



### **Kids' Stories**

From Niki Popyer, who joined Abby in Washington D.C.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to play basketball. I have devoted all my energy to perfecting my skills and improving my ability. I worked with shooting coaches and trainers and played on any teams that were available at my age levels. In season, I kept sharp by working out, practicing and playing. In the off season, I attended classes and camps just so I could learn as much as possible.

Over the years, I played for various coaches. I was lucky that my dad had the knowledge and interest to offer to coach my first travel team for my home town. We built a team then when I was 9 that stayed together until our last eligible season as 13's. Four of us went on to play together in high school. We were very lucky to be able to play together all these years and develop strong relationships on and off the court.

I was supposed to play with them. Now I can't. I have played with numerous sprains, strains, broken bones, when I was sick, and when I was tired. I chose to fit my life into basketball instead of fitting basketball into my life.

My first concussion was in seventh grade. My opponent and I dove for a loose ball at the same time, we collided and I hit my head on the floor. About a week later, I fell and slid into the wrestling mats. That was the first time we went to the emergency room. They told me to stay out one to two days.

There were other head injuries. Sometimes they told me to wait two weeks, sometimes wait until the headaches stopped. But the headaches were always there. I just didn't put them together with the accidents. My parents took me to different doctors and each one told me something else. As long as they didn't tell me not to play, I kept playing. I never really acknowledged how I felt.

Some of my concussions were very scary, like the time I couldn't see or the time my body twitched for a two weeks. With the last couple, I stayed out much longer. The last concussion I had in a game was what seemed like a minor hit, but my knees buckled and I hit the floor. I don't remember much after that, but I felt lousy for a long time. I couldn't stand the lights or the noise, I was dizzy and nauseous. That's when the headaches got really bad and never went away. I cried all the time, I couldn't go to school, I didn't want to see my friends.....nothing. I will never forget how I felt when the doctor at that time told me I had to stop playing basketball forever. It actually made me sick to my stomach.

I missed a lot of school and had teachers come to my house. When I finally went back for just a few hours a day, I was really tired and I couldn't concentrate at all. That was last year and this year I go to school but I can't always make a whole day. I have had to move down to lower levels and make other changes. Some people don't really believe me and that hurts. The administration has been on my side, and I really rely on the school's trainer to keep me positive.

This is a tough time of year for me because basketball season is starting up. I go to all the practices and games. I can sit on the bench but they are afraid so they made me move a row back and they surround me to keep me safe. I watch the girls I have played with my whole life and I feel so sad. If anyone complains, I get angry because at least they can play.

However, it's not just the basketball. So much has changed, life is much harder and I am left out of a lot of activities. Even a slight hit to my head makes me pass out. I have had a few setbacks like that.

What I want other kids like me to know is that it is much better to miss a month or a season or a year than it is to have your whole life changed. Many of my friends get hurt and refuse to tell anyone. They play with all kinds of injuries but with me they can't get away with trying to play after a head injury. I beg them to be honest with themselves.

I am lucky that our school now has a good support system in place. We have a terrific trainer and everyone uses the Impact test. There is no way to cheat on it. All schools should have what we have and all athletes have to put aside their egos and bravado and stop thinking that they can play through anything. There is no shame in sitting out until you feel absolutely fine.

More info-- [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/10/a\\_hostage\\_to\\_concussions.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/10/a_hostage_to_concussions.html)