

BODY x LENS

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1 As the Light Shines Again

By David Youn

The thick musty air with sweat envelops my entire body and clings to my skin like a damp blanket as I open the door. The dusky, dim light creeps through the windows beneath the banners, barely keeping the rims visible. A smooth, polished sphere covered with glossy brown leather echoes as it rhythmically bounces across the vast, empty gym. The unique synthetic scent of a fresh, newly opened ball pierces my nose telling me it's missed me, reminding me of my first interaction with the familiar scent. The trivial dimples on the ball's surface feel much bigger under my fingertips than they once felt. Today is the first time in three months I've stepped on this clean, wooden court.

After a sudden sharp noise, like the sound of a popping balloon, my legs began to tremble in pain. I fell to the ground. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling were the only things staring back at me. My eyes instinctively closed for a split second. As my eyes blinked open again, the lights began to fade as



familiar faces started to swim into my view. Now all I could see were the faces of ten people, all with conspicuously mixed emotions: shock, care, anxiety, and curiosity. With the sound of a crack on my knee, it was not only my ACL and meniscus that were torn, but all my plans for that summer were also brutally ripped like a corpse of an animal getting pulled and twisted by a group of ravenous hyenas.

Regaining my consciousness, I was met with two unfamiliar faces covered with scrubs and masks in front of me, asking if I was awake with soft, muffled voices. The short hand of a clock was pointing at four - eight whole hours had passed. Then, my anxiously wavering eyes caught an artificial respiration aid in front of my

mouth and a beige-colored leg lost in a sea of compression bandages. My subconscious effort to move the leg yielded no results – it was almost as if this mummified figure was no longer part of my body. Uncontrollable breaths began to hasten and become frequent under an artificial respiration aid. Sweats and tears subconsciously trickled down my face. This very moment of the 27th of June 2024, I realized how the sweat and tears, once believed I was so used to, can be so painful.



My feet are on the same floor where I laid three months ago, now standing upright with the same thick musty air surrounding

me. It was that smooth and deceptively innocent sphere that had tripped me into despair, a despair that stole my ability to walk and darkened the light I once had. Now, my light for basketball is not so dim. In the shadows of the gym, I palm the ball with my right hand and step onto the free-throw line. I become conscious of my breaths, then take my shot. The lights on the ceiling shine stronger and brighter than ever as I hear the clean and loud swoosh of the ball.

2 The Cost to Move

By Eunseo Choi

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and caught my breath. It was just past six in the morning, and I had finished my third lap around the school field. Ten years old, ponytail bouncing, I was already ahead of the world, one lap at a time. After a quick sip of water and a precise tug at my hair, no strands allowed to fall, I pushed off for another round. But within minutes, a sharp, burning ache shot through my knees, a jolt with every landing. My thoughts went blank, vision washed in white. Still, I kept running. I told myself it would pass, that maybe pain was just part of the process. But when the ground began to spin and my legs threatened to fold beneath me, I finally stumbled to the edge of the field. I sank, fingers clutching the grass, trying, failing, not to cry.

For as long as I can remember, I understood myself through movement. My sportsman dad would nod approvingly as I cycled through tennis, swimming, equitation, soccer, cross-country, badminton, and dance. But it all



I began with ballet at the age of seven. I still remember the teacher's voice drifting above the piano, "five, six, seven, eight, en bas, en avant, en haut, à la seconde," as we floated across the studio in our tutus. Though I loved how every move was deliberate, I was too timid with the idea of performing. The warmth of eyes on me, even if loving, felt unbearable. So, when the teacher announced we would be performing *The Nutcracker* for our parents, I quit.

By age ten, ballet was behind me,

but I hadn't stopped moving. I ran, swam, and played weekend tennis with my family. I liked the feeling of sweat on my arms and the stretch of my lungs after a sprint. At eleven, not ready to let dance leave my life entirely, I turned to modern dance, which was looser, freer, and for a while, filled the space ballet had left behind. But the pain crept back. It stayed for days after long runs or intense practices, disappeared, then returned stronger. Though we went from hospital to hospital, no one found anything wrong. "You are just growing," they said. So I rested less and kept moving, just slower.



Eventually, I was diagnosed with Osgood-Schlatter disease. A bone fragment in my knee was pressing where it should not be, common in adolescents who play sports.

The doctors told me it would fade once I finished growing, but it didn't. What settled in was frustration from persistent ache, the worst feeling of being betrayed by the body you once thought you could trust. The body that had been the clearest way I understood myself now felt like something I had to give up. I let go of ballet, then modern dance, and then, slowly, other sports I thought I could still hold onto.

For a while, when I stopped dancing altogether, I missed it in every possible way. So when someone mentioned that Korean traditional dance might be gentler on the knees, I tried, though that turned out not to be entirely true. At first, it felt unfamiliar. The movements were slower, heavier. Instead of a tutu and pointe shoes, I wore a hanbok and held a fan. However, the pain is still not completely gone. Some days, it lingers. But something in me believes this might be my last chance to keep dancing, and so I can't stop. I am still learning how to listen to my body, where to pause, when to breathe, and how

not to push until it breaks again. I can no longer leap, relevé, or chase elegance, but I now search for honesty. Now, when I dance, rather than trying to impress anyone, I hope the audience will watch me and see a girl who knows the cost to move and what it means to keep going.

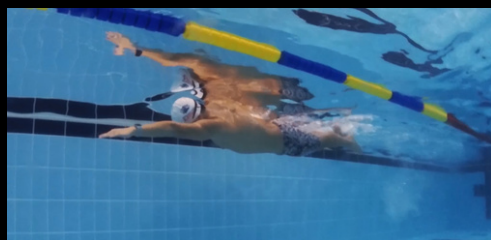
3 Beyond the Seconds

By Junghee Yu

The strong desire to move faster and the feeling of torturous pain pressuring my lungs, today, I urge to move faster than yesterday. The game, distinguishing the one to receive all the spotlights and the one to be forgotten, comes to an end as the clock stops ticking. The only mentor that would chase me and keep me motivated is the floor that differentiates me from yesterday and today. What makes swimming so unique is the endless perseverance. It's been 7 years since I started swimming. When I was young, the motivation for me to swim was to lose weight and stay healthy. However, at this moment, I lead my swim team in school. Proudly putting my swim cap on with my school's logo engraved on it, and standing behind the diving block, this is where it gets heavily intimidating, worried whether I can manage today's training session.

Perseverance is what I believe is the optimal promise that I had to make to swim faster.

As I strenuously touch the wall, the moment I lift my head above the water, I see the result that reflects all the vigorous training I've gone through. However, it can't be more depressing than seeing my time with a number added to it. When I see the time that has been reduced, the great sense of accomplishment and growth mindset sets me up and motivates me to swim faster tomorrow. On the other hand, the number added to the time brings frustration and discouragement. It makes me feel reluctant to swim



and doubt my confidence in achieving my personal best. I became hesitant to compete and lost confidence. Hence, many of generally taught me was the reward that I make and being rewarded for what I deserve.

Sometimes, the sense of frustration and discouragement allows me to step up to the next level of speed, and this brings me back into the pool again,



waiting for the effort to be rewarded with that shortened time, even though it is a millisecond faster than the previous time.

What swimming taught me was more than a perseverance mindset. 7 trainings a day, morning and after school. We as a team build a strong attachment to each other. We share the pain and tiredness together makes us feel like a family. However, it sometimes leads to a dispute when it comes to how much we value our teammate. Unlike any other sport, the number represents the person's journey as a swimmer. And sometimes the person gets left out because of their speed and by no one acknowledging the

person's effort, which was unfortunately not represented in a number. A swimmer who was substantially talented but with bad character, I thought he was the swimmer to be beloved and favored of; however, I, who thought making a rational decision for the team was the right thing to do, turned out to be wrong. The talented swimmer who looked down on the other swimmer led my team to a dispute. Myself believing that ignoring the situation and making a rational decision of ignoring the talented kid looking down on the other would grow our team the stronger. I found that this is not what I wanted, and swimming taught me to be decisive and to be rational for greater gain.

4 The Moment Before Release

By Ryan Choi

When I first held the longbow, the string taut with promise, I was twelve years old. My life's rhythm was shaped by Gukgung from that point on. As ankylosing spondylitis began to lock my joints and anchor my legs in agony, archery provided a means of maintaining my stability and uprightness. Without sights, stabilizers, or mechanical assistance, the act of standing motionless, taking a deep breath, and firing an arrow became a form of resistance to the boundaries my body attempted to set.

In gukgung, precision emerges from intuition. You learn to pay attention to your breathing, balance, and the subtle language of your muscles when you play the bow. There's no certainty the arrow will strike its mark, and somehow, that unpredictability brought me calm.

Every shot required total presence. Even though the outcome was uncertain, I had to

have faith in myself and the motion as it developed. I learned from Gukgung that we never get definitive answers in life or in archery. Every decision has risk, and indecision itself is a decision. We frequently forfeit the opportunity to proceed when we decide to pause or back off, yet refusing to give up means keeping going even when it doesn't seem like you'll succeed. It takes a kind of courage that defies logic to make that quiet, purposeful progress.

By playing Gukgung, all of the tension building and holding just before release started to feel familiar. I was able to identify it in situations outside of my comfort zone, when I ventured into uncharted territory, initiated an endeavor without knowing its outcome, or entered areas where I wasn't sure I belonged. My body, immobile due to illness, discovered a new form of stillness in the bow. I vividly recall that it

was the kind of stillness that prepares you to act with composure and purpose even when you don't know anything. It wasn't the stillness that comes from giving up.

What started as a sport became the way I learned to endure pain, stay persistent, and act with precision even when success wasn't certain. That mindset will stay with me.

5 More Than an Athlete

By Lauryn Laabs

I started gymnastics simply because my parents wanted me to gain a sense of balance, but as a child, I couldn't yet understand how deeply it would shape my mind, body, and heart. At four, I started attending gymnastics classes, drawn in by the fascination of watching my older sister Madisyn compete. The coaches had noticed me playing with the equipment and decided to invest in my potential. Just two weeks later, I competed in my first competition, only to forget my floor routine and leave the floor in tears.

At eight, the head gymnastics coach convinced my parents to homeschool me so I could participate in two-a-day practices. I was taken out of a social environment and put into a competitive gym for around 10 hours a day, where my mental and physical health underwent many changes. This same year, I fractured two of my metatarsals on a new skill I was working on. I

took a week off after being put into a boot and on crutches, but I still showed up to practice the following week to maintain my strength. Unfortunately, my coaches already had their plans, those that included me taking off my boot to walk on my tip-toes across the balance beam. "Lauryn, get on the beam, you haven't done anything in weeks...I thought you wanted to be the best," yelled Coach Debbie. At this moment, there was no saying "no." I was just a little girl trying to pursue my dreams, being manipulated into thinking this was the only way to achieve them. Stepping onto the beam, I felt a heavy sense of dread, my calloused hands were dripping sweat, and my limbs felt lifeless under the blinding lights highlighting my shame. I put my arms up high and began putting one foot in front of the other, quickly wiping away each tear as it rolled down my cheek, hoping no one would see me this vulnerable. Thankfully, Madisyn saw this and interfered,

reminding Debbie I had an injured foot. Coach Debbie hated being wrong and hated being told off even more. As I watched from afar, I could see the disgusted look on her face as I stepped off the beam.

Years later, as a level nine gymnast, there was a skill on the beam I was petrified of. Stepping on the beam to try this skill was like I was standing at the edge of a clear river I wanted to cross, yet there was an invisible barrier blocking me from doing so. The current of this river looked gentle, but the water was endlessly deep; the more I focused on crossing, the more distant I felt. My coaches didn't believe in mental blocks, as they were raised in an environment where fearing a skill was not tolerated. These beliefs let my coaches force me to stay after practices, interfering with my break time, to work on this skill. After a while, they brought my dad in to "motivate" me. The problem wasn't that I was not motivated, but rather the fear I had felt from the injuries I had already endured from the skill.

Day after day, I was threatened and constantly screamed at by Coach Debbie. The only time I found peace was when she was making someone else's life miserable. The love I had felt for gymnastics was put in a chokehold as I began to feel defeated by everything I did.

By twelve, I had reached level 10, I started going to college gymnastics camps, I was third in my age group in the state of Texas, and I could feel the dream of becoming a collegiate athlete on my fingertips.

Or so I thought.

The pain in my back, hips, and the mental drainage started picking away at me. Another fractured foot and another discouraging coach. I couldn't seem to get away. I made the dreadful decision to retire from my biggest passion, knowing my four-year-old dreams would be crushed.

My father, sister, and brother had moved to South Korea during COVID for my father's job, leaving

my mother and me behind. With gymnastics behind me and my heart searching for purpose, I made the difficult choice to join them and start fresh. I entered my freshman year in a new country, feeling like a beginner, not just in sports, but in every part of my life.

That winter, I joined my school's cheer team, eager to stay connected to athletics. Soon after, Coach Claire, who coached the Korean National Cheer Team, invited me to train with the team. I didn't speak Korean, but I didn't hesitate. What mattered most to me was connection, and for the first time in years, I had found a coach who saw me as a whole person, not just an athlete. Coach Claire listened when I said I was in pain. She didn't push past my limits; she helped me grow beyond them. She reminded me what it felt like to be supported and not used.

Later that year, I joined the track team. Every race, every practice, I used the determination that was built in my childhood to excel in everything I attempted. By my

sophomore year, I became the team captain and now hold six school records.

Gymnastics will always be part of me, but now I love it from a distance. All the hardships and challenges I faced gave way to resilience. The pain once forced on me by others is now a strength I choose to carry with intention, pride, and hope for all future accomplishments.

6 Earned in Silence

By Jaeun Hong

After I transferred to this school, I've heard the school volleyball team is at the helm. As a student who has been interested in sports, I couldn't avoid applying for Varsity. Thankfully, I got in while bypassing the fierce competition among participants.

When the first practice as a varsity came up, one of the successive varsity players shouted out to me by saying "Are you here to play dodgeball?" I was shocked, and it kind of motivated me. In fact, the reason for joining as the varsity member wasn't really special. It was to acknowledge that I'm a sports person and I have enough skills to be admitted. While I don't believe in the existence of 'genuine' inspiration, it was certainly weak to endure my hardships: receiving bad comments from upper varsity members, overcoming the lack of volleyball skills, and improving my physical ability. Coming all of these simultaneously, I was immensely pressured – by

both academic and athletic burdens. Surviving this deep hole wasn't easy. The answer was practice, practice, and practice. When the gym opened, I went and played volleyball with the dorm students. They weren't varsity players, just a group of students looking to blow off steam. But for me, they were a lifeline. In their messy games, nobody judged my awkward catches or my serves that kept hitting the net. They just played, and that freedom allowed me to drill the basics into my body.



My days fell into a tough, repetitive routine. Before the sun was up, I was in the weight room, forcing my muscles to build the power they lacked. The school day was a busy

rush, my mind switching between lecture notes and how to do a proper jump serve. Evenings were spent in the library until it closed, fighting through textbooks and essays, my mind heavy with the weight of my goals. But my day didn't end there. After the library closed, I would slip back into the empty gym, which became my training ground.

With just one ball, I'd spend hours practicing alone. The squeak of my shoes on the court and the thud of the ball against the wall was the sound of my nights. I would practice my approach, the three steps that had to be perfect, my jump, pushing until my legs burned, and my swing, over and over, until my shoulder screamed and my palms were sore and hurt. I wasn't driven by a love for the game, not yet. I was driven by a strong need to silence the voices, both inside and out, that told me I wasn't good enough.

Slowly, almost so I didn't notice at first, things began to change. The ball started to feel less like a strange object and more like part

of my arm. My serves, once wild, began to hit the corners of the court with a satisfying sting. During those games with the dorm students, I learned to read a spiker's shoulder and guess the angle of the attack. My dives for the ball became less like wild flailing and more like planned moves. I was keeping rallies going that would have been over instantly just weeks before, moving with a natural feeling I didn't expect.

This growing confidence, however, was a fragile thing, easily broken the moment I stepped into team practice. The senior who had first mocked me still watched my every move with a disrespectful look. "Look, Dodgeball is getting better at throwing," he would sneer to his friends after I hit a strong spike during a drill. The comments still stung, but now they had a hint of annoyance. I was no longer just the awkward new player; I was a constant challenge he couldn't just ignore. My improvement was a problem for his position at the top.

The turning point came during a practice match to decide the starting lineup for our first official game. I was placed on a team playing against the main players, including the senior who had made my life a living hell. The first few points were nervous moments. My passes were shaky, my timing was off. His "I told you so" smile from across the net burned into my focus. Then, their setter tossed a good pass to him on the outside. He rose into the air, his form perfect, ready to slam it down. Everything seemed to slow. I remembered the countless hours against the gym wall, the burning in my legs from thousands of practice jumps. I moved without thinking, my feet planting perfectly. I leaped, my hand meeting the ball at its highest point.

The sound was a loud hit, and the ball hit the ground right in front of him. A total block. For a moment, there was only silence. He stared at the ball, then at me, his face a mask of disbelief. The coach blew a sharp whistle, looking at me for a second longer than usual.

It wasn't a smile, but it was recognition. I hadn't won the war, not yet. But in that moment, I knew I was no longer just playing a joke. I was playing seriously.

Editor's Note



As an athlete myself, cheerleading always starts with smiles and laughter. But what I've come to realize over time is the emotional and mental toll an athlete can face over time. For me and my experience in cheer, I've come across so many cheerleaders with hidden struggles that can range from **mental** wellbeing to **physical** wellbeing. I wanted to create this digital magazine: **BODY x LENS E-Zine**, to shift the **lens** that shines on athletes and their performances to the challenges and hardships that hide behind the smiles and performances. In hopes to spread the message that smiling **after** the truth is fine, this digital magazine covers athletes - from around the world - and the challenges they faced in the process of doing their sport - or, as some say, what they love.