classroom for the first time nearly four years ago, I was insecure, nervous, and scared. I wasn't confident, I wasn't sure of myself, and I wasn't able to be me. For so long, I didn't know how to stop worrying about what others would think of whoever I established myself to be. So, I tried to blend in. I hid what made me different, and more importantly what made me me. But, I'm no longer the timid freshman I used to be. I have grown so much in the past four years. And more than anything else, I've learned and I know that literally nobody else cares about what you're doing as much as you do. I recognize now how pointless it is to live a life limited by the judgement of others. I value my voice. I do things because they make me happy. I'm not scared to be myself.

Being an athlete has been my identity for what feels like my entire life. Three years ago, a new coach came to my field hockey club, and with her started a new program, Fly Gold. As the youngest person on the team, playing up an age group, I struggled a lot to feel like I belonged the first year. I worried that my age would mean having my ideas overlooked or ignored and I assumed what I had to say wasn't important and wouldn't be respected. But I also let these fears stop me from expressing myself, so how would I have known?

The next year, I continued working to define my place on the team and struggled with how I was meant to contribute to it. I so desperately wanted to establish myself as a leader, but was also too consumed by my fear of judgement to take such a position confidently. Throughout the season, my coach encouraged me to continue defining

myself as a leader in my own way. She saw past the insecurities I had in my voice and taught me instead to lead by example. One day, mid-season, we reflected in our journals instead of practicing. My coach asked us to describe our feelings about the season: what was working and what wasn't, and how we wanted to improve our individual play, our team play, etc. She also had us write at the bottom of the paper who our role models on the team were. And, we turned those papers in. A few weeks later, we had a tournament at UC Davis. Before the first game, my coach pulled me aside and said to me something along the lines of, "Don't be worried, don't be nervous. These girls on your team, they look up to you." She proceeded to explain how a lot of my team wrote me down as their role model when we did those reflections a few weeks prior. This came as a shock to me. It took this experience for me to realize that being unique and being different is something to aspire to and not something to be ashamed of. It took this experience for me to finally have confidence in the person I wanted to be. And, it took this experience for me to really understand that what I had to say mattered.

In my final season, and senior year of high school, I've internalized and I live by everything I've learned from the past three years of playing. I've become an immensely more confident and vocal teammate, and a much more outgoing and supportive student and friend. My last club field hockey practice was exactly three weeks ago today. After practice, I said goodbye to my coach. She told me how proud of me she was, how she sees a lot of herself in me, and how I really had developed into a much more vocal leader. When I left practice, I was quite literally sobbing. But, it was a happy cry. My coach knew,

and I knew that I had grown so much in the past three years. It was kind of surreal. This journey of mine, and my identity finally felt complete.

As I said before, being an athlete has defined me for as long as I can remember. Field hockey has been my identity for the past seven years. It is what has helped me to grow into the much more confident individual standing before you today. When it came time for college decisions, I had to pick between a school where I would continue playing field hockey as a D1 athlete and one where I'd most likely not be playing anymore than on a club team. It was extremely difficult and scary for me to choose to leave behind a life that has defined me for so long. But, I think my ability to do so proves to me the growth I've experienced. I'm different. I have a voice and I use it. I'm confident. And most importantly, I'm unapologetically myself.

For so long, too long, in school and on the field, anywhere, I allowed what I thought people might assume about me control me, my actions, and my thoughts. I allowed my life to be dictated by my fear of being judged. It saddens me to think of how much this ridiculous fear burdened me. There is so much I missed out on, so many things I was too scared to try, so many people I didn't meet, wouldn't start a conversation with or was too scared to become close to because of it. And, at this point in my life, I'm a high school senior, a week out from graduating. I've learned more than anything else in this four year experience that literally nobody cares as much about what you're doing as you do. What is the point of worrying so much about what other people think of you that you choose to do what will make them happy instead of what makes you happy? My team and my coach have helped me learn to accept and live as the very imperfect

human being I am. Nobody should be judging you for your imperfections. We all have them. We're all flawed. And that is okay. When you worry about what other people are going to think of you, you can't be yourself. So, do what makes you happy. Do you. That's what I believe and that's what I know for sure.