

## **My Unlikely Journey**

In life we all have experiences and encounters that change our life's course, the way we perceive things, and the choices we make which produce both positive and negative outcomes.

I am no different but, first and foremost, I have been blessed to be raised with the freedoms afforded by the greatest country on earth in a strong family setting where I was free to dream and take action to forge my own future without much of the family, political, and economic hardships so many in the world face today.

My chosen direction throughout my early years was an intense desire to play sports as part of my high school and college experience. From as early as I can remember, I envisioned myself taking the same paths as those I saw on television, primarily the Olympic Softball Team. Albeit, I had no idea what the path behind the successes I watched being celebrated looked like or how hard it was. But for an eight year old girl playing Little League baseball with the boys with more than my share of success I certainly felt like I was on my way. I lived for these experiences and as I transitioned over to girls' softball, I stayed right on track with my aspirations. First there were the local leagues, then making all-stars I was given my first taste of just how many focused young ladies out there shared the same dreams as I did.

I was fueled to stay ahead of the pack even though I was starting to experience more sports such as basketball and volleyball as well. I still seemed to only want to play the game I loved most, softball. I continued this path playing travel ball in countless locations and virtually year around. Looking back on those times, I can see just how fortunate I was to have a family be so supportive of my endeavors. We were often packing up and hitting the road to all these adventures and, as I now know, sacrificed greatly so I could pursue my dreams. I learned so much during this time and was touched by so many wonderful people.

By the time I reached my seventh grade year I was starting to find new athletic passions thrown into the mix in the form of basketball and volleyball. Not so much a new revelation but simply growing taller and stronger I was able to play these sports as they were supposed to be played. I still loved softball, however, and had no plans on changing my course. But, ever so incrementally, I found myself falling in love with the speed, pace, and intensity of the other sports, basketball in particular. So once again I found myself on the road. Long road trips for AAU basketball tournaments from Oregon to San Diego to Las Vegas. Packing our bags and going to play club volleyball from Reno to Colorado to as far away as Ohio.

As my high school freshman year came around I was still on course with my long term goal of playing softball. I made the varsity team as a freshman both pitching and playing outfield. The only difference seemed to be now there were these other two sports which I loved as well. When it came to thinking long term I was torn when considering what I wanted to do over the next seven plus years.

“Is that wrong?” I used to ask myself and parents. I was afraid of where my heart was taking me and had no clue how to express my desire to scale back not only a sport, softball, but one that I had put so much time into as well as one my parents had invested so much in financially and time wise. I found myself conflicted between speaking from my heart and the fear of disappointing my family that had put so much into my stated passion. The assurances I received from my family coupled with their understanding and unconditional desire that I not only should but needed to follow my heart and it was OK was unbelievable.

Well, I pulled the trigger and eventually walked away from softball in high school and further zeroed in on basketball where I was blessed with wonderful coaches and mentors enjoying much success on the court as well.

One might ask why I am compelled to include such lengthy background. The simple answer is the importance of understanding the context of an adolescent girl growing to maturity maintaining the same goals from 8 years old at a substantial sacrifice to my family now barely into my high school career feeling conflicted and almost guilty of the additional exposure to other sports and where it has led me.

I found myself starting my junior year giving up softball to focus more on volleyball and basketball and now leaning towards pursuing basketball in college. I was going through basketball season junior year and doing very well. It was at this point a series of seemingly simple encounters with two people was about to change my life forever even though I didn't realize it at the time. It would appear that one of the football and track coaches had been keeping an eye on me and saw something in me while doing workouts and at games. After one of my games coach Jamie Wise approached and said, "Hey Mel, have you ever thought about doing track?" I was hesitant at best with my answer and explained that I was not exactly sure what I thought about the idea. As the season went on, I would see Coach Jamie periodically as he always seemed to cross my path and he would laughingly joke to me about coming out to track this year. After basketball season came to a close, I saw a few signs announcing when track practices started and with coach Jamie's voice in my head I just decided to go give it a shot. After all, if I didn't like it, I didn't have to do it right? I started going to practices and was finding myself enjoying being out on the track doing running and strength workouts, the freedom and peace it gave me. The actual meets started up and I was running the 100 meter dash and the 200 meter dash primarily and succeeding in both of those events.

Enter Coach Angie Marino, the second in the duo that, unbeknownst to me, were in the process of taking this girl to new and unimagined places. It appears Angie was checking out the

new blood and had some other ideas for me. “Hey Mel, I think you need to try hurdles.” She said. Needless to say, I was quick to shut her down and told her I was not coordinated enough to do that and it would probably not be my thing. In fact the thought scared the heck out of this rookie. She kept pursuing me though and asked me almost every day to come do some hurdle workouts with the others. Once again, these two people’s persistence led to my capitulation and I gave it a shot. I wasn’t fantastic at first but got the hang of them quickly. I competed in a few meets doing the hurdles and found a feeling of excitement and presence I hadn’t felt in some time as I overcame my fear. It would eventually lead to a berth in the Sierra Foothill League Finals with only a handful of races under my belt.

There I was in my blocks anticipating the gun signaling the start of 100 meter hurdle final. Off I went and I was over the first five hurdles swiftly and running right with the leader in the SFL at the time! As the sixth hurdle approached, my back foot clipped it and threw me completely off balance. I had lost all of my rhythm and it took me some time to regain it. I tried running as fast as I could to try to catch back up but it proved ineffective as everyone had already passed me. I was devastated and it was the first time I had ever hit a hurdle resulting an even higher level of disappointment than it should have. It was then I realized how much Jamie and Angie had impacted my life. Their support and assurance I had another shot my senior year to redeem myself and be successful even further confirmed that. The tears streaming down the faces of my parents and coaches gave me a feeling of love and support that was unbelievable coupled with an intense desire for redemption.

I entered my senior year continuing as a three sport athlete playing volleyball in the Fall, basketball in the Winter, earning All-League honors en-route to the first SFL championship in seven years. I was, at that time, receiving interest from colleges but secretly the brightest fire

burning inside of me was that lit by Jamie and Angie. I was a kid in a candy store wanting to get back on that track to prove myself and make them proud of me. Some of my highly talented teammates were battling burnout, nursing injuries, and contemplating their commitment to the physical demands of playing basketball in college. When it came to basketball I had some of the same feelings given I was a 5'11" 130 pound post giving up a hundred plus pounds to my opponent every night. Inside, however, those feelings were quickly out the window when I thought about track and how I had been inspired and could not wait to get back to it.

I wanted to really make hurdles a focus and see how well I could do. I dedicated all of my training to improving. I wanted to run the 100 meter hurdles and add the 300 meter hurdles as well. As the season went on, I was improving immensely in the short hurdles and the long hurdles. My times were dropping and I loved every minute practicing and competing working towards my goals but also had a sincere desire to make Jamie and Angie proud of me for all they had done for me.

My senior year ended off the charts. I won the SFL Championship in both the 100 and 300 meter hurdles! I once again witnessed the tears streaming from the faces of my parents and coaches, only this time it was the tears of joy, my success, and redemption. The feeling you have standing atop the podium is priceless. I wish I could bottle that experience up and share it with every young aspiring athlete wanting to make her mark in athletics. It was one of those times that make it all worthwhile and I had Jamie and Angie to thank for putting me there. With the victories, I advanced to the Sac Joaquin Section Championships and then qualified for Masters. I was named All League and Most Valuable Player culminating in an honor I could not have imagined a year earlier. I was the recipient of the Albert Ali Award for female athlete of the year.

In June, I signed my national letter of intent to attend Chico State University in the fall as a member of the track team competing in the heptathlon and hurdles. Rather than being nervous as I always had envisioned, I found myself beyond excited to start a new journey in my life and I just could not wait until I was moving into the dorms, meeting my roommate (also an incoming freshman on the team), meeting my team, and everything that Chico State had to offer.

Eventually, the day came when it was time to move to Chico and get settled into my dorm. When school started, track practice was not supposed to start for about five weeks to give everyone time to get settled in and in the flow with school so I was not expecting to really meet many people on my team for a few weeks. But the day that I was hectically trying to get everything moved and settled in, the women's head coach Robert Nooney and one of the hurdlers on the team showed up to my dorm to talk to us, introduce themselves, and offer any help that we needed. It was great because the exact day that I got to Chico, I felt like I was a part of something special.

As the weeks went on and school had started, I would periodically get texts from different girls on the team offering to help me with anything that I might need and girls from my event group inviting me to workout with them as we were getting back in shape and ready for fall training. The other multi-eventers really took me under their wing as season started to roll around. I was the only freshman out of the four heptathletes and six decathletes. That being said, they understood what I was going through. We often did fun team bonding things like go on bike rides, go to the river, and get ice cream. Immediately, I felt very privileged compared to what other freshmen were going through. I found myself becoming best friends with a lot of people and hanging out with most of the team outside of practice going on adventures, hikes, swimming, etc.

Jamie and Angie's contributions to changing my life extended beyond their persistence of getting me to run track. They also showed me what a good athlete-coach relationship should consist of. They taught me technique in a way I could understand, they pushed me and were tough on me when they needed to be, and when I experienced adversity or needed their support they were the first ones there with comforting words and hugs. They provided the perfect balance and I could feel and see how much support they gave me and just how much they cared about me and my success. Having such a good relationship with my coaches in high school carried over into college and helped me make connections and positive relationships with all of the coaches that were new to me at Chico State as I was transitioning.

These past ten months, I have been fortunate enough to be a part of an amazing track team at Chico State. To me, our team is way more than that, we are a family. A successful family composed of phenomenal athletes who had garnered five straight CCAA Conference titles and named the #6 Division II program in the United States.

I was fortunate to find success within this talented group with my season highlights coming in the form of an all-time Chico State freshman record in the heptathlon, making the conference championship team and helping the Wildcats win their sixth consecutive conference title.

I truly have been blessed with an unlikely journey and, when I reflect back on all I have experienced, it was the simple encounter with Jamie Wise seeing something special deep inside me and the vision and persistence of Angie Marino teaching me to face my fears by taking on the hurdles that I will always credit for putting me on a path that was surely best for me. If I had not made the decision to try something new and scary to me, my life would be immensely different. Looking back now, I would not change one decision that I have made in my life thus far to put

me where I am right now. High school and now college track and field has changed my life. It has given me tremendous opportunities, provided me an almost unfair ease of transition, and numerous relationships that will last a lifetime.