

A little girl once fell in love with a game. Every Monday and Wednesday, she would get home from school, change into her cleats and ride with her dad to practice. When the fifteen-minute ride was over, she'd hop out of the car to help him lug all of the practice dummies, cones and mesh jerseys to the field. The first whistle meant it was time to line up for stretches and agilities, which were routinely followed by a two-minute water break. The majority of practice always consisted of learning new plays on the dry-erase board and walking-through gaps and routes. There would be another two-minute water break before goal-post sprints ensued. Practice would end with a quick huddle, enhancing the importance of making good grades in school and working hard to become great.

Practices were fun, but they never could beat the weekends. Coach and his daughter would sit in the living room, scanning film for stand-out plays. Zip-block bags were filled with helmet stickers for each player who scored a touchdown, got a sack, made an interception, caused a fumble or even made a monster tackle. Coach liked to call those "pancakes". He also liked to call Saturday morning "Crunch Time." Coach's wife, the team mom, would fill the squeeze bottles with water and Gatorade. Coach's son, number 99, would line the stickers he earned from last weekend's game down the stripe of his helmet. And Coach frantically packed the car, making sure not to leave anything behind. The little girl put on her orange number 22 jersey that was, of course, matched with a navy blue hair ribbon. The family piled in the car and headed to the field, making sure to be there no later than an hour and thirty minutes before kickoff.

Saturday mornings were full of cheering mothers, screaming fathers and the sounds of pads colliding. The little girl stood on the sideline, holding the play cards and waiting to aid players with water bottles during timeouts. The hour-long games seemed to be over in ten minutes. She'd jump in line behind the boys to shake hands with the opposing team and then sprint to the endzone to take a knee for the post-game huddle. Whether the team walked away with a win or a loss, the huddle ended with a quick prayer and a break. Trash on the sidelines was to then be picked up and equipment was to be carried to the car. With the day's excitement behind them, the football family would return home to finish the weekend with both LSU and Saints football, anticipating the start of another busy week.

It never got old. In fact, it seemed just as fast as the season started, it was ending. Practices were enjoyable. Games were exhilarating. But the best part about the season was the time the little girl spent with her dad, learning to love the game just as much as he did. That little girl was me.

I never got my own shoulder pads or helmet. I never played a single game-time down. But I was part of the team. Every season, I became part of a new team, of a new family. And my teammates, my brothers, never saw me as anything less. I may have been the only girl around, but no one ever saw it that way.

At 8-years-old, I told my dad I wanted to be the first female NFL player. My dad silently looked at me with proud, loving eyes for about ten seconds before he told me, "Ab, you can be anything you want to be if you work hard enough."

Dad and I had a more serious conversation about my desired profession when I turned ten. Boys were biologically built bigger and stronger. After realizing professional football may not have been attainable for me, I had to rethink what I wanted to be when I grew up. I had no clue, but I did know one thing for sure. I loved football and all the memories it gave me. It was a big part of me. So whatever I did decide to dedicate my life to would just have to include that sport.

Now, eleven years later, I find myself diving deeper and deeper into the sports world. I'm surrounded by inspiring people, on and off the field. Names like Erin Andrews and Laura Rutledge continue to break ground for females in this profession. And I find myself working with reporters like Fletcher Mackel and Eric Richey who lend helping hands any way they can in order to aid my success.

I first saw Carley McCord at a New Orleans Saints game. As I sat on my stool in the press box, I wondered who the pretty brunette on the jumbotron was. She was so well-spoken and comfortable, and she made her job look easy. She was a natural. After watching her game after game, season after season, I knew that I wanted to be like her one day. I wanted to be looked up to by a teenage girl who was just getting her feet wet in the sports media world.

As a woman in a male-dominated field, I've learned so much. I've learned history and statistics. I've learned how to effectively communicate and network. I've learned to use rejection and criticism to become better. I've learned to bask in others' glory and to mourn in others' defeats. But the best thing I've learned is the power a woman holds when she is in the minority.

Women bring a different perspective to the table. We see things differently and use those angles to elevate experiences. We open eyes that were shut and inspire closed-minds to open. Without women, sports would be trite and unlayered. And though we are making progress, there are not nearly enough women in the field.

Progress starts with inclusion. Inclusion leads to success. And success leads to inspiration. Persisting through the obstacles and burdens is necessary to even the balance of men and women in sports media. And although the glass ceiling is cracked, it must be shattered for that balance to exist.

I believe I can aid in that breakthrough. Hard work, perseverance and passion were things instilled in me at a young age. The practices and games I attended, the hours of studying and reading I committed to and the women on the sidelines I grew up watching have prepared me for this challenge. Of course, the goal is to become a successful sideline reporter, but I think the bigger goal is to pave the way for those little girls who will come behind me. It is my job to know the facts and report well. But it is my duty to inspire others and give them opportunities I may have never even dreamed of.

I refuse to fail those girls. I refuse to stand idle and cower to the intimidating norms women face in this field. I will continue to take steps in the right direction, no matter how small those steps may be. I may not know exactly how I will change this industry, but I know that I will, in fact, change it.

I've found myself questioning the significance of sports during times like we are experiencing today. Why are they so important? And why are they so important to certain people? Sports give you moments. Moments of hardships and of successes, moments of pain and of bliss. But life is nothing without those moments, and women should not miss out on them.

With my actions, I hope to tell those little girls exactly what my dad told me. You can be anything you want to be if you work hard enough. And to that I add, don't let anything stand in your way.