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The Last 32 Minutes

I can't breathe. I can feel the walls closing in around me and my chest refuses to fill with oxygen as I desperately fight for air. I run off the court into the dark hallway and think to myself, "Is this how it's all going to end? I'm going to go out by having an asthma attack in a hallway?" I shake my head and force a deep breath and walk back to the rest of a night that will stay with me forever.

I grew up in a tiny town and graduated with 28 other students. We were all somewhat famous in our farm town. Everyone was expected to be a four sport athlete and I was no exception. However, due to recurring injuries and extreme pressure from coaches, my senior year I only played volleyball and basketball. Volleyball had always been my passion in life; I was born to play. My senior year I led my team to sub state and after a devastating loss, I was less than excited about starting my last season of basketball.

Keith Sietstra was my varsity basketball coach and I had started for him since I was a freshman. We had a special relationship and I always called him Siets. I didn't have it easy growing up and my father was more than absent from my life. Somehow, Siets knew what I had been going through; he understood I was in pain and my world was being completely ripped apart. From the very first varsity practice that sparked the fire of my high school career, he gave me something to believe in, something I knew I contributed to and belonged to. Siets is everything you would want in a coach; amazingly inspirational, strong, focused, positive,

spiritual and someone you want to impress. He became more of a father figure to me than anyone else in my life. He recognized my rough edges, my fighting spirit, and my desire to compete in every aspect of my life. Siets harnessed my competitive drive, all the anger in my life and showed me compassion, taught me discipline, and pushed me to places I never imagined I could go. This man changed more than my attitude, he changed my life.

I was awarded a starting varsity spot as a freshman and I worked my ass off to keep it. I had a need in my heart to be more than enough for a coach I adored because I had never been remotely good enough for a father who continued to abandon and abuse me. If I'm being honest, our team had been the laughing stock of our conference for a couple years and under a new coach we were trying to rebuild the program, which is something that takes a lot of time, hard work and patience. Slowly but surely, we kept pushing forward and by my senior year, we were the team you didn't want to see on your schedule. With that territory comes the pressure to practice as hard as we could and stay in an attack mindset.

It was never just about basketball. Coach Sietstra taught me lessons I couldn't learn in a classroom, lessons I will carry with me for the rest of my life. He taught me to dig as deep inside of me as I can, to take the punches as they come, and to give more than I have at everything I do. He taught me to be the best student, player, teammate, and, most importantly, the best person I can be.

It would take me hours to explain all of the lessons I learned from this man. One that I specifically remember was during an intense conference game and if we won, we would be moved up in state rankings. The opposing team was one of our rivals. We had never lost to them and I was determined to keep it that way at whatever cost needed. However, you have to know me as a player to understand this lesson. I have a temper, I am stubborn as hell and I am so

competitive it scares people. I'm passionate about everything I do in life and it especially shows on a playing field. I'm outrageously aggressive and I usually ended up fouling out or having four fouls. There was six minutes left in the fourth quarter, I had four fouls and we were down by three. I was sitting on the bench and I said, "Siets, put me in. I can do this." And he looked at me and said, "Hope, you have four fouls... Not yet." I quickly replied with, "Siets... Come on! This is a huge game. Trust me!!" and I looked up at him, begging for a chance to show him I could keep my cool and be the player we needed, the player he taught me to be. He looked back at me like he was reading my heart and said, "I know you can do this Hope. I know the player you've grown into. Play with your head, not your heart right now. I have faith in you." I finished the game with four fouls, and we won by a single point after I stole the ball on a pass I couldn't help but go after. As I walked back to the locker room, I locked eyes with Siets and he pulled me aside and said, "I am so proud of you. You kept your cool, you waited for your chance and you showed everyone the Hope I know and love. Do it again." As I walked away, I knew he wasn't just talking about a basketball game.

As my final season was coming to a close and we started preparing for tournament play, posters with the Wells-Fargo arena and the words "DO YOU BELIEVE?!" plastered the gym and locker rooms. Siets drilled it into our heads that if we believed, we would be there. We had nothing to lose and we had more heart than any other team in the state. We soon had a ritual of touching every poster on our way in and out of the locker room as we headed to practice to work as hard as we ever did.

We discovered we would first be facing HLV, a conference team that wasn't any good and usually resulted in a blowout. However, that game wasn't a blowout and we went into overtime. The referees we had were probably the worst we had all season. I fouled out thirty

seconds into overtime on a call that made absolutely zero sense. As I realized this meant that I could possibly end my career sitting on the bench, I heard a commotion coming from the scoring table. My jaw dropped as I saw Sietstra out in the middle of the floor yelling at the referee. This man, mind you, never raised his voice towards his team in anger, always kept his cool no matter how bad a call was, and never expressed his frustration. As I approached them with tears in my eyes, our assistant coach, Stew, was pushing Siets back to his bench after he was given a technical foul, when Siets grabbed me in a bear hug, looked me dead in the eyes and said, “I will always have your back. No matter what, Hope.” Over the course of my four years of playing for this man, he had five technical fouls. Every single one of those technical fouls was given to him for defending me. We won that game with three seconds to spare and knew we had to focus because we would be facing Lynnville-Sully in the next round. Lynnville-Sully was also a conference team who had made it to the state tournament two years in a row, and just so happened to be our biggest rival. It was always toss up on who would win our games; our talent level was dead even.

Nerves built over the next couple of days as we were mentally preparing ourselves for the biggest game of our lives. Radio stations had put the word out this would be the toughest game for both teams on our way to the state tournament and people were planning to be there two hours before the game started. As we loaded the bus and touched our DO YOU BELIEVE?! signs, a silence fell over the twelve of us girls, who normally on a bus ride were chattering away. I sat in the same seat with the same teammate and listened to the same songs I did before every game. Like always, as we unloaded the bus Siets and Stew met us with high fives and we dropped our bags off in the locker room before taking two laps around the gym. We walked two laps as a team around every gym while our coaches put our jerseys out on the benches with a

letter on top of each jersey. I had my music blaring as I walked my laps and wondered what the letter would say tonight. Four years of games with letters and every letter was different.

As, Courtney, one of my best friends and co-captain, read the letter aloud like she did every game we all realized this was it. We had to believe, not for us, but for our coaches, the waiting gym full of support and most of all the sisters we had sitting on either side of us. Our coaches came in and we formed the circle, interlocking pinkies knowing that no one could break the circle we formed, waiting for the prayer to start. As we recited the Lord's Prayer as a team I couldn't help but thank God for the amazing journey I had with this family in front of me, but I wasn't ready for that journey to be over. We lined up in the exact same order as every game and ran into a gym that erupted with cheers when our feet hit the hardwood.

Six seconds left on the clock and the Hawks are throwing the ball into the corner. Time is standing still. I fly over to the girl with the ball with three seconds of my career remaining as my team just stares at me. We're down by six points and I know it's impossible as the last second ticks off the clock and the final buzzer signals the end of my somewhat amazing high school career.

The tears hit me as soon as I turn around and see my team... my sisters... my family. "But I believed", I think to myself. I believed more than anyone, maybe that's why it hurts so badly. As I walk back to the locker room for what I know will be the last time of my life, I can't stop the sobs escaping from my broken heart, the uncontrollable shaking or all the emotions coursing through my veins as I watch my dream slowly disappear out of my reach. As I am sitting on the bench in the locker room, I don't think I will be able to handle Siets walking in and knowing that his role as my coach is over. I realized later that even though the loss stung, what hurt the most was knowing I would be losing him as a coach and a chapter in my life was ending.

He tells the four seniors to stand together holding hands and instructs the rest of the team to make a circle around us. Then he has the team put their hands on us and I feel his hand on the back of my neck as my heart breaks wide open. I can't help but give in to the sobs that are wracking my body as Siets prays over us. He asks God to take the sting away and to bless us in more ways than we thought possible. I almost fall to my knees when he thanks God for letting him be a part of our lives and granting him the honor of knowing us so well, but Siets's hand on my back holds me upright.

I left the locker room for the last time and walked back into the gym to see my small town community and the rest of my team, all waiting to see us four seniors walk out holding hand. I was beyond moved when everyone turned and started cheering for us. I made my way around the crowd, receiving hugs, words of encouragement, and crying with teammates and close parents. I caught sight of Siets and my mom discussing something. I asked my mom later what he had said and she told me he had stopped her with tears in his eyes and said, "You have a truly special, amazing girl and I am so honored." I turned away from her with tears in my eyes and thought, "No, Siets, you're the special one. You changed my life just the way that God planned."