

How soccer rolled back into my life



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I've been doing sports longer than I've been talking. I started swim lessons at eight months old, biking at three years old, skiing at three and a half, gymnastics at four years old, soccer at five, golf at six, basketball at seven, softball and tennis at eight, volleyball at 12, cross country and track at 13.

In elementary school, it's easy to do multiple sports because of the slimmer time commitments, and for a while that was all I did outside of school. I've always been able to pick up new sports quickly and with decent skill, coming from a naturally athletic family. My mom and grandpa both ran track in college and my dad did a wide range of sports from gymnastics to rugby during his childhood and still participates in a men's tennis league, golfing,

and biking for fun.

When I was very young, I wanted to be an Olympic gymnast. Then in 6th grade, I fractured a growth plate in my wrist, was out for three or four months, decided I had fallen too far behind the rest of the girls at my level, and wouldn't be able to catch back up. I've always put a lot of pressure on myself to be the best in everything I do, and that notion is only exacerbated by sports. The whole premise is competition.

Pressure on little kids to do sports and do them well seems to stem a lot from the fact that humans are most athletic when they're



In 2016, Nayera places 2nd in the floor exercise at a gymnastics meet. She competed in 5-7 meets every spring.

young. The typical peak of athleticism is between 20 and 30 years old, according to Wired. Olympic athletes can be as young as 11 years old.

But

even while I was doing gymnastics and trying every other sport under the sun, soccer has always been the sport for me. From scoring goals on my YMCA team in kindergarten to sharpening the skills necessary to be a defender on my club teams and being selected team captain for multiple seasons. Soccer is the perfect combination of athleticism, intelligence, and comradery in one sport. I was never the best in my age group but looking back I realize how much I liked that challenge.

Soccer goes hand in hand with running so in some way I've always been running. But I'd never seriously run before the 7th grade cross country season. I'd always been the best at the PACER test in my elementary classes, an accomplishment that I will always be proud of. But when I won the city meet both years in middle school and did just as well in the middle and long-distance events in track, I thought I'd found my calling.

I stopped playing soccer in 2019 to focus on my freshman year

cross country season. I enjoyed running because I was good at it, and I didn't think I'd ever find the same success with soccer.

My cross-country coach in high school told me running was a lifelong sport. I was excited and relieved knowing I didn't have to rely on golf when I'm 50 years old to keep me entertained. I hate golf.



Nayera stands with her grandparents after the 8th grade city final cross country meet. She placed first by over a minute.

My success continued through the fall 2019 season, and I made state my freshman year.

When COVID hit in 2020 and track got canceled, I was disappointed, but at the same time felt relieved that I wouldn't have the pressures of competing. Expectations were set high for me after such success in my first high school cross country season.



Nayera and her teammate Eleanor stretch at the starting line before the 2019 cross country state meet. The two girls raced in Kearney, NE.

I still ran a lot during the spring but began to realize how much I missed playing soccer.

In May, my assistant soccer coach whom I'd been playing for since 2nd grade reached out to my mom asking if I would want to come back that summer. When I went to tryouts at the end of June, I was playing soccer like I'd never left.

Fall of my sophomore year, cross country was canceled due to COVID restrictions for OPS sports, which ended up working out well because I could focus on soccer. We went to a few out-of-town tournaments and I met a lot of new girls that I had fun playing with. Club soccer only goes from June to February because high school soccer begins in the spring season, and everyone gets too busy with that.

I was excited for my 10th grade track season because I knew high school track would be a lot different than middle school. I trained well and PR'd in the 800m but didn't have what it took to make it to state. This was a huge blow. I knew everyone was expecting me to make it at least that



Nayera's team pictures on her first soccer team. The team was through YMCA coached by a classmate's dad.



After winning a tournament in spring 2017, Nayera and her teammates admire their medals. The girls played for the Omaha FC '04 girls' team.



Nayera's soccer team poses for a picture after winning a tournament in Kansas City. These were the last games Nayera played in before quitting soccer to focus on running.

far and I had higher hopes for myself too.

As I tried to move on, I began training harder than ever over the summer for my junior cross country season. I also met back up with my soccer team and ultimately decided I would play club soccer at the same time as cross country that fall. Having cross country practice five days a week plus a meet is physically demanding on its own, but adding

soccer three times a week and out of town tournaments twice a month is incredibly daunting.

But it never came to that point.

Soccer and running came screeching to a halt for me when an MRI in August 2021 told me I had a third-degree stress fracture in my left femur: the culmination of too much impact on my legs and low iron levels in my blood. After a long and grueling

summer of high mileage weeks and the hefty commitment of club soccer, I was informed by the orthopedic doctor that it would all be for nothing. I wasn't allowed to run for at least 3 months.

Just like that, my junior season was running off without me, and I was left hobbling behind on crutches trying to catch up.

It was the déjà vu feeling I'd had a year and half before when my freshman year track season and then my sophomore year cross country season got cancelled due to COVID. There had been a lot of pressure on me for that upcoming fall season and I would be lying if I said it wasn't a small weight off my shoulders to not have to compete anymore.

But of course, there were mixed emotions.

I knew a lot of the team would be looking to me as a leader, being an upperclassman now, and I was looking forward to breaking my PR and possibly the school record and returning to state. Even though I couldn't run, I still went to most practices, pre-meet yoga, team dinners, and meets. Basically, all the fun, with none of the difficult or nerve-racking parts.

I had a lot of fun cheering everyone on even when I knew I should've been running with them. I did a lot of physical therapy and as soon as I was cleared, I slowly started getting back into running, lifting, and soccer.

During those three months, it finally struck me how much more



The Omaha United Soccer club '04 girls soccer team poses for pictures. Nayera (farthest left) was still on crutches in fall 2021.

I missed soccer than running. I could feel the major difference of physically not being able to play rather than choosing not to play. Whatever it was, I had finally decided soccer would be my primary focus and something I wanted to continue after high school.

In February I traveled with two different teams to tournaments in Memphis, TN, and Phoenix, AZ. I had a blast playing and my legs were feeling strong and faster than ever. It was hard to believe I had just been out for three months recovering from an injury.

I strongly debated playing soccer at school this spring but knew the track team was



Nayera takes on a defender in Arizona while guest playing for Omaha United's '03 team.

relying on me as I was one of only two total girls distance runners trying out. A week into the season, though, I got a terrible pain in the bottom of my foot. It hurt a lot to run and even just walk around school during passing periods.

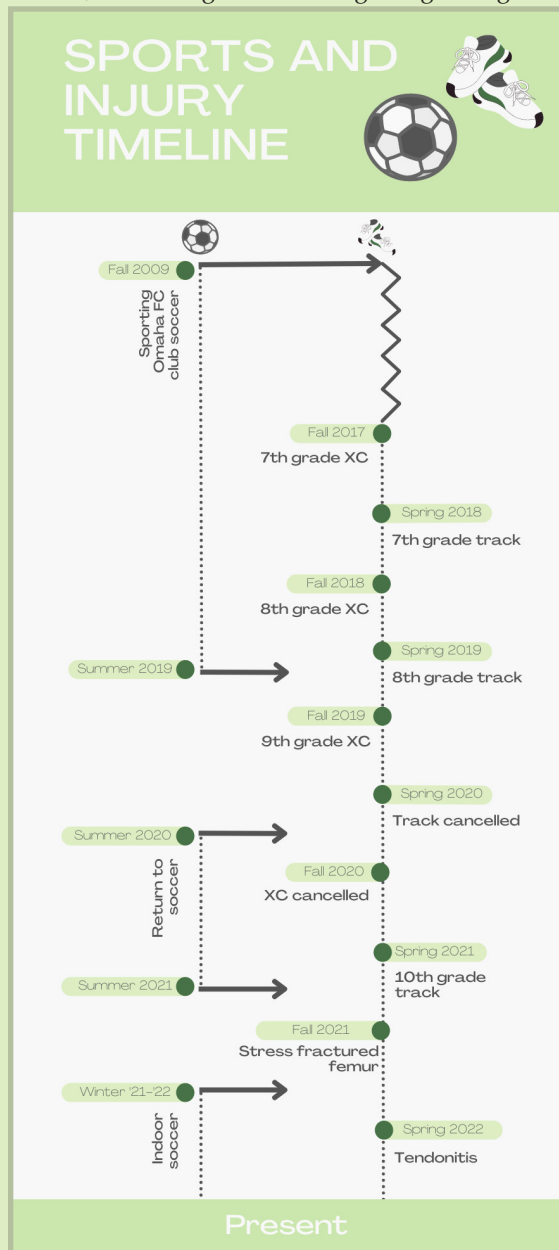
At the end of March I got another MRI and though I was afraid of another stress fracture, it turned out to be tendonitis. I missed the next three weeks resting and deciding the best path of recovery. My orthopedic doctor ultimately said I was cleared to run, even though there might still be pain.

Even after a month of not playing soccer I was already itching to get back. My hopes for running well this season are dwindling along with my enjoyment of it. I still don't know exactly what my next steps will be, but I know this whole journey has taught me a lot about myself. I still have a lot to learn but I know I have time to figure it all out.

I hope other young athletes can learn how to block out some of the pressure from their parents, coaches, teammates, and even themselves, so they can seek out where they truly find happiness. It's also important not to just chase success if the process of getting there isn't enjoyable.

There's an important difference between struggling through adversity to reach a better version of yourself and struggling through just to come out worse off and more unhappy. A gold medal or qualifying for state isn't worth it if that's the only thing keeping you afloat.

Everyone faces setbacks, I've certainly had my fair share, but I now know how much there is to learn from them.



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