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### Professional Loser

*“The art of losing isn’t hard to master” -Elizabeth Bishop*

I know what you are thinking. Why would I write about being a loser? Most people would highlight the times they saw victory or prevalence over something, but not me. This is about the art of losing. It is the battle between the natural instinct to want to succeed and choosing to be content with a different outcome instead. Want to know more about being a loser? Lucky for you, I am a professional.

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Game 1:

The gloves are shiny, sticky, and incredible at gripping the soccer balls as they come hurling in their direction. Each shot is a new opportunity to prove themselves. A short burst of water is blasted onto their palms before the game begins. The water works in the elastic foam to increase their grip. As the referee blows his whistle to start the match, the gloves clap together and prepare for the battle ahead. The first shot comes and flies past the gloves with so much speed that they have no time to react. Fortunately, the shot misses the goal just barely, but it leaves the gloves alert and ready. Moments later, a second shot flies toward the gloves again. Feeling more prepared, they react quickly and make contact with the slick Nike soccer ball. Once in contact with the gloves, the ball stays permanently stuck in its grip. The gloves are in control

of the field. The whole team's energy rides on the motivation and determination the gloves give off. Like a ripple, the drive to succeed surges from one teammate to the next from the goal.

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*The following responses are from three interviewees who were questioned about the subculture or professionally losing. In the order of their responses: Nathan Witte, junior collegiate goalkeeper; Emily Scheese, collegiate women's soccer coach; Madison Dack, author and senior collegiate goalkeeper.*

**Q: What is the biggest takeaway you have received from your involvement in soccer or sports?**

A: I have been able to play with a bunch of guys that are fun to be around because of soccer and it has given me the motivation to stay in shape and get outside every day (Witte, Nathan).

A: A team is a big amalgamation of personalities and so part of being a soccer coach is figuring out how to turn up that chemistry because not everybody is going to be like you so you have to find a way to work with people. They won't be exactly like you, have the same values, or think the same way so trying to get them to cooperate and get out there every day to put their bodies on the line is something I have taken away from the experience. The management process as a coach is just as hard as the actual coaching. It's a people process, so I think that that's one of the biggest takeaways from soccer. People underestimate how multifaceted coaching can be (Scheese, Emily).

A: The biggest takeaway that I have received is probably the ability to lead others, how to work as a team, and the ability to get through tough situations and keep going. Being

involved in sports has allowed me the opportunity to learn skills that I will use for the rest of my life (Dack, Madison).

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I've been a soccer player since I was young. I grew up playing in recreational clubs, eating orange slices at halftime, and chasing the ball aimlessly around the field. I didn't particularly enjoy running and I wasn't super talented with the ball, but I did feel a natural calling toward the goalie position. I had taken up the role quickly and was doing well too. While the idea of soccer balls shooting toward you can be scary, I liked the challenge. Pretty soon I was becoming a beast in the goal. All through my teenage years, I continued to play soccer as a goalie in both high school athletics and a competitive club team. There had always been a strong emphasis from coaches and teammates to win which created a lot of resulting pressure to perform at my best every game.

Standing in the back of the net for a collegiate women's soccer team now, everything has changed. The competitive, determined team I had transitioned from was much different than this new one. Now I am playing against teams with rosters double the size of mine and athletes much faster and more talented than ours. I am doing my best to adjust to the new challenges that come with this new team and the new expectation of loss. Maybe if I train really hard I can perform well enough to prevent losing. At least that's what I told myself.

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Game 8:

Some of the elastic foam on the fingertips of the gloves have begun to tear up. The gloves are halfway through the season now and have endured more shots than expected. Some of the stick is wearing away and it is being compensated for using more water and spit. Dirt and turf

have continued to layer upon the pair and the gloves begin to call out for a wash. Despite the wear and the slight stink, the gloves are still performing the best they can. They remain strong after making saves low along the rough turf and high in the air against the crossbar. Currently, the biggest struggle the gloves face occurs after each goal is scored against them. The journey to retrieve the ball from the back of the net feels like an embarrassing walk of shame that cannot be avoided. It feels lonely, dark, and reeks of hopelessness. It takes more strength to make the retrieval than it did to shoot into the air in an attempt to make the save. Each failed save attempt ends in a brutal meeting with the ground. Gravity shows no mercy to the gloves as they continue to reach absurd heights in the air and then inevitably come crashing back down to the turf. The gloves begin to develop a new kind of strength with each goal against them. The gloves stay determined to keep working. They can't let their team down. They cannot give up.

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**Q: How would you say losing affects you?**

A: Losing freaking sucks. Especially because I can see how much the team cares and wants it. When you are prepared to lose a game it doesn't affect you as much, but when you really want it, it hurts way more (Witte, Nathan).

A: Losing allows you to reflect on yourself professionally. Like how do you reflect on the kind of experience that you're providing for the players in terms of their ability to grow and learn about themselves even if they're not seeing the numerical successes out there? So I'm still constantly learning and growing (Scheese, Emily).

A: Losing used to affect me a lot. It used to really bring me down and I would be hard on myself for the result, but after having experienced a lot of losses, I have learned to grow from the losing experiences, make the best of it, and focus more on my own goals rather than the outcome at end of the match. I began striving to keep my team's energy up no matter the score and to remain calm and collected no matter what (Dack, Madison).

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There is truly nothing worse than having to retrieve the ball out of the back of your own net. It is a defeating feeling, but I have to learn how to lessen its impact on me. One game at a time I am learning to shift my mindset from a focus on a traditional statistical victory to a win that is measured by my own standards and rulings. This looks like setting a goal to not let a specific player on the opponent's team score or only allow so many goals into the net. I am choosing to focus on the growth and development of my own team instead of letting the goals against me bring me down. It is a really challenging task, but it is helping me make a positive impact on my team and their mindsets as well. This mentality is one that has started to leak into other parts of my life as well. This process of losing over and over, but choosing to continue on is an anecdote that can be found in media, work life, relationships, and more. I am developing strength in persevering losses on and off the field. It is developing me as an athlete and as a person. Is having strength in losing a trait worth attaining? Will others understand or judge me for this way of thinking? Perhaps it could even become a contagious lifestyle to those around me.

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Game 16:

It's almost the end of their time. The gloves have reached their last game and they look worn and tired. The once bright color is now faded, the sticky grip now barely holds on to the

ball, and the clean plastic aroma has been overcome by the smell of sweat, dirt, and spit. Struggling to fulfill their purpose, the gloves stretch for every shot possible. While they still make the gruesome trek to recover the ball from the net after every goal, this pair of gloves has developed a new skill that has kept them driven through the season. After reaching down to scoop up the dark turf-stained soccer ball, the gloves find themselves helping their teammate back up to their feet. They make a wave in the air to the two fans cheering them on in the stands. They encouragingly slap the back of the defender beside them and remind them that no matter how many go in the net, they will continue to stand strong in the goal. Sitting on the sideline after the last whistle has blown. Their journey has ended, but they don't feel like they are done yet. Will this fight continue outside of college? The gloves have learned to lose and fight on over time. They have done their service and will continue to work as long as they are called upon.

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**Q: At the end of the day are you content with what you do and accomplish on the field?**

A: Yes, I feel accomplished. I've now played two full seasons of collegiate soccer which is not something I ever would have expected and I'm grateful to have gotten to do it (Witte, Nathan).

A: I'm not a "throw the hands up and sit back" kind of person so I think after our season with the win I wasn't ready to sit back in my chair and put my feet up. It was more like "okay, what can we do next to build?" I don't think I'm a very "I'm okay with this, I'm good now" kind of person.

That's not how I'm built. Let's keep going and keep improving and trying to be better  
always

(Scheese, Emily).

A: Yes, I am, because I'm creating an environment that is fun and can hopefully develop  
even when I'm not a part of it. I got the opportunity to play a sport I love at the collegiate  
level which is something I will never get the opportunity to do again so I am quite  
thankful for that (Dack, Madison).

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The battle has ceased. The games are over. Does this mean I am no longer a loser? Will I  
always be one at heart? Is being a loser such a bad thing? There is a lot of uncertainty, but I know  
one thing is true. I have learned and grown more from the losses that I faced than I ever could  
have with an undefeated record. The professional loser mindset will get me through the days  
where nothing goes right and I can't seem to find a win anywhere I look. My hope is that others  
around me will see this strength and be curious about where it comes from. I hope that their  
curiosity will be an opportunity for me to share about the art of losing. Anyone can be a loser,  
but not everyone will be able to capitalize on the challenges it provides like I have learned to and  
benefit from it.

Works Cited

Dack, Madison. Personal Interview. 16 Sept. 2022

Scheese, Emily. Personal Interview. 30 Sept. 2022

Witte, Nathan. Personal Interview. 29 Sept. 2022