

A Fallen Athlete

By Patrick Bergstrom

To Rick Reilly

PART 1

For many years I have read your articles in *Sports Illustrated*, and they've been an inspirational part of my life. I know many athletes and readers across the country share this same feeling. You have an amazing ability to touch readers' hearts and minds in just a short, one-page article. Some of your articles have brought tears to my eyes. You also undertake some of sports most controversial subjects; I truly admire this.

My hopes are that you read my story and that it has a similar affect on you or anyone else who reads it. I am by no means an accomplished writer but I believe in my heart that I have a story that must be heard. I am about to discuss an issue that is not touched on in competitive athletics. This very serious and life-threatening subject is also misunderstood in our society and often distorted by the media. This is a factual account of what can happen to an athlete when their competitive career comes to an abrupt halt. This true-life narrative goes beyond the glory of victories on the field and describes what happens off the field when the roar of the crowds go silent and there are no more games to be played.

Many people see two paths that can be followed in life. One is which you grow up, establish a meaningful career, get married, and “live happily ever after.” The other path is lonely, dark, facing struggles with addictions or some type of horrifying disorder. No one deliberately follows latter this path, it more or less just happens. It is genetic, a gene that can be inherited--some get it and others don't.

I am a 24-year-old former Men's Division III lacrosse player. I am one of those people with that gene and was dealt the hand to go down the second path of darkness. I am writing you from an eating disorder recovery center in Florida. I will be here for a minimum of 30 days, but will stay as long as it takes. I will be spending my 25th birthday in treatment, fighting to get my life back. To understand how I came to be in this place in my life, you must know where I came from. My name is Patrick Bergstrom, and I am a male athlete struggling with an eating disorder; this is my story.

The Glory Days

Like many other young boys growing up, I was a sports junky. As soon as school was out, I enthusiastically threw myself into some sport. I always dreamed of being a professional athlete and, yes, I was always reenacting those famous last-second game-winning shots replayed on Sports Center. I was a typical young kid except that I grew up with a lacrosse Dad, no baseball allowed, just lacrosse. As far back as I can remember, I had a lacrosse stick in my hand. I loved it, and I became pretty good at it too.

In high school, I leaped right past the JV team and started on the varsity with my older brother. For some reason or another, lacrosse seems to attract brother combos--like the famous Gait brothers or the Powell's. Some of my happiest memories involve connecting with my big brother for Bergstrom-to-Bergstrom goals. We built a true "best friend" bond on the field that carried over into real life. I admired my older brother, and he was a true mentor to me. This helped me to become the athlete I am today. One of the saddest moments for me on the field was playing my last high school lacrosse game with my brother. Yet, at the same time I was so proud of him because he was heading off to college to play D3 lacrosse.

I wanted and dreamed of doing just that same thing. Lacrosse was in our blood, it was like second nature to the Bergstrom's. Unlike my brother, I was a small athlete, weighing 135 lbs and standing a mere 5 ft 6 in. However, I conditioned my body to be as strong as those who were much bigger than I was. I was not the fastest athlete, but I made up for that with heart and determination. I always had my stick in my hand. When I had a free moment, I was working on my stick skills. I studied the game, and developed a true understanding of how I could play it. I was a smart player, yet I was very aggressive. Lacrosse soon became my life and my identity.

I put immense pressure on myself to become the best I could be. I developed quite a "swagger" as many called it and could carry the team on my shoulders. I was the go-to

guy under pressure, the team captain, and the person people came to when they needed help. Lacrosse to me was an escape from reality. My world off the field could be in chaos because of problems at school or girlfriend issues but, on the field, nothing could touch me. Lacrosse was an opportunity for me to express my feelings and emotions. Like the saying goes, “leave it all on the field,” and that’s exactly what I did. When that first whistle blew, nothing else mattered. For 60 minutes I was free to express who I was and compete to my best ability.

I wasn’t blessed with great athletic talent, but I worked to become the best. By the end of my high school career, I had become the all-time leading scorer in school history, made the Maryland Senior All-Star Team, and was nominated for Public School Player of the Year. As Dick Vitale would say, “I was living the dream, baby!”

I played lacrosse at a small high school in Maryland, so I wasn’t very highly recruited for an athletic scholarship. I made the decision to attend the University of Tennessee to pursue my education in business. I did play club ball there but it just wasn’t the same. I missed that drive to compete at the highest level so I transferred to a small D3 school in Delaware. While at Tennessee, my Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, so transferring closer to home to play lacrosse seemed to be the best decision. I could play the sport I loved and, at the same time, be closer to home to support my Mom.

I was so excited to begin my college lacrosse career. I had such high hopes of success for myself, as did many others who knew me. When fall ball started, I

encountered the same issues as in high school. I wasn't big enough or fast enough. I'd be a millionaire today if I received a dollar for every time I heard that! This did not trouble me, in my heart I believed I could overcome anything I faced. I couldn't have been so wrong. All I had ever experienced up to this point was success and glory. I had never been injured and hardly spent anytime on the bench. I had never experienced failure nor did I know what it felt like. Needless to say, my college lacrosse career was anything but spectacular. In my three collegiate years of lacrosse, the team went through four head coaches, and I saw minimal time on the field. The coach who had recruited me to the college left in the fall, and we were without a hired head coach until the season started in the spring. The spring season went well although I had to battle both back and knee injuries.

Near the end of my first season there, however, things took a devastating turn. I was just starting to earn more playing time and my relationship with the new head coach (Coach Reynolds) was really clicking. Even though I was a freshmen and small, the coach saw something in my ability on the field. Just as things were starting to look up for our team, we received an alarming phone call that Coach Reynolds had died suddenly in a surfing accident. This was on Easter Sunday in 2003, the day before my 20th birthday. The entire team was overwhelmed with pain and confusion. There was talk of canceling the season, but we played it out anyway in his honor.

Coach Reynolds was a remarkable person with the drive to succeed. He made everyone around him a stronger and better person, both on the field and off. He had one saying that has stuck with everyone from that team, “just get it done.” I will never forget those words, and it really wasn’t until being in recovery that I truly understood the meaning of those three short words. The meaning of those words will have more meaning in the conclusion of my story.

My final two seasons in college were somewhat of a blur. I did earn a starting spot my junior year but suffered two concussions, sidelining me for several games. I finished the season with somewhere around twenty points. This was not what I expected to produce for my team as a starting attackman. Being a strong-willed person, I did not let this affect me. I trained hard over the off-season and came prepared for my final year. However, my senior year I became a utility player, bouncing from position to position on offense. I saw very little time on the field that year, despite my best efforts to improve. In practice, I held nothing back. What I lacked in size and speed, I made up for with hard work and great field presence. I worked great off ball, and rarely created a turnover. I conditioned myself to be in top physical shape, which allowed me to finish in the top in all sprints in practice.

Still, everything I did seemed to do get overlooked. As the season neared an end, I saw less and less time on the field. We did make our conference playoffs that year but lost the first game. I spent my final lacrosse game in tears on the bench, watching my team

lose as that final whistle blew. Understanding that our offense was not working, our assistant coach had tried to get me into the game several times but it just didn't happen.

The rest of the seniors tried to get the head coach to put me into the game and, yes, he finally yielded with just five seconds remaining with the ball down at the other end of the field. I told the coach that out of self-respect I would not step onto the field. I was too embarrassed and felt this would disregard what I had tried to accomplish during the past three seasons. Five seconds into my last game was not going to justify three years of not missing one practice, two concussions, one knee injury, and one severe back strain. If playing five seconds was his way of saying thanks for a fine career and was his final coaching instructions to me in my last game, I simply was not going to listen. A few choice words were exchanged between us, and he told me to get off of the field. I chose not to give him that respect and stayed with the team. My friends and family were in the stands that day, just like every game, for support whether I played or didn't. I was pretty distraught at this point. Every senior played in that final game except me. I felt like I had let everyone down, my team, my parents, my high school, myself. Despite the hard efforts that I had made to become a great college lacrosse player, it never happened. My final memory was of not even stepping onto the field during my final lacrosse game. The storybook ending to my lacrosse career was anything but that.

All those dreams I had just a few years before were abruptly ended. The goals I had set for myself going into college were shattered. I had a lot of bitter feelings. In my

heart, I truly believed I should have been on the field that final game. I really did not know how to handle the situation. I had never experienced anything so painful.

What I did at this point did not seem drastic at the time, but I would come to realize the true psychological effects it had on me. I did not dwell on my lacrosse career, or so I thought at the time. I made an abrupt decision based solely on emotion. I cleaned out my locker, graduated from college with a marketing degree, and walked away from the sport of lacrosse. I didn't pick my stick again for more than three years.

This may seem meaningless to most people, but I know any athlete who has experienced failure on the field can relate. I turned my back on the one thing I loved because I felt it betrayed me. For so long, lacrosse was my escape from reality. Lacrosse defined me as a person. It was my way of expressing myself and dealing with life's many obstacles. This one small act of picking up my stick three years later has become symbolic in my life and my future. Thinking back on that final game, I have many regrets. Do I blame the coach or myself? No, it was an event in my life that happened.

After recently reading the book *Failing Forward*, by John Maxwell, I realized this was the start of a series of negative events where I failed backward rather than failing forward. Failure is an inevitable part of life. Nobody goes through life mistake-free. However, it's how a person handles their failures that determines the path they will take in life. You can fail over and over again and accept failure. Thus, you become stuck in the

past and you and failure become one. This is the choice I made after my final lacrosse game, although I couldn't see it at the time. The other alternative is to take failure, learn from it, and become an achiever. I challenge everyone to read this book and to learn from my experiences. As you will soon learn, my unfortunate judgment to accept failure led to a downward-spiraling chain of poor decisions that directly thrust me into destructive situations. If you learn anything from my story, remember--failure is in the eye of the beholder. Most people who succeed in life do so because they fail first. Commit this to memory: failing backward leaves you trapped in the past whereas failing forward brings vast opportunities for the future.

Beyond the Glory

What happened between that last lacrosse game and now is what led me to my present condition and situation. After graduating from college, I took the summer off and lived at the beach to map out my future. I was in the real world and I wasn't really prepared for it. Sure, I had a college degree and a 3.1 GPA, but I had no real-time experience. College teaches you what you need to know to get your degree, but it really doesn't give you the life skills you need to make that transfer from school to the work force. I went through numerous interviews and received the same response each time. "Patrick, you have great qualifications but we're looking for someone with more experience." This was frustrating since I had no experience because I was fresh out of college. You would think being able to balance school and being a college athlete would

be enough to give a young starting professional a chance. Apparently not. Finally, I took an inside sales job in Baltimore, Maryland, for a large electronics distributor. I was so excited to start my first job, and the pay was great! However, the job was painful. I went to work everyday, and spent eight hours “cold” calling on contractors, trying to sell them the same thing the other guy was.

I hated the job. It beat me up emotionally, and it began to take its toll on me outside of work. I began drinking more and was downright miserable. This is where my life began to slip out of my control. I had no avenue of escape from my problems. I was losing control of everything around me. This was something I had never experienced, I was so used to being in control of every situation. When things went wrong, I turned to the sport of lacrosse. With lacrosse being absent in my life, I had no way of coping with my feelings or problems. I began eating less and binge drinking more.

Eventually, it got to the point that I would purge after eating to cope with the stress. I didn't realize what I was doing until my girlfriend left me. My weight had dropped from my usual 145 lbs to 130 lbs. My girlfriend leaving me was an instant wake-up call. I had a problem and I needed help.

I left my job and ran home to the comfort of my parents. My family was very supportive and we sought professional help. My family is one of the main reasons I am still here today. They have truly played an inspirational part in my life. Always keep your

family and friends close because you can't go through life alone. I met with a therapist many times during the next month and I thought my problems were solved.

Strangely enough, this event in my life also occurred just before Easter. On Easter Sunday, I made the decision on my own to be baptized and I accepted God into my life. Oddly enough, Easter Sunday also has a very spiritual and symbolic meaning to my future as well. I was both healthy and spiritually refreshed so I quickly raced back to Baltimore and took another job. My problems were surely in the distant past.

My girlfriend and I got back together and things seemed to be moving along effortlessly. What nobody knew was that I was secretly struggling with some type of eating disorder; I really didn't even understand what was wrong with me. Not being able to secure a position with a marketing firm, which was my major in college, I took a job with a recruiting firm in Baltimore. Not being able to do what I wanted with my career was very frustrating. I was basically just going through the motions at work and struggling at night. The drinking continued as my weight progressively decreased. I began shutting myself out from everyone, including myself. I really didn't know who I was anymore. My girlfriend made the decision for the second time to walk away. It just wasn't healthy for her to be around me even though she truly cared for me. This had a major emotional affect on me. I was angry at her but more so at myself for losing control.

I left work again and escaped back to the comfort of my family. This time I hinted at the possibility of having an eating disorder and a drinking problem. Nobody seemed to understand how a guy could have an eating disorder. Nobody had even heard of a guy having an eating disorder; this was something only women suffered from. This is what people told me, and this is what you hear from the media.

Honestly, I was not even sure I had one either. I had no feelings of wanting to lose weight nor did I think I was fat. However, what I did not know at the time is that most eating disorders are not even about food or weight. Eating disorders are mostly about stress and feelings. Not having this vital information, my family and I mapped out a plan and I went to therapy with the main focus on the binge drinking. We all thought that the main cause of my problems was the alcohol abuse. I wish this had been the correct diagnosis—it would have been more easily treatable. I had no insurance so my parents had to pay for outpatient therapy. This had a positive effect on me, and I was able to control my drinking. I didn't need to drink, yet I used it as a coping device or as an escape tool, much like I had with lacrosse earlier in life. Things started looking up for me. My confidence came back and I got a good job in retail management, which I really enjoyed. I put all my drive into work and was good at it. Soon enough, I was promoted and I was starting to enjoy life again. Still, lingering somewhere in my mind were unresolved issues and the lingering problem of a possible eating disorder.

My girlfriend and I were reunited and our relationship was stronger than ever. Love could not keep us apart. I began working out again and everything just seemed to fall into place. Life is great and simple when things go the way you want them to. It seemed inevitable, however, that things were just too good to be true. Feeling very confident and content, I moved out of my parent's house and moved closer to my girlfriend. I took an awesome job as a department manager for H & M in the Annapolis (Maryland) area. This was a big step for me. Again, I was out on my own and had the opportunity to succeed within my grasp.

What I did next was the biggest decision I had ever made in my young life. I purchased an engagement ring and surprised my girlfriend with a marriage proposal at a restaurant. It was truly perfect; I had arranged for the ring to be brought out at the end of dinner with her favorite dessert. She was completely shocked and what happened next was the happiest moment in my life. She broke down in tears of joy and said yes. Words could not describe the sense of elation I felt. I called everyone I knew, I was so happy to be alive! That one moment surpassed any single flash of glory I had ever experienced on the lacrosse field. I was going to spend the rest of my life with my best friend. I couldn't have asked for a better blessing or honor. I was truly back on top in the game of life.

Things just seemed to be falling into place. Our relationship continued to grow as we set a date and began planning the wedding. The big day was set to be on May 2nd, which was less than 7 months away. This was such an exciting part of my life!

Still, although everything on the surface appeared ideal, something seemed to be lingering inside my head. Something was holding me back from happiness. I couldn't seem to figure out what was wrong. My new job was going great, I had a beautiful loving fiancé, and the wedding planning was moving along with ease. I actually even enjoyed being involved in the planning, which most grooms seem to try to avoid. It was going to be a picture-perfect wedding.

A bright future was upon me but something was holding me back. I began to put all my drive and energy into succeeding at work. For eight hours, five days a week, I was at the top of my game. However, outside of work is where I seemed to struggle the most. If you knew me at work, I was a hardworking, driven employee who had no complaints. I guess I was able to shut the unknown out during the hours I was at work.

This routine began to have a huge effect on my personal life. I would leave work exhausted and emotionally drained. It was like a wave of pain would consume me, and I would completely shut down. I became a completely different person, I became someone I didn't recognize or want to be. I tried to hide it as much as possible, but it got to the point where I didn't have the energy to fight it. At this time, even though I couldn't see it, the eating disorder had taken complete control of my mind and life. I started to distance myself from everyone around me, including my fiancé.

In my heart I knew something was drastically wrong but I didn't know how to face it. I was ashamed, scared, and disappointed in myself. I spent many sleepless nights. I just could not bring myself to face the underlying problem that was slowly killing me. I did not know how to confront it nor did I know if anyone would understand. I thought to myself, I'm a guy and this does not happen to guys, especially strong athletes.

However, therapy has taught me that eating disorders attack people with three distinct qualities. A person who struggles with an eating disorder is usually very intelligent, successful, and usually has an athletic or competitive background. The competitiveness inside me would not allow me to cry out for help. So what did I do? I let it completely consume my life, and I tried to fight it on my own. The pain, shame, and utter embarrassment were just too much for me to handle. With lacrosse still being absent in my life, I had no coping mechanism. Again, I turned to alcohol. I began binge drinking to medicate and hide the inner pain I was feeling. It got to the point where I was getting no rest so I would drink just to fall asleep. Now, I really had no control, and I'm not even sure if anyone around me realized my downward spiral.

My fiancé knew, but she just did not want to say anything; she didn't want to lose me. It was an unbearable situation for both of us. I don't think either of us knew how to handle it. She tried to convince me to get help, but I was too stubborn to listen. I thought I could beat the eating disorder on my own. What I now have come to realize from being in recovery is that I really never had a chance. It had already taken complete control of my

mind and my life. I still tried to fight it and kept denying the fact that I truly had an eating disorder.

Many people have told me that I am a very intelligent person, but I could not make sense of what was happening to me. I analyzed myself backward and forward, exhausted every possible avenue as to what was happening, but I could not come up with a conclusive answer. I kept telling myself I feel fine, I know I'm thin, I want to gain weight, I do not have any eating disorder thoughts. This is what was constantly racing through my mind. I still believed eating disorders solely had to deal with the psychological intake of food. All you ever hear about the disorder is that people who have them experience a distorted view of their body image, but this wasn't me. Now, while I was trying to fight this on my own, my body began to completely reject food. I could not keep down even a small meal. I was completely frightened of eating. I would eat and be in complete pain, I fought just to eat because I knew I needed to in order to get some type of nutrition to survive. I was in a battle with my own mind and body, and I was not equipped with the proper resources to fight it. It's really hard to explain and understand unless you've actually had an eating disorder. It's been explained to me in treatment that it's like fighting an alternate personality. How can you fight your own mind when it knows exactly what you're thinking? Its like being in the biggest game of your life, with no scouting report and the opponent knows every move you're going to make before you make it. At this point, you simply do not have a fighting chance on your own to achieve

victory. To conquer an eating disorder, you need to seek professional help. This is truly the only way to overcome this monster.

Fallen and Failed

By now, I was clinging to what little energy I had left. My weight was down to somewhere around 110 lbs, and I just didn't look or feel healthy. I was drinking too much, drowning the pain that lurked deep inside. I couldn't take it anymore. After a night of drinking, I broke down to my fiancé and my roommate's girlfriend. I cried out about my problems and pleaded for help. I needed an intervention in my life or I was going to slowly die.

This is exactly what I got, but not in the way I pictured it. The damage I had done to my fiancé and myself was too destructive. I had lied to her and put her through emotional pain and shame. She was in a situation I hope nobody ever has to experience. She had fought for me for so long but the pain was just too much to tolerate. The person she knew herself to be was completely gone. It was lost in the process of trying to help save me but I was unwilling to seek help.

She had to make the hardest decision in her life. She chose to cancel the wedding as well as the engagement. She moved back to Delaware, and I went home to seek help. I called my therapist and told her what had just happened. The last time I had gotten

help, I was more or less persuaded by those who loved me. For someone to truly get help, they must be 100% personally committed to the cause. This time, I was the one seeking the help.

I returned home and immediately saw a therapist who specialized in treating eating disorders and substance abuse. I was physically weak and emotionally drained but somehow I composed myself to take that first step. The first step is crying out for help. This was truly the hardest decision I ever made but, hopefully, the most beneficial one. I finally came to the realization that I was not strong enough to tackle this on my own. My family and I had an intense three-hour therapy session and came to the conclusion that the only way to fight this monster was through in-patient treatment. I had taken the first step, but this was just the beginning. This all happened on Wednesday, March 19th.

Thanks to my amazing therapist, a meeting with my fiancé, her family, and my family occurred that Saturday. This was by far the most emotional day of my life. There was so much love in the room, and they all had amazing things to say about me. They all believed in their hearts that I could overcome this battle in my life. However, my fiancé made the choice to stick with her original decision to call off the wedding and engagement. She had lost who she was and had to let me go for her own well being.

I have never cried so much in my entire life. I was angry and devastated, yet somehow I understood her decision. I have not heard from her since that day. I was now

stuck with a beautiful engagement ring and no beautiful fiancé. My future now became undecided. All those plans we had made together just several months before were swallowed up by my eating disorder. I lost my life partner and best friend. That night, feeling emotionally destroyed and lost, I had my friends meet at my house, most of whom were supposed to have been in my wedding the next month. I explained the situation and told them I was making the decision on my own to change my life. I then held up a picture of my fiancé and I that she had given me, and cried, "This is what I have lost." I broke down in tears and asked for their support and got it.

My friends have truly been an amazing part of my recovery process. Friends are one of the most important things a person can have; I am deeply thankful for each and every one of them. The next day is when I think I truly came to grips with the demons of my past.

Again, bizarrely enough, it was Easter Sunday, and my entire family was home. What I did that day was something I had not done in more than three years. I picked up my lacrosse stick and went outside and had a catch with my dad, brother, and sister. It was just like old times. This was the first time I had truly smiled in weeks. To me, this symbolized the start of a new life. When I picked up that stick, I openly faced my past and decided to change my future.

I now had to fight this monster of an eating disorder while dealing with an extreme loss. I had not expected to lose my fiancé but I guess it had to happen. By allowing myself to fail backward, I lost pretty much everything that was important to me. Words will never do true justice to the loss I endured.

Poor decisions on my behalf had taken everything from me. Grief-stricken, I moved ahead with the support of my friends and family to get help. A new journey in my life was to begin. It was explained to me that this would probably be the hardest thing I would ever do in my life. I now had the challenge to face my past and battle my own mind and body. However, this time I would not be alone.

I set out with the willingness in my heart and the faith in God to find my true self. Symbolically, I seemed to struggle and fail just before Easter, but on that day a light from God seemed to open my eyes and deliver hope. I truly believe this was a sign from the heavens that I could rise up again and start a new life. Love would be the basis from which I would start a new journey—love of God, love of family, love of friends, love of myself, and a love to live again. This is the point in my life when I would “get it done!”

PART 2

The Recovery Process

Just “get it done.” Those three short words will be what I live by for the rest of my life. No longer will I accept defeat. I have taken the first step, but the journey back is only just beginning for me. I have been in recovery at Canopy Cove Treatment Center, located in northern Florida, for just about two weeks, and I have already learned so much about myself. The one thing I came to realize very quickly is that recovery is not a swift and easy fix. It took me almost two weeks, spending most of my time on the telephone, trying to find an eating disorder facility that could meet my needs. Very alarming to me is that many treatment facilities in the U.S. do not even accept men into their programs. Another problem I ran into was the long waiting lists. Most places I contacted had at least a two-week waiting period.

However, the main obstacle I ran into was the financial aspect of inpatient treatment. Most facilities cost upward of almost \$2,000 per day. Thankfully, I had insurance this time around; this made finding the right place a bit easier. Still, eating disorders are not seen as medical conditions so most insurance companies will only cover about half the expenses. I really have no answer for why eating disorders are not seen as medical threats. Inpatient programs cost anywhere from \$20,000 up, depending on how long you need to stay.

This is scary because if you don't have the means to get the money, then you're stuck trying to fight the eating disorder on your own. I was not going to let the financial burden keep me from getting help. No amount of money was going to keep me from

recovering my life and my health. At this point I had already lost too much, I was willing to do whatever it took to get the help I needed and deserved.

I finally located Canopy Cove Treatment Center. This program holds, at most, eight people and is customized to meet the needs of each individual patient. It was a true blessing from God that I was able to locate this facility and get in so quickly. I took out a loan and was in recovery within two days. Recovery is a full-time all day, every day process of fighting to try to separate yourself from the eating disorder. I am in treatment all day, going through therapy and retraining myself to eat properly again. At night, I stay in my own apartment with no supervision. This partial-hospitalization program is designed to give patients the freedom to experience real life while receiving treatment during the day. The nights are used as learning experiences. It is the individual patient's responsibility to put what they learn during the day to the test at night. The next day you review your battles, victories, and mistakes from the previous night. This method allows you to fail and then to learn from your own mistakes. This allows the patient to fail forward and continue on through the recovery process.

I have learned a lot in the first few weeks, but the process for my recovery is an ongoing, uphill battle. Canopy Cove allows you to step out of your normal comfort zone, challenging you to be free to experience new things. They use various methods of treatment to remedy the mind, body and spirit. These therapy techniques include music, art, yoga, and body image therapy and allow clients to enjoy the simplicities of life.

I am beginning to understand my disorder and am starting to separate myself from it. The overall goal of recovery is to completely separate your mind and body from the disorder, giving individuals full control of their life. I am by no means a specialist in eating disorders, but I am fighting one and eventually I will be a survivor. My hopes are to recover who I am, and take what I've learned to reach out and help others who are struggling. If I can save one persons life, then all the work I have done will have paid off. I am a fighter and a believer, I will not give up and I will not rest until my story is heard. I believe this is my calling.

PART 3

Eating Disorders

I am currently battling an eating disorder and truly believe that no one needs to suffer the physical and emotional pain that has ravaged my life for the past three years. I did not ask for this to happen to me, nor do I believe it is my fault. I am a very strong-willed, loving person who was raised by a very caring and supportive family. I excelled in whatever I did for most of my life. However, the fact is that something happened in my life that I could not handle on my own. I was vulnerable and was taken over by an eating disorder. If it can happen to me, it can happen to anyone.

I believe that people who suffer from eating disorders also struggle with being misunderstood by the rest of the world. My mission is to change the way the rest of the world perceive people who struggle with this disorder. Why can we accept and understand drug and alcohol problems in our society but not be able to comprehend an eating disorder? The simple answer is that they just are not talked about in public. We are ignorant of the causes, effects, and severity of this very life-threatening and rapidly growing illness.

For three years, I listened to society and everyone around me, ignoring my heart. They told me I could not have an eating disorder, and I believed it. I was told I had the drinking gene and that my problem was simply that, drinking. To this day, I wish that were really the case. I do not need to drink nor do I have the desire to drink. I was simply drinking to avoid a much more devastating and mind-altering problem. The simple resolution to a drinking problem is to stop drinking.

I have an eating disorder; there is no simple way to resolve this problem. I am following my heart, and I hope people will understand me and realize that guys can also suffer from this illness. We tend to be too quick to judge based on what is known rather than on trying to make sense of the unknown. The fact is, all the effects of eating disorders are still not understood, but these effects do have the potential of being much more devastating than drugs and alcohol. You cannot just quickly fix the human thought process and heal the body. You cannot just start eating to fix the problem. Eating

disorders deal with feelings and emotions. Only time, education, and help can bring about the possibility of recovery.

I may be only one small voice, but I am setting out to change this negative and misinformed perception people associate with eating disorders (and they occur in many different forms). It is estimated that more than eight million Americans suffer from eating disorder illnesses, seven million are women and one million are men. The reality is that eating disorders have the highest mortality rate among all mental illnesses. According to Vivian Meehan, president and founder of The Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, more people die each year from eating disorder illnesses than from AIDS. We need to come together and unite in a cause to educate and fight these deadly disorders. These misunderstood illnesses are secretly destroying the futures and lives of men, women, and children all over the world. I am not trying to change the world; I am just trying to help save lives and help others avoid the agony and pain that I have gone through.

If you are personally struggling with an eating disorder or you think you might know someone with one, this is what you need to know about the illness. Most importantly, eating disorders do not discriminate. Men can and do suffer from this illness whether they admit to it or not. I am proof of this. They can and do affect all ethnicities, both men and women, young and old, rich and poor. Next, eating disorders tear families apart, and they are fatal. However, if treated, a person can attain a normal life with a full

recovery. My personal battles with my eating disorder and recovery have taught me that the disorder is more about feelings than food. This is essential information because society seems to label it as an illness solely focused on weight loss and food consumption. There is no one specific cause but it is more-or-less caused by a complex combination of genetic, social, and psychological factors. The illness usually attacks the “perfectionist,” a person who is very intelligent, sensitive, or searching for accomplishment or recognition. They are usually very well mannered and willing to please others and have a fear of sudden loss or change. Basically, “perfectionist” defines who I was. I was very goal-oriented and driven to succeed. I was calm and composed on the outside, but I hid my insecurities and fear of failure deep within myself. This is what fueled and ultimately caused my eating disorder. Recovery at Canopy Cove has also shown me that there are seven main factors that both contribute and lead to full-blown eating disorders. A person can be affected by any one of these or a combination but the end result is still the same. These are the warning signs for developing an eating disorder:

1. A single traumatic event;
2. A two to three year period of intense pain or stress;
3. An extended period of emotional pain;
4. The onset of a mood disorder;
5. Having been a very sensitive child;
6. A controlling environment;
7. Lack of validation of feelings (expression).

There are three main types of eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating.

- Anorexia is simply defined as self-induced starvation. Symptoms may include excessive weight loss, restricting food intake, over obsessive food thoughts, and extreme concern with body image. Some physical complications include heart and kidney damage, bone density problems, dehydration and fatigue, malnutrition, low body temperature, stomach pain, depression and mood swings, and death.
- Bulimia is the cycle of overeating binges followed by self-induced vomiting or the misuse of laxatives or diuretics to rid the body of food intake. This disorder is dangerous because it is so hard to detect. A person suffering from bulimia may not even seem underweight. Physical complications include esophagus damage, stomach injuries, electrolyte imbalance, lung complications, teeth problems, cold sensitivity, dehydration, depression, and death.
- Binge eating is a condition in which a person frequently eats more than most would consume in a similar period of time. They have no control of over the impulse to overeat. Warning signs for this disorder consist of rapid food intake, eating to the point discomfort, eating while not hungry, and the inability to eat in front of others. Physical complications include joint problems, type II diabetes, hypertension, depression, and cardiac

instability. Psychological problems for eating disorders may include but are not limited to: depression and suicide, loss of control, feeling of guilt and shame, extreme fear of discovery, compulsive behaviors, anxiety, anger, and a sense of hopelessness.

All eating disorders share similar traits and symptoms but each is very specific to the individual suffering from the disorder. No single eating disorder is the same as another; each has its own unique qualities. There is not one specific way to treat an eating disorder, which is why seeking help is essential.

You cannot beat this disorder solely on your own. Each disorder must be treated on an individual basis to meet each person's specific needs. The underlying fact is that, without treatment, the physical and psychological complications related to eating disorders are seriously life-threatening. Anyone suffering from an eating disorder both deserves and has the opportunity for recovery. Please, learn from my story and seek help. There are plenty of people and organizations out there that are willing to provide treatment and care.

If you are struggling to find treatment in your area, I recommend using the Internet. This is an unbelievable resource tool to both locate treatment centers and to learn more about eating disorders. This is where I found Canopy Cove. If you are looking for an individualized, spiritual program, I personally recommend Canopy Cove. This program

and the people you meet can save your life and instill you with the resources you need to attain a full recovery. Some good sites for information include the International Association of Eating Disorder Professionals (IAEDP), the Association for Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) and The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA). Eating disorders are very complex and destructive but I am here to tell you that they can be defeated. I will have a full recovery, and you can too. Never give up, and remember, it is not your fault. Be proud and confident in yourself. There is no shame in suffering from an eating disorder; there is only pain and shame if you do not seek help. Believe in yourself, trust in love, and follow my lead into the recovery of a better life. You can have a life without an eating disorder!

PART 4

For the Love of the Game

This is where I get real about competitive sports and speak directly to all athletes out there. It does not matter if you're on the professional, collegiate, high school, or junior high level. It does not matter if you are male or female, or what sport you play. We all share in a unique bond. That bond we share is the love of the game. I hope my story has been eye-opening for all athletes.

If you love the sport you play, don't turn your back on it. Learn from my mistakes and realize that failure in sports is an inevitable part of the game. Game, that word is defined as something you play for entertainment or fun. Sports are a game, and these

games are a big part of all athletes' lives. However, games are not life. I loved the game of lacrosse, but I took it too far. I put immense pressure on myself to become the best. To me, it became more than a game; it was my life and, eventually, my identity. I was nothing without the game of lacrosse. This is what I thought at the time. I was so caught up in the competitiveness of the sport that I forgot why I was playing it in the first place.

I started playing lacrosse because I loved it, and because it was fun. Lacrosse gave me an avenue to be free from the world around me. The love of the game, the fun and excitement sports provide, is what athletics are all about. I lost sight of this love when (I thought) the game failed me and I ran away from it. Sports are a game and they should never become your sole identity. A sport should never take the individuality of an athlete. However, an athlete should be identified with the sport they play and the excitement they provide for the sport.

Brett Farve is not football, but we identify that name with the amazing accomplishments and miracle plays he gave the sport of football. I know everybody remembers that miraculous Monday night game when Farve, after the recent passing of his Father, led his team to an inspirational victory with four amazing touchdown passes that seemed to fall from the heavens above. Football did not give that to Brett Farve, he gave that memory to football. He gave that day to all of us. I lost sight of all the great things I provided for the sport of lacrosse in my career and I let lacrosse identify me.

I may have not become a well-known professional lacrosse player but I had some amazing moments in my career, just like Farve did. Yet, I was blinded from these memorable achievements because I believed lacrosse defined me. With that mind-set, when I failed in lacrosse, to me it meant I had failed in life. Not knowing how to handle failure, I turned my back on the sport for three years; my life rapidly spiraled downward until I hit rock bottom. I never truly lost the love for the game, it was just buried deep inside me, with all the pain, shame, and anger I had from my last game. I wanted to be the best, but you can't always be the best at everything you do. Sometimes it is okay to just be good at something.

All you can do is be the best you can be, nothing else matters. I demanded perfection of myself on the lacrosse field but nothing reaches perfection. I set myself up for failure, and when I failed, I couldn't handle it. I lost control BUT, thankfully, I ended up in recovery. I couldn't have done it alone. My story may seem drastic but if it can happen to me, then it can happen to you. Just remember, I grew up as a kid who was a sports junky just like you. That kid who loved lacrosse lost sight of the true meaning of love of the game. However, when I picked that stick back up on Easter Sunday, I was enlightened and reconnected with the sport. I now have that love of the game back and a future to look forward to. Please learn from my experiences and love the game you play. Remember, sports are a game, play hard but have fun.

PART 5

Athletes' Greatest Teachers

Coaches are athletes' greatest teachers. They have the incredible opportunity of taking young kids with amazing dreams and talents and transforming them into remarkable athletes and people. However, notice that I used the word "opportunity." Every coach has the chance to be an athlete's greatest mentor, but so many overlook this because winning becomes everything. What is the number one priority of any coach out there? If you asked that question to any coach, I would bet that four out of five coaches would come up with the same answer. That answer, of course, would be to win games.

The ultimate goal of any coach is to take their team to the championship game and win. How are coaches' careers defined or measured? This answer, just like the above, seems to have a simple response. Coaches are judged and compensated for the amount of success they achieve. The more titles a coach brings to a school, the more his legacy grows. No one talks about or goes into the various sports' halls of fame for setting the record for most overall losses. Everything in sports focuses on winning. No one wants to hire a losing coach, nor does any player want to be apart of a losing program. Our society seems to have both embraced and accepted this "all or nothing" mentality. The real truth is that in sports, there is so much more than winning.

The hard fact is that, in any sport, at any level, there will only be one championship team at the end of the season. No sport has two or three champions; in the end, only one team wins. What I have learned throughout my athletic career is that there is more than one way to achieve victory in competitive sports. I have been on both sides of teams—winning and losing. Honestly, it feels great to win, and I have been on championship teams. Still, I believe I learned more from losing than I ever did from winning. I believe my story is a true example of that. In my lacrosse career, I lost my final game in both high school and college, as I am sure many other athletes have. It is almost impossible to finish a career or season with a win because, inevitably, only one team wins. Yet, just because you ended the season with a loss doesn't mean you didn't accomplish victory. I lost my last high school lacrosse game, but I went on to play in college. This was a huge victory for me.

So many victories occur in sports everyday, but they seem to get overlooked because all we focus on is being that championship team. Do not get me wrong, I love to win and there is nothing wrong with winning or working hard to become a champion. What I am saying is that sometimes it is okay to lose; you can still be victorious. Why does any one athlete play a sport? Yes, more than anything they want to win, but the real reason they play is solely for the love of the game.

Look at Tiger Woods; he is by far the dominant athlete of this era. He defines the true drive to win, but you can tell by his passion on the course, that he truly loves the

game. Also, I almost guarantee that if you asked him whether he learned more from winning the Tiger Slam or from the tournament that broke his consecutive win streak, he probably would have said the tournament that ended his streak. Yes, even great athletes like Tiger Woods lose at some point in their careers. You truly learn more from losing than you do winning. By knowing how to lose, you learn to win.

I have had many great coaches throughout my career, and I can vividly remember the life lessons they instilled in me. Many of the best coaches I had prepared me to be successful in my future. I credit Coach Reynolds for giving me the fight and heart to turn my life around. He was only my coach for a short time before his life was tragically taken but his legacy lives on in me. His “get it done” mentality saved my life and has allowed me to be here today to tell my story. No days go by for me that I don’t remember and learn from what he imprinted in my heart. He was not only a great coach, he was my greatest teacher. Coach to win, but teach your players life lessons that will prepare them to succeed when that final roar of the crowd goes silent. The level at which you coach does not matter. You have the opportunity to change a player’s life for the better. Teach your players to win, allow them to fail, and lead them to victory off the field by the way you coach on the field. Just as Coach Reynolds was and is my mentor, you to can be some player’s greatest life teacher.

Get It Done

I hope the narrative of my life as been both inspirational and educational. I plan to continue to write about my experiences in the hopes that I can shed more light unto this very dark and controversial issue. Again, my name is Patrick Bergstrom, and I am proud to say, I am a 24-year-old former D3 lacrosse player who is now overcoming an eating disorder. I have lost so much yet have gained more in the past two weeks than I had in the previous three years of my life. Please understand my story and realize that you don't have to go down the same path I did. There are ways and people out there who are willing to help.

Remember, use failure as a stepping-stone to build the future you deserve. The more you fail, the more steps you eventually have to take to climb back up. Learning from each step of failure will make reaching the top more attainable and rewarding. There are no free rides in life; everyone controls his or her own destiny. No one goes through life without experiencing adversity. Take it for what it is worth; do not dwell on it, learn from it and become an achiever. In other words, just "get it done."

This is exactly what I am doing. I will get this job done and use my eating disorder as my stepping-stone to rebuild my life. Lacrosse was my identity for so long, and then I turned my back on the game I loved. Never turn your back on something you love.

I would like to finish with a short story that was brought to my attention by a former teammate. Since being in recovery, many of my teammates have reached out to me with prayers and insightful words of wisdom. It is evident that Coach Reynolds' legacy not only lives on in me but in every athlete who played for him. What he did was something that few coaches can say they have done: he touched each one of our hearts.

What I have come to realize is that an eating disorder can affect your mind and body but it can never touch your heart. Before the season started that year, Coach Reynolds held what was called the Iron Man competition in the weight room. It consisted of doing a full plate workout with both the upper and lower body. It ended with a challenge to see which player could keep the 45-lb weight above their head the longest. The entire team was exhausted, but we faced the battle believing we could achieve victory. It came down to two players, and shocking enough, the smallest player on the team won. I was that player, for that day I was the Iron Man. I wasn't the strongest player on the team, but I had heart. I believed I could accomplish anything and that day I got it done.

For three years I struggled and fell over and over again. For some reason, I kept getting back up. That one reason is heart. You can fail over and over again and have everything taken from you but nothing can take your heart. I am here today because one coach took the time to make each player believe. Even in your darkest hour, if you follow your heart, you will "get it done." I was a fallen athlete but I am standing proud today.

Believe in your heart and you will not fail. Holding my lacrosse stick in my hand and knowing my teammates and coach are with me, I am moving forward into the light of a better life. I will have a full recovery; I will have a life of happiness again. Taking one day at a time, I will have victory. I may stumble along the way, but no longer will I fail backward. I have learned from my mistakes and am building a great future. My goal is to complete the recovery process and use my writing as a weapon to speak out about and fight this ugly monster that is misunderstood by so many. Writing for me has become my new playing field, much like lacrosse was for most of my life up to now. However, the playing field is now life and my gift is not scoring goals--it is expression. My stick is now a pen; my team is my recovery, and the opponent is eating disorders. I will "get it done," and I know in my heart, you can too. You will hear from me again. I believe my purpose is to use my testimony to inspire, to teach, and to help others out there who are struggling. As Coach Reynolds did for me, I am going to do for others. If my words and actions reach one fallen heart, then I have achieved the greatest victory life has to offer.

I will be leaving Canopy Cove Treatment Center in exactly ten days. I am looking forward to going home and the opportunity to start a fresh life. I am here today because one person took the time to instill the value of love and life into my heart. I am returning home and will start my life again. My first step forward to this new life will be to go back to my college to visit my coach's memorial. I plan to say a few words and end with a prayer. His legacy lives on in me, and I will honor that each and everyday. My real journey in life starts now. Believe in your heart, you can "get it done."

Live, love, laugh, and be happy.