

## Benchwarmers

One, two, three, four, five, and six. He called out the names of six girls. I was not one of them. I knew my name was not going to get called. I was not his *favorite*, and I was not his daughter either. He loved her, there was no way she was going to sit on the bench. The coach's daughter, a bench warmer? Nah, it wasn't going to happen. He had to make himself feel good. He could at least say that "I taught her better than that," whenever she fucked up. Unlike the rest of us, who were used as pawns, holding places for whenever his favorites could not perform. We were tossed in like sheep among the wolves, left to be devoured. It was like we were supposed to use telepathy to his mind for the play-by-play of what he wanted us to do.

He held us to a higher standard than they were. Bad pass - bench. Bad set - bench. Bad serve - bench. And if they messed up? The clapping of the hands began, "Oh, come on!" His favorite line. I wish I had heard that line before I was subbed off. Unlucky to say, I never heard it. It was just one bad touch and off I went. It was one bad touch for them, and his favorite line would be repeated several times. They would of course play two more sets of the game and by then we would have already lost.

The worst part of the loss was hearing about it in the locker room for the after-game talk. It was a summary of what we had done wrong and how it could have been prevented. To me and many others, this summary was very biased and opinionated. All of the things that "could have been prevented" were things that he neglected to see during the game. He could have easily swapped a girl or two, but he did not. In the end, he was the real reason we had lost the game that night.

He was the reason for a lot of things going wrong. For one, he was the reason many girls had quit in the first place. One would think everyone would be super excited to stay after school and play the sport they loved, but not with him. With him, it did not feel like the sport we all knew and loved. Going to the gym to practice after school was like a walk of shame. Immediately knowing that the only time to play was during practice. In the real game, touching the court would never happen.

The practice was from three to six o'clock, Monday through Friday. A long three hours that felt like the longest time of our lives. When practice was finally over, it was as if we had been released from prison, locked away in our jail for months without seeing the light outside. We had suffered enough that day and were ready to go home and sleep. The only problem was that one can never sleep when dreading the idea of going to practice the next day. A shame how a volleyball coach could make me against my favorite sport.

Not only did he coach volleyball, but he was also the girls' softball coach. That was where the roots of his favoritism started. Softball was his favorite sport and volleyball was just something he did in college. He used to harass volleyball players into playing softball. He would say that it was a lot more fun. This habit of neglecting the volleyball team and showing more interest in the softball team was starting to become clear to everyone. Some people never cared because they *were* softball girls. Other girls, like me and many others, did care. We cared because we were the ones left on the bench.

These are prime examples of when he was a complete jackass to us for no reason. I remember a special time with the volleyball team that I will never forget. This memory was nothing but drama, shock, and tears. It was my senior year of high school, and we had a volleyball tournament at home. We were so pumped to play until we figured out how far his

favoritism ran. Not only did it run deep, but it flowed in the darkest places of the ocean. He was a shark in the sea, chomping at anyone who did not fit into his “dream team.” He dared to tell us one team had dropped out of the tournament, so he was forced to separate us into two teams. The separation was a shock for all of us. While it was fine at first, it immediately became a problem when names were said. I was listed on the team with the not-so-good players. The same ones I had been stuck with since the Junior High B Team. That's how I knew how stressful this tournament was going to be.

All his starters and very few benchwarmers he would throw in randomly. He planned to have his first team collect the first-place trophy in the tournament and have his second take whatever we could get.

I was furious at the thought of having to relive Junior High all over again. Our volleyball games would be like baseball games. Long and drawn out for no reason. And I don't mean good play between both teams, like the ball bouncing from one side to the other. I mean, one pass to the other team and then a shanked ball from the next. We would spend more time running to retrieve a ball from across the gym, than actually playing a volleyball patch.

As depressing as it sounds, I would be the one to stand there the most. I was a setter, and the only thing we did was set the ball for the hitters to hit. They were supposed to hit the ball inside the court and give us an ace. Boom, that would have been an easy point. But no, they would just hit the ball straight to the ceiling. Which was obviously... OUT OF BOUNDS!

Since it was the setter's job to give the hitters a perfect ball, they would look to me as if I had somehow sabotaged them. I would then look at them and say “You were the one that hit the ball out. And if you want a better set then tell that to the back row.”

The back row was all sorts of uncoordinated. The front-row hitters did not care one bit. Instead, they yell at the back row to give me better passes initially to *give* them better sets. We managed to make it work somehow, but it was not perfect. We would barely make it through the game with a decent pass, set, hit combination.

That was how the Junior High B Team played. I was hoping that the “new and improved B Team” would have been better now that we were in high school. Not to mention, we all were seniors as well. Unfortunately, nothing changed with this “new and improved B Team”. We looked like we had just left off from where we started. There was nothing better about being older and more experienced when we did not even look the part. Some girls played as if they had never played volleyball before. Others just wanted to be the ones to blame someone else for messing up.

Our volleyball coach would come by and sneak glances at us whenever his first team was not playing. He would come over to us and act as if he was going to be a coach. In reality, he just wanted to see how amateur we looked. In which we were, amateurs at their finest. I was embarrassed to say I was on the team after the fifth shanked ball. He would change some things around for the next set and say, "See if that helps." Then he would leave. It did not help, in fact, whatever rotation that he wanted us to do, made us look even worse. Which might have been his plan from the beginning. He was a coach who liked to sabotage the other team just so he could make his first team look better.

We ended up losing every set of that game. Coach had another after-game talk with us on how to improve. The talk did nothing but tell us why we were failures in the first place. He had no confidence in us, so it was hard to have any confidence in ourselves. I could see the girls getting down on themselves. It was a bad game and today was not going as planned.

I was convinced that we were going to lose every single game in this tournament if we did not get our act together. So, I was the one who stood up and said something. We were still on the volleyball court when I decided to speak. I started with, “Do we want to win or not?” Everyone looked at me in confusion. We had already lost the game so there was no going back.

“He obviously put us all together for a reason. He wanted to prove to us who his dream team was. We are not them, plain and simple. If we want to prove that we are better than ‘the benchwarmers’ then we have to show it. We have to play like a team and win some games.”

I was serious and meant every word that had come out of my mouth. I did not want to be on the losing team. We were always the losing team, game after game. It was time to finally put an end to the losing streak. There was no reason to give him the satisfaction of proving him right. We needed to show him how wrong he was.

Everyone cheered and agreed. I could see the passion in their eyes. They wanted to win just as much as I did. We **needed** to win. This was the last year that we were ever going to play volleyball together again. This was our last year to show who we were as players. This was also probably the last time we were ever going to touch the volleyball court in a game.

We were ready to go all out. We hyped ourselves up for the next game. We scouted the other teams, watched how they played, and reported back to one another. We watched our own team play. They were not doing so well. They lost the game. That was all we needed for motivation. If he thought that his “dream team” was a dream team, then they should have won that game with no problems. Sad to say, they lost with flying colors.

The next game, we went out screaming. We sang and danced to the warmup songs. Every ball that I set was perfect. I even took a few hits, and they were definitely ace-worthy. We had

overcompensated for what had happened in the last game and it had felt as if we had never even lost the game before this one. The only thing we needed to do was get this show on the road.

The game started and we were fine. Pass, set, and free ball over to the other side. “It's okay! Let's just get the next one,” I would say. I had to keep their heads up and keep them in the game. We did not need to shut off. Even though having a free ball to play was like a free easy comeback, we need to bring more heat to the game. We needed a hit; we needed an ace.

The other team's right-side hitter jumped up. Boom. She hit the ball hard and fast, but fortunately, we received it. The ball popped back up into the air and I set it. My right-side hitter jumped up and BAM! Ace, baby. The other team would not receive it. “YEAH!” We had a point on the board. The game continued with the same excitement. They would score and then we would score. It had become the ultimate game.

We were on our last set when the coach walked in with his “dream team”. They watched us play for the rest of the game. From his perspective, I could tell we looked like monkeys with our heads cut off, but it was not as chaotic as it looked. We had our shit together and things were going according to plan. It just seemed a little scrambled in the process.

Game point. Ace. The game ends with a 25-15. We were the victors. We all run together in a huddle and jump and down, screaming with excitement. We may have looked like a team that had never won a game before because we were. We had just done the impossible - winning a game that no one thought we would.

The “dream team” congratulated us but everything that came out of their mouths seemed like a pity. Not trying to be rude, we said thanks and kept it moving. They did not need the attention from us. They had the coach's attention. What more could they want?

It was finally lunch break and we had already sat together in the stands eating the Chick-fil-A sandwiches that were always sponsored at our high school tournaments. We watched other teams play as we went over every detail of our game. How this person made a good pass, how I had a perfect set, and someone else with the ace. The conversation had even ranged from how dumb the coach looked when we won to how dumb the “dream team” looked when we won. It was an amazing feeling to be the underdog and come out on top. We just had to prove it for the rest of our tournament.

So, we did. Every game we played after that was a success. We were on the roll with a winning streak. Even the “dream team” could not keep up with us. They had alternated from a loss-to-win situation. It was embarrassing, especially if they were supposed to be the best of all of us.

We had made it so far and now we were reaching the end of the tournament. It was now our chance to do what we set out to do. I thought we were all on the same page until I overheard a conversation between one of our players and the coach.

She was telling him how she did not want to play with this awful team anymore and that she was better than us. The next day she was moved up to play with the first team. It made me mad to see this because I had also talked to him about my position on the team. It was not to switch like she had done, rather it was about if I was going to get playing time in the real season. I was worried that by him putting me on the lesser team, I was never going to play. I cried in front of him that day. I cannot remember the words that I said, but that was the most embarrassing thing that I had experienced.

No one was shocked to see that the girl we thought was supposed to be on our team was suddenly moved to the first team. If anything, it only gave us more fuel for the next game. It was

our last game of the tournament, and we were ready. Our game was scheduled right after the first team's game, what a coincidence. We watched them as they lost the first set. The girl that had left our team was subbed in the next set. The first ball that came her way was shanked. He left her in and then she continued to shank the ball. We all looked at each other knowing exactly what each other was thinking. She had begged him to leave the team because she thought she was an all-star player, which she proved not to be. He subbed her off after the next shanked ball and she sat on the bench for the rest of the game.

The Dream Team lost that match, and it was not a close game. The girl who had left our team got less playing time than she was receiving on our team. She went from being a starter all the way around to a benchwarmer. Nonetheless, it made her happy to be considered for the first team.

We started our last game with a few hiccups. There were shanked balls throughout the court. I looked over to the bench. Our coach was standing there, watching without saying a word. After the next shanked ball, I called out to the team, telling them to clean it up. It was not just us playing without a coach and doing whatever we wanted like before, but this time we were being judged by our coach. Despite his presence, we managed to win the game. After many failed attempts, we got good balls that brought us right back to where we needed to be. He looked so surprised that we had fought back and won the game.

The tournament ended with his first team getting first and us with the second-place trophy. It was a little exciting to see that all our hard work had paid off. We were still confused about how the first team had got the first-place trophy after losing so many games. The thought of a rigged system crossed my mind.



In the end, we managed to do the impossible. We won games that we never would have thought to win. We stuck together as a team, and we made our dream a success. I improved as a player and so did everyone else. Our coach was still the same. It did not matter how much we had improved, his “dream team” was all that he needed. He did not need the help from the benchwarmers. Regardless of how much we had improved and how hard we played, in the end, we were still benchwarmers.