

May 16, 2022

To whom it may concern,

My name is Abigail Dop and I am a recent graduate of The Ohio State University and former student-athlete at Saint Francis DeSales High School in Columbus, Ohio. I am writing to you today in support of House Bill 492.

Competition has always been a huge part of life. Growing up with two older brothers, I learned to compete from a young age just to be taken seriously. It was this competitive spirit that made me an athlete for the next 12 years, and helped me play three sports in high school, win a state championship, and graduate first in my class. While competition was always a part of my life, it wasn't always about beating everyone else. Sometimes, it was about beating myself.

My life on paper has been seemingly perfect. I excelled in the classroom and on the athletic field, I was active in student council and other student organizations, and I was always surrounded by a large group of friends, teammates, and classmates. Perfection quickly became an expectation for everything I did. When the weight of these expectations eventually became too heavy, in the winter of my junior year of high school, I found myself competing with new beasts named Bulimia and Orthorexia. While there were many circumstances I felt I had no control over, I made sure I controlled my body. Including what I ate, how often I worked out, and how many calories I burned.

My meals were all pre-planned in a calorie counter I had on my phone, and every one of those calories was worked off later by either excessive exercise, forcing myself to throw up, or taking laxatives to erase what I indulged in. I showed up early to practice and stayed later to run. I participated in a team dinner, then escaped to the bathroom to get rid of my meal. I spent my lunch periods in an open classroom or the school chapel to avoid the questions in the cafeteria on why I didn't touch my food. I experienced panic attacks when I knew my food had been cooked in oil or my condiments weren't sugar free. I was living with a mind that had a short temper, and I took the frustrations out on my body.

My family couldn't understand why I was so angry all the time, snapping at them in an instant and throwing tantrums about problems that to them seemed so miniscule. I never found the courage to speak up to anyone, including my family and my coaches while I was in the eye of this storm. I was afraid of being perceived as weak, of losing playing time, as being too much work for them. These problems persisted through my senior year of high school and into my freshman year of college. In October of 2018, I sought counsel from various doctors. I was recommended for The Emily Program, an outpatient eating disorder treatment program, but I never attended. I was still too afraid of how I would be seen by the people I cared the most about impressing. I moved out of my dormitory after the first semester of college and back into my parents' home for the remainder of my freshman year, where I was able to begin my healing journey. I sought resources from the Student Wellness Center at Ohio State as well as the advice of Registered Dietitians.

Looking back, my eating disorder took so many valuable opportunities and experiences from me. I missed out on enjoying team meals and getting to know my teammates outside of the field. I denied opportunities to play lacrosse at the collegiate level, an experience I will forever wish I could have had. I missed out on getting to know and appreciate my brothers, my mom, and my dad, because I was too consumed by the demons in my head. I missed out on getting to meet new people and be involved in Ohio State's campus in my first two years, a vital time for creating friendships and joining student groups. It has also taken away the joys of food and exercise, which should be seen as nourishment for my body, but are now viewed as forms of punishment.

The introduction of House Bill 492 is a game changer for student athletes. It would provide the resources and training for coaches to recognize the warning signs of mental health issues and properly address them. In my case, these warning signs would include participating in an unnecessary number of extra workouts, disappearing during or after events in which food was provided, changes in concentration, and low energy. I could never and would never place any blame on any of my coaches or my parents for not intervening, because I know they were not fully aware of the warning signs and resources to address them. I was a female athlete at the hands of male coaches, who may not have fully understood issues of eating disorders and body image issues in female athletes. The training that House Bill 492 would require will surely bring awareness to those cries for help in future instances.

Knowing and recognizing the warning signs in athletes can help give them quick access to the resources and help they would need. Athletes spend a substantial amount of time with their coaches and team and look up to their coaches as leaders and mentors. Many programs also have volunteers and assistant coaches that are younger and closer in age to the athletes. I know I would have felt more comfortable opening up to my assistant coach who was only a few years older than me, than to my head coach, schoolteachers, or parents who were sometimes decades older than myself. It is vital that all coaches receive the tools necessary to direct athletes in the direction of help at the first signs or conversations of a mental health struggle.

House Bill 492 will provide coaches with a steady framework to recognize and address signs of mental illness, and the passion of athletes, parents, coaches, and all others involved in ending the mental health crisis will fuel the engine of change in our communities.

Sincerely,

Abigail Dop

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