

## One Fall Changed It All

*“When things are going bad: Don’t get all bummed out, don’t get startled, don’t get frustrated.*

*No. Just look at the issue and say: ‘Good.’” - Jocko Willink*

I entered this world with a glass-half-empty disposition: in one of my first photos, I am scowling through the clear hospital bassinet, already worrying what might go wrong in life. Though I have always applied myself passionately to my interests, I have many times been my own worst enemy in adversity, sabotaging myself with a negative mindset. On multiple occasions, my headspace has prolonged or exacerbated tough situations. I began to change this pattern only after everything went wrong for a long period of time in my sport of choice, soccer.

I started playing soccer not long after I started to walk; like my scowl, one could argue the sport is one of my earliest defining features. I have played at a committed, elite level since the age of seven. In early 2020, I was excelling on the Asphalt Green Soccer Club’s 2009 “A” travel team -- until COVID abruptly upended all in-person activities. For months, I itched to get back on the field. It felt like part of me was missing every week that slipped by without my team on the turf.

I was ecstatic when my club finally reopened in Fall 2020. I showed up to the first practice with my adrenaline pumping. Just twenty minutes into the first drill, I jumped up to head the ball and got bumped mid-air. I fell to the field on my wrist at an awkward angle. I felt nothing for about ten seconds, before I was flooded with a surge of pain so intense I nearly vomited. I could not move my wrist, and I knew something was wrong. My dad rushed to me from the sidelines, scooped me into his arms, and whisked me to the hospital. At some point my

eyesight went hazy, and I vaguely remember the rest of the night as nothing but a blur of lights and sounds. When I woke up the next day, my dad informed me I had broken my wrist and it needed to be reset under sedation. I was bitter with my fate, even before learning the injury would take me out for eight weeks. As it dawned on me that my long-awaited fall season had ended before it started, my heart was shattered worse than my wrist.

Over my eight-week hiatus, I got moved down from the “A” to the “B” team because I was not able to play. I tried to hide my disappointment from my parents, who assured me this was standard team protocol and that I would have the chance to earn back my spot. When I finally returned to the field, I fully expected to be back on the “A” team in two weeks at the next roster decision. This did not happen. Instead, I found myself stuck on the “B” team for the next roster. I became despondent as my parents encouraged me to keep faith; however, two weeks later, I still was not on the “A” team. Two weeks after that, same outcome. This cycle continued for the entirety of the fall and winter seasons.

In reality, I returned from my injury a noticeably different player. I was not aggressive about making tackles and shied away from physical contact out of fear of hurting myself again. I also approached soccer with a different mindset, one where I was entitled to have back my rightful spot on the team. I thought I was doing everything right and that I was being held back because of my teammates. Although some kids on the “B” team did not have as much passion for soccer, I mainly stopped myself from improving by not taking feedback from my coach because I was so disgruntled. Both the way I acted and the decreased intensity from my teammates caused me to dread playing soccer, despite it being my only in-person activity during COVID. My refuge suddenly felt like my prison. At many times during that year, I seriously contemplated quitting because it did not feel worth it. It seemed as though I was training for countless hours

with negative payoff. I tried to dissect my frustration: was it with the sport, myself, or my team? How would it feel to walk away? Even though I wanted to quit, my parents told me I needed to honor my commitment and finish the season. I grudgingly played on, but I was very aware of my regression; practices and games felt brutal and joyless, nothing clicked.

Towards the end of the 2020-2021 season, I attended tryouts for other teams in the tri-state area. For Manhattan Soccer Club (MSC), I had an especially energetic tryout and played arguably some of my best soccer ever. Days later, my parents received an acceptance letter from MSC, stating that I had earned a spot on their premier travel team. I was convinced that I received this letter by error. In my view, I was definitely not as talented as the kids I had competed against at tryouts. Likewise, my Asphalt Green teammates and coaches had a hard time hiding their surprise. I accepted the offer with a desperate hope for something better, but also a healthy dose of fear that it was all a big mistake. Considering I was not even pulling my weight in a lower league, how could I possibly belong on a better team? What if I got benched, or even cut, from the team after a season?

In the summer of 2021, I rigorously trained every day. I went to camps and I joined a summer Latin League in the Bronx, where I played two weekly games of street soccer with elite players. The league played in smaller and rougher spaces, which allowed me to become more physical. I came into the fall of 2021 as a more aggressive and confident player than the prior season. On my new team, I was free from the past year's misery and approached soccer with a different mindset. I began to understand that when my highly vocal coach was yelling at me, it was because he cared deeply about my development and had seen promise in me during tryouts. As I learned to seek out and implement his feedback, I actually started to enjoy his yelling.

Initially, I was definitely not the best player on my MSC team, but I put my faith in this new opportunity and poured all my energy into my training regimen. By Spring 2022, I consistently started every game at defense, played the most minutes of any teammate, and was often selected captain for games. With this great environment and a clean slate, I started to enjoy playing soccer again. Thankfully, the positive spiral continued into Summer 2022, as well as the 2022-2023 program underway.

As I thrive in soccer again, my parents often remind me that I would never have experienced my many recent highpoints if I had not endured a prolonged personal lowpoint. I have gained a new understanding that during difficult parts of my life, I need to continue fighting and believe in my ability to get back to a place that makes me happy. Through soccer, I have learned that bad situations force me to adapt and work harder to solve them. This is an important lesson for me, as soccer has taught me to apply this mindset to everything I do in life. Drawing on this experience, whenever I get down about tough moments in life, I smirk at the Jocko Willink quote and say to myself out loud, “Good.”

