

The Game Knows

“The Game knows.” Throughout my career as a college softball player at Alabama, I heard that statement hundreds of times. From teammates, from coaches, and even from family. There was always a part of me that wanted to believe that the Game really *did* know. That it saw all of the extra work I put in. That it appreciated my genuine happiness for the teammates who played over me. That it sensed just how badly I wanted to succeed. And because of that, my time would eventually come. On the day that my collegiate career came to an end, if you had asked me whether I believed that the Game knows, I probably would have said yes. It wouldn’t have been a lie, but my words would have lacked conviction. Throughout my career, I worked hard. Very hard. I tried to do things the right way and be a good teammate. And yet, things never really clicked for me on the field. So yes, I thought that “the Game knows” was a nice idea to cling to, but it didn’t ring true for me at the time. Ask me that question today, however, and I will look you dead in the eyes and tell you with an unwavering voice that the Game really *does* know. You can’t fool it- it sees your heart. It knows who deserves to be rewarded, and it will do so accordingly. So what changed? Why am I now a believer? Well, let me tell you a story.

I arrived on Alabama’s campus in the fall of 2010, making the 10 minute drive from my parents’ house down the road. This was what I had dreamt of for as long as I could remember- to wear the script A on my chest. I was excited, nervous, and full of hope. My classmates quickly became my best friends (#SS forever). I was working my butt off in the weight room, coming to practice early, staying late, and loving every minute of it.

I was a catcher, and there were two junior catchers on the team who were both wonderful players and even better people. They taught me so much, and I truly loved

getting to learn from them (shout out to Kendall Dawson and Olivia Gibson- BS da best). I didn't play much at all during those first two years- a few pinch hit opportunities here and there. The two of them handled almost all of the catching responsibilities. I missed being on the field every day, but I knew what I signed up for when I decided to play at Alabama. I knew that catching time would be limited in the first two years. It didn't matter to me- I just wanted to WIN. I figured that I would spend those first two years learning, getting stronger, and improving all aspects of my game. By junior year, I would be *ready*. Ready to lead the infield, ready to manage the pitchers, ready to get the job done at the plate.

I have never worked as hard as I did during those two years. I improved, but not as much as I hoped that I would. As I said, I didn't play much, but I stayed the course. I tried to be a great teammate and contribute from the bench through positive energy and enthusiasm. We ended up winning the National Championship my sophomore year, and it was the most rewarding experience of my life. That team was truly something special. So special that one of my dearest teammates wrote a book about our journey that year- *Finish It* by Cassie Reilly-Boccia. READ IT. You won't regret it.

Coming off of the National Championship, I was more determined than ever. We had two catchers coming back- myself and a sophomore, Chaunsey Bell. I knew that both of us would be given opportunities to prove ourselves early on, and I was going to give it everything that I had. I had played the role of supportive teammate for two years and really took pride in that. It's so important. Every team needs role-players who take pride in their job on the bench. But now, I wanted to be on the field more than ever. The Game knew, right? It had seen all of the hard work over the past two years. It knew my heart. In the back of my mind, that little phrase gave me hope that it was finally my time...

I'm not exactly sure when, but I remember getting a call from my coach the summer before my junior year. "We are adding a transfer to your class. We know that y'all are very close, but we trust you to take her in and make her a part of your family."

Absolutely. No-brainer. I had full trust in our coaches and knew that they would not bring anyone into our family that didn't belong there. I wasn't sure who the transfer was, but I was excited to find out.

A couple of weeks later, I was sitting at my desk at my summer internship when I got a text from Murph. "Molly Fichtner is going to be a part of our family! Here is her number. Please reach out to her and make her feel welcome." I excitedly got on RollTide.com and read the article about Molly's transfer, and my heart sunk. While Molly had played shortstop at her old school, the press release said that she would probably be working at catcher here. I can't explain the feeling that I got- I just remember thinking that this was going to change everything. It was such a selfish reaction, and it is the moment that I am most ashamed of from my four years at Bama. Well, it did change everything. Molly arrived on campus that fall and I immediately knew that she was special. She fit in perfectly with our team and quickly became one of my best friends. On the field, she was stellar. She swung a great bat and consistently threw baserunners out stealing. She beat me out, plain and simple.

That year was a roller coaster of emotions. I was so happy that Molly had ended up at Bama. She belonged on the big stage. She was one of the best people I had ever met, with a heart bigger than her home state of Texas. On the other hand, I was heartbroken. While no spots in the lineup are ever set in stone, and I kept working hard, I simply knew that my next two years were going to be much like my first two. If coaches read this, they will probably cringe at that statement, and they would be right in doing so. You never want your players to give up on themselves. There are so many stories of players who turn it around their senior year and are basically a

completely different player. If I was a coach, I would preach that to all of my non-starters. You are never stuck in that role. There is always something you can do to get better, and don't ever stop trying. I knew that Murph still believed in me.

However, looking back, I think that there was a reason that I got the "feeling" that I was going to remain a role-player. When I began to accept that my job as an upperclassmen was going to be leading from the bench, I was able to truly commit to it. I kept working hard, still came early and stayed late, but my motivations for doing so began to change. Instead of being motivated by the desire for personal success, I was motivated by the desire for *team* success. I needed to work my butt off so that I could demand that others do the same. I needed to keep getting better at blocking and framing so that the other catchers were pushed to get better. While I had always been a "team player" on the surface, I had finally morphed into a "team player" at heart. There were still times during those two years that were hard. As an athlete, you always want to be on the field. It's something that's inside of you- a burning desire that doesn't just go away. Tears fell on occasion. It didn't happen often, but sometimes I would wonder why it just never clicked for me on the field, even though I tried so hard and cared so deeply.

Now, I'm two years removed from the game, and I wouldn't trade those moments of sadness and frustration for anything. You know what? That's life. Sometimes, you are going to put every ounce of your being into something, and it's not going to work out exactly the way you wanted it to. **Get over it.** No, I never became a starter. But I did have the best experience of my life. I learned lessons that I never would have learned otherwise. When I walked off the field at the Women's College World Series in 2014 after Florida beat us in the championship series, I had no regrets. I was truly thankful to the Game for everything it gave me, and I didn't expect anything else from it. I had experienced so much team success at Bama, and that truly was enough for me. Little

did I know, the Game would give me the biggest personal reward of all two years after I walked off the field.

I chose to go to law school after I got done playing. The legal market is pretty tough right now, and jobs can be hard to come by. If you want to work in a law firm, the best way to secure a job for after graduation is to get a Summer Associate position. Most firms hire law students the summer after their second year of school, with the intention of extending a full-time offer after the summer is over if you do a good job. Competition for these positions is fierce and the interview process is lengthy.

After living in Tuscaloosa for my whole life, I have been itching to move to a big city. When it came time to start applying for Summer Associate positions, I knew that Washington, D.C. was my top choice geographically. The problem was that it can be pretty hard to get your foot in the door at D.C. law firms. They do not typically recruit students from Alabama, tending to get their Summer Associates from more “prestigious” schools. Side note: I would put my school up against any in the country and am so thankful that I ended up there. But I digress.

A family friend of ours is a partner at arguably one of the best law firms in the world, and I expressed my desire to end up in D.C. to her. She graciously offered to set me up with another partner at her firm who knew a lot about the D.C. market. I was thankful for any help that I could get, and booked a flight up to go meet with him. I had nothing to lose- I wasn't even thinking about asking this man for an interview. He was just going to give me some advice on how I should go about applying to smaller D.C. firms that might be willing to interview a student from Alabama who was not at the top of her class. As it turned out, he ended up being the Hiring Partner- in charge of hiring all of the firm's Summer Associates.

Well, lucky for me, he happened to Google my name before meeting me for breakfast. When he did, he found a Tuscaloosa News feature article that was written about me during my senior year. The article basically told the story that I've been telling you here: that I was a hard worker and always tried to be a good teammate. The Hiring Partner brought it up at breakfast, saying that those are the qualities he looks for when hiring law students and that it's not often that he has tangible proof that someone possesses them. He then proceeded to ask me "if I was opposed to interviewing with them." Um.. NO!

The firm flew me back up to D.C. the next week. I had five 30 minute interviews with different attorneys. The first four went very well. I walked into my last interview with one of the attorneys that was on the recruiting committee (so it was really important that this one went well). He was a big sports fan, so we immediately started talking about softball. He asked me if I had played much, and I truthfully answered no. Then I got THE question: "What did you learn from that?"

There is not a single interview question in the world that is more suited for me than that one. I proceeded to explain to him for over 45 minutes precisely what I learned from being a role-player throughout my four years at Bama, rather than a starter. Resiliency. Selflessness. How to take pride in your role, whatever it may be. What it really means to put the team first. I walked out of his office knowing that it was the best I had ever done in an interview.

Two days later, the Hiring Partner called and offered me a job. I am now living in D.C. for the summer, working at the firm, and loving every minute. I am surrounded by former Supreme Court clerks, attorneys at the very top of their fields, and genuinely wonderful people. On paper, I have no business being here. I do not have the same level of qualifications that my fellow Summer Associates have. Yet, here I

am. All because I chose to keep working hard even though I wasn't seeing the results that I wanted. My coaches and teammates noticed. A reporter chose to care about a story that almost no one else would. And then, of all things, someone Google'd me. Do not tell me that the Game doesn't know.

So, to any players out there struggling with being a role-player: keep working hard. Keep putting the team above yourself. Keep trusting your coaches. Believe me, I know that it hurts at times. But the Game sees you, and it *will* reward you. It won't always be in the way that you wanted or pictured it, though. Sometimes the reward will come years later, in a way that will have a much greater impact on the course of your life than getting more playing time ever will. And I wouldn't have it any other way.