

HOW HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS HAS IMPACTED MY LIFE

By Nicole Graham
Greenwich High School

Going into high school, I had competed in nine different sports, and was torn that I had to choose just three: field hockey, indoor track and lacrosse. Sports have always been a passion of mine, but it wasn't until my junior year that I realized how much athletics impacted my life. During my journey through leukemia, septic shock, and two strokes in junior year, every team at my high school had something referring to me on their equipment or uniform: a helmet sticker, warm-up jersey, or swim cap. Pictures were sent to me with my initials or leukemia symbol on equipment. These weren't just from friends, they were also from school mates who knew how much sports meant to me. Games and entire seasons were played in my honor and it drove me to get back on the field. I was motivated by the pictures of my school's teams and fans in orange for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society rather than Greenwich's traditional red. I got strength from letters from players throughout my school who offered encouragement and support, and also humor and love. Players approach me and say, "Whenever I want to give up, I see you out on the field and say 'If she can be doing that, so can I.'" When I came out of my medically-induced coma in October 2012, I was unable to move any part of my body or even swallow, and barely able to see or communicate. I had to relearn everything while still undergoing chemotherapy. Despite this, my teammates named me captain for all three of my varsity sports. This gave me the opportunity to not only lead, but to inspire, which has given me a greater purpose in sports beyond winning. Though I may no longer be the best player, my teammates voted me captain because they realized it's not just about skills, it's also about attitude.

I was always told that coaches cared about a positive attitude and the desire to learn and improve, but it wasn't until this experience that I realized how true it is, not only for sports, but throughout life. High school athletics taught me that in college, in the work force, or as a parent, I may not be the best on paper, but my openness to improvement and a positive outlook can take me wherever I need to go. My teammates' confidence in me gave me the drive to prove people wrong when they doubted me. The doctors had told my parents that I would likely never be back to my previous ability, but I didn't listen. Every day I worked out because I wanted to prove them wrong and it paid off. My teammates and friends visited me in the rehab hospital; they helped me grow strong, and they even broke the rules with me. (Using our lacrosse sticks to throw a ball around my room in the Traumatic Brain Injury Unit was not something the hospital endorsed.) I listened to my body and embraced the words from everyone who had faith in my ability to come back and I became a starter for my field hockey team. These were lessons I couldn't have learned anywhere else. Athletics can teach a person so much; to me it showed that a positive attitude, setting goals and having others believe in you are the best gifts you can have. With those, you can never let anyone tell you your limits.