

## More Than a Game

It's eighth grade year. Basketball season is going great. We are winning almost every game, and I'm starting. My name is always announced over broadcasting announcements as the highest scorer. Friends, parents of friends, and teachers brag on how well I play. We end our season as district champs. What more could I ask for? Right now, I'm playing every sport, but as the end of the school year rolls around I have to make the decision on what to play in high school. I want to focus on one thing and be really good at it, rather than being mediocre in multiple areas. Out of all of the sports, basketball to me is definitely the most fun and fast-paced. I consider myself pretty fast and a descent shooter and dribbler, so naturally I pick basketball. Besides, I just came off of an excellent season, and everyone has been bragging on me, so I must be pretty good right? Wrong.

Deciding to go with basketball, I get private shooting lessons and trainings every Sunday from March until May. Towards mid-May, my coach tells me that Mandeville High is having summer basketball tryouts the last week of May and that he can talk to the coaches to see if I can come. Several days later, I get a phone call from one of the coaches, inviting me to tryouts. Excited and extremely nervous, I go to tryouts. I am the only one from Madisonville Jr. High trying out. The last day of tryouts, the head coach calls three other girls and me into his office and invites us to travel with the varsity team over the summer.

The summer goes by, and I play pretty well for a freshman. This is one of the best shooting time periods of my basketball career. I'm on cloud nine, anxious for the season to begin. When fall season starts, I make the freshman, JV, and Varsity teams. I start for freshman and JV. All throughout preseason I work my butt off. I hustle extremely hard. I run the hardest and the fastest. My heart for the game earns me favor from the head coach. He sees potential in me. That is good enough. Although I'm not starting for varsity, I often come in second string. Coach asks me to come to varsity games any time a freshman or JV game conflicts. Towards the end of preseason, I assume my spot as second string varsity. Feeling secure, I let my pride influence my intensity level. I slack off a little bit, not to where I am slow, but not as fast as I should be. Several games go by. Next thing I know, I am sitting on the bench listening to the final buzzer go off. I am not sweating. I did not play. The pattern continues. I only go in when we are winning by a lot, and when I do, it's not for very long.

It's a home game halfway through the season. We go into the locker room celebrating a big win. After coach finishes the postgame talk, he announces who from the freshman team he wants at the next conflicting varsity game. It's always me along with two other girls. He only announces the two other girls. I go home and cry, wondering what had happened to my playing time. Looking back I realize that it was because I was horrible. We were ranked as one of the top teams in the state, and a girl who couldn't dribble or shoot consistently didn't need to be on the floor. But at the time, I thought I was good because I had been playing. I was miserable. All I wanted was one more chance to prove that I could hustle harder than anyone else. But it was too late for that... too late to become good... too late to try harder. The chance never came. I sat miserably through most of the season never touching the

floor. I was good at only two things... pressuring the first string by my defense in practices and warming the bench during games. Fast-forward to the end of freshman year. We are in the Semifinals of the state tournament. I am on the bench. We lose. I didn't get to set foot on the court of the biggest game our team will ever make it to. Subs came in off the bench, but not me. I never got to experience the feeling of playing in front of thousands of people for one of the biggest games of my life. I never will. The locker room is silent. Everyone else is thinking about the loss, but I am thinking about how I will improve myself so that I will never experience this kind of disappointment in myself again... I promise myself I will change, and I never break a promise.

So I find out the hard way that it takes more than athletic ability to play basketball. Turns out you need this thing called skill. Well.... skill and court awareness. This is high school. Athletic ability can only get you so far. My speed and endurance had earned me a spot on varsity, but if I ever wanted to actually become someone, I needed a miracle. One year had gone by, and I couldn't waste another.

I knew that all of the girls that started and got lots of playing time went to AAU training for Charles Tracey with the Northshore Titans. Basically everyone on the team trained at Coach Charles's gym. I used to think I could become good on my own, but freshman season clearly portrayed reality. I thought long and hard about how I was going to improve. I almost decided against AAU training since everyone else had been going there for years, and I was scared of feeling out of place. My mom finally convinced me into going, and I can honestly say that it was one of the best decisions of my entire life.

I can still look back and remember the first day. I was extremely nervous of what the great and famous Charles Tracey would think of me. I mean, after all his daughter, Hannah (who was on my team), was one of the best players in the state. That first day Coach Charles made me feel like the worst player in the history of basketball. Think of the smallest ant you have ever seen, and I felt smaller than that. Everything I did was wrong... literally everything. "Butt down!" "Head up!" "Pivot with the other foot!" and many other things with which I am not going to repeat were repeatedly yelled at me. How he managed to correct me on everything in that very, very long hour and a half is still a mystery to me. I thought he was crazy to yell at new people so much, amazed he still had a business. There were two things I realized that first day. Number one, I wasn't as tough as I thought I was. It wasn't until later on I possessed enough strength to not let anyone break me. That first day, Charles broke me. That is the second thing I learned. Coach Charles wasn't crushing my dreams of becoming good. He was rebuilding me. He had to break me in order to make me.

And so my first season of AAU began. I felt very out-of-place at first. Coach Charles would show many different options to run off of Texas which completely blew my mind. I couldn't keep up with everything and often found myself "winging it". The fast-break was very different than Mandeville High's, and I kept getting school in-bound plays confused with these new ones. Charles's harassment made me push harder. He criticized me constantly because he loved me. He saw potential in me that I couldn't even find in myself. But at the time, it was hard to see it that way...

Day 8: Charles grabs me by the shirt and yells at me to keep my head up.

Day 13: Charles strangles me from behind.

Day 22: Apparently I wasn't paying attention in line and Charles makes me run.

Day 29: Charles singles me out in front of everyone for doing a move the wrong way even though four other people did it incorrectly as well.

Day 36: I don't keep my head up again and now owe him 40 push-ups.

Day 40: Charles throws his shoe at me. I duck, and it hits Whitney Ward behind me.

Day 47: I ask Charles how I played in a game. He says I sucked and makes me cry.

Day 52: Charles strangles me and yells at me for not passing the ball to the right person.

Day 59: Charles tells me he is proud of me.

Day 61: Charles yanks my hair and threatens to kick me out if I don't dribble with my head up.

Day 68: Charles chokes me, threatening me that if I don't knock some girls on the other team out, he will sit me.

Day 77: Charles calls me over to play defense on some guys. I do, and apparently I don't do well on the thing that I am best at. He says I am terrible and makes me leave his group. I literally have no idea this time what I did wrong. I think he just feels like yelling at someone.

And so as you can see my first season of AAU went very well. This pattern continued to repeat over the course of the three years that I did AAU. The summer before sophomore year was extremely hard. I probably played more basketball through AAU and boot camps than I did in my seventh and eighth grade years combined. It was that summer that I realized my first life skill: Determination. It was my dissatisfaction of where I was and crave to set foot on the floor that drove me to dedicate many sweaty hours to the gym, my driveway, and the summer heat. It was that summer that began my transformation from athlete to player. AAU did that for me. Not myself.

Returning in the fall, I started as a sophomore. I was very intimidated because 3 of the 4 girls I was playing with were top-ranked in the state. Although I still hadn't mastered dribbling and shooting, I brought defense to the team. My athleticism saved me and earned me the nickname "box-and-one girl". My job was to shut down the best girl on the other team. I may have made bad shots sometimes, or had the ball stolen from me, or made a few bad passes... well, more than a few, but I hardly ever let a girl get by me on defense. Ever! If I couldn't provide that for the team, then I was useless. I was constantly worried about losing my spot. My career finally boosted sophomore year, and our 5-A team was ultimately ranked seventh in the state. That year, I received the Most Improved Player Award. Sophomore season was the time when basketball really started to impact me as both a player and a person.

I continued with AAU training and boot camps right when the season ended. This season I focused on improving my skill. I was good enough sophomore season to play, but I still wasn't good. Charles did lots of dribbling trainings throughout the summer, and 3-on-3 league definitely helped enhance my court-awareness. I became a much better ball handler than I had been. I looked forward to going to all of the games and tournaments and began creating close friendships with lots of my teammates. I finally felt like I belonged to something.

I kept up the training. Junior and senior year were two of the best years of my life... primarily because of basketball. The coaches of the Northshore Titans transformed me from just an athlete to an athlete with some skill, court awareness, and more heart than I could have never obtained on my own. My family at Northshore Sportsplex taught me how to fight and be a leader through example. Out of

my entire high school career, I was never at one single point the best shooter, dribbler, or passer. Eventually I became less terrible in each of those areas, but I never let it get to me. I worked on what I was bad at and shone at what I was good at... defense. I finally realized that I could still play the game through defense. I went on to receive awards like Defense MVP and All-District, so I guess all my hard work paid off. As a freshman sitting on the bench, I never could have envisioned that I would one day become an important aspect to the team, a person my teammates relied upon.

They say that everyone has a life-changing experience. For me, it was AAU. I don't know what it was about the noisy gym, aching limbs, or the sweating, running, and occasional bleeding, but I loved it. Scratch that. I needed it! Basketball provided an escape from reality, a time where I could forget the world and just focus on me, the ball, and the court. I found a family in AAU. Coach Charles, Coach Kenny, Coach Ryan, and Coach Elicia have always been here for me the past three years that I have known them. They all contributed something to that gym that made me never want to leave. Coach Elicia is definitely the most compassionate, and yet is extremely tough at the same time. As a girl, I found her easy to relate to and became inspired to see how well she could play. Coach Ryan definitely lightened everyone's mood with his friendly personality and humor. He tried to teach me how to dunk, but I'm still not quite there yet. Throughout my AAU experience, however, I have grown extremely close to Coach Kenny and Coach Charles. Although to many they probably come across as the toughest coaches, they each offer a softer side to life than they lead you to believe. Through boot camps, Coach Kenny has provided my teammates and I with advice about life and work ethic that I will remember forever. He has also shaped me into the player I am today. His boot camps were the perfect combination of brutality and wisdom. And then you have Charles Tracey. ... the man who claims he is a balder, poorer version of Brad Pitt. Although there have been moments (many moments) where he has told me I play horrible and made me question why I even play, he is also the man who made me realize why I have the passion to push forward. Basketball has created a new kind of family for me. When you're on the court, you're not just a team... you're a family.

Ultimately, I have learned that there's more to basketball than trying to shoot an orange sphere through a hoop. Basketball has taught me several things. For example, goal-setting, time management, and self-discipline are all crucial components needed for success in all areas of life. Also, basketball has influenced me by teaching me how to be both a leader and a team player. As one of the captains of the team, I clearly understood the impact that a single individual can make. As a leader, you have to make sure to always give your best effort. Give and take constructive criticism because it builds character. Never hang your head or look down.... you never know when someone is looking up to you.

I was not born a basketball player. And that's okay. I was born an athlete and worked like crazy to improve as much as I possibly could so that I at least had a shot at playing the game I love. The great and famous Charles Tracey has instilled in my heart that life is about finding something you are passionate about and being the best you can at it. Our team never did make it as far as we did my freshman year, but I am okay with that. I had become a player. Our team went on to playoffs every year and had tremendous records. I felt like a somebody, rather than just another jersey number. Although I cried like a baby every year when we lost out in playoffs, I had no regrets. I had kept my promise to myself. As much as I hated losing, I always reminded myself that you learn more from losing

than you ever will by winning. And as Coach Charles told me the night we lost in playoffs sophomore season against Denham Springs, "You learn even more from yourself when you do something about it". The Northshore Titans are an incredible family. They are a family who taught me the true meaning of following a dream and persevering until you reach it. It's not always about who starts the game or who scores the most points. At the end of the day, what matters is the kind of person you are, what others think of you, and most importantly... what you think of yourself. Basketball is more than a game. . . it's a reflection of life.

My name is Kari Ousterhout, and this is my story. What's yours?