

## Adapting to Change as a Student Athlete

By Cole A. Becker '21

2020 is my annoying younger brother. I was on a spring break trip in Panama City Beach, Florida near the end of my Junior year when I got the news. From that moment on – the typical moment when your sibling comes home from the hospital - everything changed. I was comfortable with my life: I had the next year and a half of it already planned out. My next year was going to be identical to every other year I had experienced. I've never really thought about how much my college experience has been one big pattern – a form or model proposed for imitations. There are different kinds of patterns. A routine is a form of pattern, and I knew exactly what my routine would be for the remainder of my college experience – until I didn't.

I'm a student athlete at Hampden-Sydney College – a small liberal arts college in Southern Virginia. The ability to play American football in college was one of the reasons I chose to come to this beautiful, small town. I had so much to look forward to at the end of my Junior year. I wasn't able to experience any of it. There would be no spring football. There would be no waking up at 5:00 AM on the Saturday of our school's Greek Week to practice on our turf field. There would be no retired seniors watching that practice, per the tradition. These things didn't mean that much to me at the time because I thought that everything would be back to normal after a couple of weeks. It didn't mean that much to me at the time, but it does now.

I left for Panama City Beach with the intentions of coming back in a week, and I did: to clean out my room, seven weeks before the semester ended. My time as a Junior had come to an abrupt end. Everything that I looked forward to in the Spring was now nowhere in my mind. Everything that I was used to was abruptly cancelled.

I remember the car ride home from Panama City Beach. I was actually excited that our school administration had decided to finish out the year online. After having experienced how the rest of the semester went, how my may-term classes ended, how my life has changed indefinitely, I would have felt differently during that ride home. At the time, I was excited. The pandemic gave me an extended spring break, and to be honest that is all I thought we were going to get: an extended break. I didn't think that COVID-19 was going to have the impact that it had. As the weeks went by, I started to realize how serious the pandemic was. I think everyone else did too. People across the globe had already gone through so much with the virus during the spring of 20' that it wasn't a shock when I received the news that our student athletes wouldn't be allowed to participate in sports during the fall. The news only confirmed what I thought to be true – We would be dealing with this pandemic for a long time.

My coaching staff told us that we were going to prepare to play in the Spring. I had doubts that we'd even have the opportunity to do that. Nonetheless, my coaches and team captains emphasized that we had a lot of individual work to do in order to come back and have a successful season. Over the summer, each player was sent a full workout regimen. The only problem was that all of the gyms in my area were closed down. I had to improvise. Instead of going to the gym, I would fill up a

backpack with a couple weights, and add a blanket for padding. Sometimes you have to improvise. It wasn't ideal, but it was a way to somewhat do what my coaches wanted me to do. Most of my summer time was taken up by May-term classes, backpack-workouts, spending time with family, and working for family friend's home-building company. Before I knew it, it was time to come back to school.

My friends and I expected to be home with our families within three weeks of in-person classes. Many other big university students fulfilled my expectations. But to my surprise, we never closed down. I don't know whether it was being away for so long, or just the amount of changes made to how our school-life would be (which allowed us to stay in school), but I felt like a freshman my first week. Everything was new. My experience with football was exceptionally different. In a typical year, we would have football camp in August, and proceed to play a ten-game schedule. Our last game would be in early November. We would have until the Spring before workouts and Spring practices began. Camp would start in August, and from there it's basically wash, rinse, repeat. Well, Not this year.

This year, the team couldn't meet for two weeks - we were quarantining from each other. We began with meetings. Eventually those meetings progressed into workouts. Eventually those workouts progressed into full practices. It felt like we were having Spring ball in the Fall. With everything we had been through up until that point, I was concerned with our playing chances. It was hard to not have doubts. I didn't want to upset myself or have false expectations about having a final season of football. Of course, I worked hard when it came to practices or lifts. I prepared as if we were going to play – it was just hard sometimes. Eventually, everything that we were doing became the new normal. I was able to get back into a routine. I knew what to expect throughout my day.

On a grand scale, I am able to recognize that, as a current full-time college student, I tend to follow daily routines that help me accomplish what I need to accomplish on any given day. Routines can and will be interrupted. Before the pandemic, I would feel completely thrown off if my routine was heckled. I would feel as if I couldn't accomplish anything else until I made up for what I missed.

If there is one lesson I've learned from living through this pandemic, it is that nothing is certain, and that although change can make life hard, we are very capable of adapting to that change. Our plans don't always work out the way we intend them to. I had a picture in my head of what my senior year at Hampden-Sydney would be like, but that picture was ripped apart. Patterns – routines – are interrupted: change happens, and we are really good at adjusting to change. It's like having an annoying younger brother – it sucks, but it's not the end of the world.

