

**2021 NIAAA SCHOLAR ESSAY FEMALE RECIPIENT**  
**SPENCER SHIELS, CHARIHO HIGH SCHOOL**  
**WOODRIVER JUNCTION, RHODE ISLAND**



I always thought of athletics as just a game—each one a trapeze to overcome, a simple ultimatum to tame. I never deemed it as once useful, and, in turn, I rendered it useless. I always believed it wouldn't ever change. It was bound to stay the same. It was just a blatant contest in a simulation of true challenges. It didn't offer anything.

I was told, though, that athletics granted everything. I heard that it was the foreground of what was to come later in life. If I was still a fourteen-year-old, I'd have argued the falsity of that claim. In truth, I would've written a full essay in denial of it. But, it's the most real statement I've come to know.

I've been engaged in athletics since I was little. I lived a life structured around it, playing on several teams, travel, recreational, and school. It was a regular, daily routine—go to practice, play a game, come home, repeat. I was so accustomed to it that I failed to acknowledge its significance. It wasn't until high school that I experienced an epiphany: athletics is everything you believe it isn't—lessons, memories, nostalgia. It shapes you in a way unimagined. I regret not grasping that claim earlier, and I've become aware of just how wrong I was.

I learned how to overcome adversity. I learned how to deal with it. I've always been repeatedly cued of my short height. It's something I can't change, so I let my performance in sports change the mindset of others—my opponents, teammates, and coaches. I didn't allow myself to be controlled by it, and athletics prompted me to vigorously work while everyone else talked. I persevered. I ensured people that I was there to stay, that I was determined, because a stable, optimistic attitude alone can resolve some of our greatest issues. I recognized the value of credence. The more you believe in others, the more they believe in you. It's epidemic!

In the unexpected death of my soccer captain, and teammate in 2017, athletics is what brought our community together into a close, knit environment. I watched her collapse on the ground that night of devastation. I didn't think I had the power, the willingness to play again, but the support of other athletes, and athletic teams drowned that uncertainty to the bottom of my mind. I've returned to the playing field. I didn't succumb to the melancholy of her fall at the 30-yard line; I accepted it.

I discovered that athletics isn't about winning. We aren't divided into "winners" and "losers"—rather, it's the opportunity to develop as an individual, and mature as a team. It's the ability to continue pushing yourself until the edge of breaking, until you can get past your limits, and ultimately, create new ones. It is not the triumph that builds character, but the failure that humbles, and strengthens us.

I've been given the chance to institute friendships I wouldn't have otherwise, and I can say that they'll last a lifetime. I'm able to welcome, lead, and shape new teammates, as my upper class captains once did, and I'm grateful.

Now, as a seventeen-year-old, I regard athletics as not an enemy, but a partner-in-crime, as it guided me towards success, contentment, and prosperity when I believed it was too rare to come by. It is not just a mere game, anymore. It is a trapeze that leads you to the biggest game of all: life. It brings you through moments of failure, and victory in preparation. It is the blueprint of your future.