

Mental Toughness: A Journey to Confidence Through a Change in Mindset  
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By: Emily Solomon

I've been a sports fan for as long as I can remember. Fourth grade YMCA basketball was where it all began for me, on a team where I was the only girl on the court and touched the ball a whopping three times the whole season. For some reason, I stuck it out. I tried volleyball and track, but only basketball stuck. Basketball soon became my outlet when school was rough, when friends got annoying, or I just wanted to be out of the house. Basketball became my home.

My freshman year of high school was the best year of high school basketball for me for a lot of reasons. First, I absolutely loved my team. We hung out all the time outside of practice, and that made the early morning workouts okay because at least I got to run with all my favorite people. My coach was incredible. He was your typical basketball coach: tall and loud with a deep voice that yelled at us every single day, but I enjoyed every minute he coached me. He let me play *my* game, helping me utilize my strengths and develop my weaknesses.

It got a little harder when sophomore year rolled around. New coach, new team, and it felt like everything had changed. One of my best friends was graduating this year so I knew our time together was limited. School got tougher, family life got tougher, and on top of that, basketball got so much tougher. Our staff my sophomore year valued fitness, so we started doing track workouts before school started at 5:30 in the morning. One of our assistant coaches took over as our conditioning coach, and to this day when I hear her name I feel like I should just start running. She would play the song "Centuries" by Fall Out Boy on repeat during "practices" when we wouldn't even touch a basketball. Suicide, down and back, suicide, down and back, listening to that song over and over again. Now when it comes on the radio I have to change it before I start to get nauseous.

When I think of that year I think of running. That's all I can remember. Running. She was only in charge of conditioning for one year, my sophomore year, but for every day of high school after that I could hear her voice in my head. To this day, I hear her voice in my head when things get tough.

"Mental toughness!" During the workouts when we felt like we were going to die she always stressed mental toughness. "Your mind gives up way before your body will," she would

say. Sometimes she wouldn't even explain what she meant by it, she would just yell "MENTAL TOUGHNESS!" during a drill or a run and we could interpret that in any way we wanted. In the moment, I wanted to punch her in the face. Mental toughness? Okay, Coach, *you* come out here and do what you're making us do and then try to say, "It's all mental." In the moment, it didn't feel like my mental approach made a difference at all.

But this turned out to be one of the most powerful lessons I've learned in my entire life, not just in basketball. It helped me realize that I can control so much more than I thought I could. I learned that mental toughness is way more powerful than any kind of physical ability, especially when it comes to how you approach a situation. The next couple years of high school basketball after that coach left were a struggle for me. As I began to struggle more with low self-esteem and insecurity and all the other horrible things that inevitably come with being a teenager, basketball started to feel less like a home and more like a job.

Unfortunately, now as a sophomore in college, basketball hasn't gotten much easier for me, the mental side anyways. Confidence is a difficult thing for me to achieve, and committing to something so psychologically exhausting and physically time-consuming hardly gets any easier. Basketball can make some things harder, but what lesson have I learned from it?

Mental toughness. I have learned that the way you approach a situation can influence how the situation turns out. In a world where female athletes are often discouraged from carrying out their sports dreams, it's super easy to let society make you think that you aren't meant to succeed. Luckily, I've had amazing teammates these past couple years who have encouraged me to keep going, keep grinding, and above all, keep being myself. I've realized in the past few years just how important being a good teammate is, both from how I've grown as a teammate and how incredible my teammates have been to me.

In the moment --- the moments --- when things are hard and hard work doesn't seem like it's doing the trick, I try to stop and reflect. What am I learning from this? How is this making me a better person? Because like I said, sometimes things just don't go your way no matter hard you try. But how you respond to it reflects who you are as a person. Basketball has taught me a lot of things about the world, how to work with people, and how to work hard. These are all important lessons but above all I've learned about who I am.

Who am I?

Mentally tough.

As much as it has been a constant battle for me, basketball has given me much of who I am. It's given me friends who are like family, a work ethic, a passion, but most importantly it's shown me how mentally tough I really am.