

When a child first joins a sport, especially at the youth level, they join to have fun, make friends, and to get some exercise. As they get older and get into higher levels of competition, the line between “I want to do this” and “I feel like I have to do this” gets blurred. And most of the time it’s due to coaches treating players as a number on their roster rather than a person.

I have my fair share of incidents like those. Especially in my 4 years of playing high school basketball. The phrase, “if it’s not broken you can play,” has defined me as a player. I played multiple games injured when I shouldn’t have. I went behind my dad’s back after he told me and my coach I would be done for the season after straining my hamstring with only 4 games left in the season. I played that basketball game because my coach simply told me I would be letting my team down if I didn’t play.

I would also play games on a sprained ankle my junior year because, well, it wasn’t broken. I also played through concussions all four years which I had gotten from taking charges on the court. One game my senior year I had hit my head so hard that at halftime I threw up in the locker room and when I came back to the huddle and my coach asked where I was and I told him I had thrown up and was feeling light headed. He asked the dreaded question, “can you still play?” I looked at him as if he already knew what my answer would be and said, “I will if you need me to.” I ended up playing the rest of the game, and the rest of the season with headaches.

I had known that I was considered durable to him, indestructible, because of the words he had said to me when I was injured. It was dehumanizing.

My mental health was destroyed and I told my dad I didn’t love the game anymore, this was only after my first year of high school basketball. And it wasn’t about how I didn’t make varsity or I wasn’t performing well, or the JV team wasn’t winning games. It was because my coach had run me to the point of being burnt out. I would go my whole freshman season averaging about 1 to 2 breaks each game. And the games I didn’t get a break in would result in my throwing up due to exhaustion. Even after expressing to my coach I needed either more little breaks or longer singular breaks and the whole conversation never registered with him. I lost all passion for the game up until my senior year.

I had developed seasonal depression, or as I called it, “basketball depression.” It only came over me during basketball season. That’s mostly the reason I didn’t continue playing in college. I didn’t want to ruin the passion I rediscovered my senior year.

No player should feel dread coming into a sports season, they shouldn’t feel like just another number. Feeling as though you need to play in order for your coach to value you, no matter the cost or circumstance, is incredibly disheartening.

I know friends who had similar feelings during our years playing high school basketball. One player was late to practice because she saw an old man laying in the middle of the road unconscious on her way to practice from therapy. She had to call 911 and covered

him with a blanket and a jacket because it was the middle of January. She waited for the ambulance to arrive before heading to practice. Our coach was upset she was late and made us run because she was late. He didn't care that what the reason was, all he knew was that she was late. None of us blamed her for being late, or the fact we had to run because of it. We were just glad that she was okay and that the man she helped was okay.

There was also a player who had a literal season ending injuring and was out for the whole season. After their first game, which they lost, he told her that basically it was her fault they lost because if she was able to play they would've won. He acted as if it was her choice to be injured and to not play her senior season. I have never felt more anger to a coach, I was okay with him treating me like that because I had developed a bullet proof mindset against him, but when he talked to any of my teammates like that, especially one I had grown up playing with, I was livid.

It does change however, with every experience with different teams and coaches. I have witnessed it here at UMPI, Coach Edwards has always made a point to check in on me, schedule meetings to just talk about anything. She truly values her players wellbeing and that is something every athlete should not only experience, but have unconditionally. Having a coach that I can text and talk to about anything that is going on whether it's softball related or not, has made a huge impact on my views towards sports in general. I don't feel as though I have to play through an injury, I am not pushed past my physical limit, and I am valued as more than just a number on her roster.

So coaches, make sure your players know and feel valued on the team, as a person not just as a player. It will get you farther with players and as a team.