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Fair Play, Fairways, and Fearless: Teeing Up Equality in Golf

Daryn Dickens · Monday, October 16th, 2023

Fair Play, Fairways, and Fearless: Teeing Up Equality in Golf
by Daryn Dickens

As the youngest of three, and the only girl, my brothers have always treated me equally and with respect. In a memorable conversation, my father warned me, “Not everything out there in the world will be like home. There will be situations in your life when you will feel like you are being treated unfairly, and you will need to figure out how to handle that.” I would remember that when I faced one of the hardest obstacles in my life, playing the game that I love.

My golf career started unexpectedly at a local school spring fair. One of the booths had an inflatable target set up with a bucket of golf balls and clubs. The man leading the activity was a PGA professional, drumming up interest in the sport. The ball I hit flew over the target, across four lanes of cars, and was lost, but the golf pro seemed very impressed. Shortly after, I happily enrolled in classes to learn the game. As I became a more skilled golfer, I joined the PGA Jr. League where I would play competitive golf in a team format for the next 2 years.

My freshman year of high school, I made the top 6 golfers on the co-ed Varsity team. That designation meant that I would play in all matches and tournaments. I was the only girl and the only black player. I was excited and proud. It was the culmination of years of dedication and hard work.

Unfortunately, the upperclassmen boys weren’t as happy. They treated me differently. They did not include me in their conversations. They did not provide guidance or leadership like they did with the other boys. It was obvious that they did not like that my skills were better than many of theirs. I realized the internalized sexism in the sport. The girls were not welcoming either. They barely spoke to me. The rejection at practices became intolerable. I began to question my ability to continue. I had to figure it out.



In golf when you are lining up a shot, you have three questions to ask yourself: Where am I on the course? Where does the ball need to go and how am I going to get it there? These assessments help me choose the right club, the best way to hit the ball and amount of force to get to the hole. I decided to apply these golf principles to my golf team dilemma.

Where was I on the course? I was in a no-win situation. I had to figure out a way to change the way I was perceived. Where was I going? I wanted to continue to grow my personal game without repercussions. And finally, how do I get there? I realized that we were not operating as a team. We needed to build comradery. I thought there must be a way I could help.

First, I spoke to my coach. I asked to spend more time with the girls during practice to build relationships. Before tournaments, I offered my help in a humble way. After practice, I would talk to everyone, creating a conversation about non-golf related subjects. We spoke to a sports psychologist and shared personal stories that developed a trust between us all. Finding similarities in shared experiences and being empathetic created a bond. I built an alliance with one of the team captains and he helped me fit in.

Together, the team learned how to work for the common good, set goals and achieve them, and deal with uncertainty. I learned when to lead and when to just listen.

We had each other’s backs and our team improved on and off the golf course. Personally, I realized what I am capable of, whether it is driving a golf ball or facing adversity. I am sure I will carry the lessons of this experience as I meet the challenges of college and life.

The lesson I took away from this experience was that I had to focus on myself rather than others on my team so I could play a game that I loved. My core belief was shown in my experience to be determined no matter the circumstances. On my team, I had many “teammates” working against me but it was important for me to ignore it in order to achieve my passionate goal. I believe other people will agree with me about my core belief because they may have experienced it, not just in sports but in school, work, or in a club. Reflecting back, I still would make the same decision because I grew as a golfer and person once going through it.

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This entry was posted on Monday, October 16th, 2023 at 8:07 pm and is filed under Sports, Tomorrow's Voices Today, Essay, Identity
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