

How My Freshman Year Came to an Early Ending

Thursday March 12, 2020, a date that I will never forget. I was traveling to Flagstaff, Arizona with my tennis team to play Northern Arizona University, and was beyond excited to play against the best team in our conference. Raring to go, is an understatement to describe how I felt leading up to that match. Nevertheless, the excitement started to soon fade away on Wednesday.

Our team consists of many European players, and the corona virus had already impacted the majority of Europe, especially Italy. Friends and family from Belgium were telling me that many things had already shut their doors. Universities closed, bars were closing the next day, and clothing shops were also closed. In Montana, everything was still normal, there wasn't even a corona case yet. Therefore, it was hard to imagine how bad things were back home. I remember feeling the anxiousness and desperation inside me start to rise. The urge to go back home and make sure everyone I knew was doing okay, was overwhelming. However, the other part of me wanted to stay and give my best shot against NAU's team. I was still excited, but some of the excitement had been replaced with fear. It suddenly hit me that it was a bad idea to go to Arizona, as numerous positive cases of the virus had already surfaced in the state. I was wondering why we were going there, looking for trouble. On the other hand, I didn't want to stay in Bozeman, because it would feel like we were just giving up on our season and admitting defeat. All of us realized that the pandemic was not going to get better soon; the spread of the virus had just started in America. It was only going to get worse, but it was just too hard to come to terms with the fact that our season was ultimately over. I think no one wanted to admit that, so we traveled all the way to

Arizona, and pretended that everything was going to be alright. From the moment that we first stepped on that plane, till a week later, everything in my life completely changed.

On the plane, we saw people with face masks, and gloves. The guy in front of me sanitized his entire seat with a hand sanitizer. It was impossible to keep up the act that everything was fine. Coach had not said a word about corona yet, so once we were in Arizona, we asked him if we were still playing the match. He said he didn't know, but we had to stop assuming that the match was going to get canceled, because we just had to be in the right mentality and be prepared to play. He wanted the whole situation out of our heads, so we all continued pretending that everything was fine. Unfortunately, that night during our usual practice session, we were interrupted by NAU's Coach. He said aloud what we all dreaded to hear, but knew deep inside, so everyone was prepared when the already impaled knife, was twisted inside of us. "All matches from now till at least April 15 are canceled." I was about to cry, but I also felt relieved because my mind wasn't set to playing a match, even though I had tried so hard. All I could think of was that I wanted to go home, to my family, to my friends, and especially to my boyfriend.

The next day, we were back in Bozeman. What felt like the longest weekend of my life, was lying ahead of me. It was a weekend full of uncertainties, and hope. I didn't know yet if classes were going to be canceled for the rest of the semester, I didn't know if we were still practicing on Monday, and I didn't know if we would still be competing in matches after April 15th. I actually did know that everything was going to get canceled, and I think a lot of people realized this, but didn't want to believe it at first. However, it was only a matter of time. The uncertainties made it difficult for me to decide if now was a good idea to go home. I kept weighing out the advantages and disadvantages of going home, but I didn't come to a conclusion. On Sunday, I heard that Belgium was talking about closing its borders, and if I didn't leave now, I could potentially end up permanently stuck in America for the duration of

the pandemic. I didn't want to take the risk to remain in Bozeman, for the slim chance that our season as well as classes would resume. Later that day, I went to the airport to get my flights changed, and the employee warned me that I had to get out of here as soon as possible if I wanted to make it home. This scared me a little, but it proved for me that I had made the right decision. Three days later, exactly one week after we flew to Arizona, when everything was still normal, I was with my family again in Belgium. Meanwhile, all classes got canceled till the end of the semester, and our conference was canceled as well, so I was really happy to be home.

When I came home, my mother and my brother were waiting for me in the airport. I wasn't allowed within 4 feet of them. I haven't seen them for two and a half months, and I was not allowed to give them a hug, for their own safety. This felt completely unreal to me. The night before I left Bozeman, I was still hanging out with my friends, and I was hugging them because I wasn't going to see most of them for months, or even never again. It was a big shock, the transition from a normal life to a complete lockdown in a span of one day. My boyfriend wasn't waiting for me in the airport, because he was not allowed to. I had been in four different airports on my way home, so suddenly, I was seen as a potential carrier of the dangerous virus which had inflicted so much pain upon our society. I stayed home for a full week, which was not too bad because it allowed me to recover from the jetlag and be lazy without feeling bad about it. Though, after a week, the boredom hit, so my best friend came to see me, and we had a nice talk 6 feet away from each other. It felt strange not to yell way too enthusiastically, "aaaah omg I missed you so much!" and jump into her arms. Anyway, I was happy to see someone else apart from my family. I caught myself talking way too much, and way too fast just because I finally had someone to talk to.

Today I have been home for exactly three weeks, and I am doing alright. I adjusted to the online classes pretty fast, but I am still having a hard time staying inside all day long. I

was at tennis practise 20 hours a week, for the last couple of months, and now it feels like the sweat, the blood, the tears, were all for nothing. I don't practise to sit in a couch all day; I practise to compete. I have never been this fit in my life, and I can proudly say, that I worked extremely hard for it, so it is painful that I am not standing on a tennis court at this moment. However, I am still allowed to go out for a run, because our government thinks that it is important to stay active. I am glad about that, because it gives me the opportunity to retain the fitness that I had worked so hard for. Going for a run or doing a little workout in my garden is helping me through these tough days. It still doesn't take away the problem that I miss playing tennis a lot. Luckily, I have a very understanding and nice brother who wants to play tennis with me on the street every once in a while.

If something like this happens again in a couple of years, my advice to people would be to try to keep yourself busy to pass the time. Playing tennis on the street with my brother isn't nearly as good as competing on a clay court against top ranked Belgium players, but it is by far better than doing nothing at all. Calling my friends is not even close to having a nice dinner together, but it is still better than not talking to anyone at all. This situation is unfortunate, but if you try to make the best out of it, it is manageable, at least for a certain amount of time. However, if you keep thinking about all the negatives of this situation, your thoughts and life will only get harder and more negative.

Consequently, I try to stay positive, but sometimes people manage to get me really mad. There are some people that don't take this situation seriously. Lockdown-parties are still happening, and some people are still hanging out with friends. I totally get that these are hard times, but it is the same for everyone, so I don't understand how people can be so selfish to ignore the rules, putting everyone else's lives in danger. If people keep breaking the rules, the lockdown will only extend in duration. I can't predict the consequences of that, but I think it can be disastrous for certain people's mental health. I have my two brothers, and my parents

around me all the time now. It sometimes gets a little annoying to be around the same people all day long, but at least I am not completely alone during this worldwide crisis. I don't even want to think about what would have happened if I didn't get on that plane home anymore. The sad truth is that a lot of people are just all by themselves in this time of need, and I feel so terrible for them. For this very reason, I live by the rules of the government.

To end this essay, I would like to talk about one positive realization that this whole situation has brought me. It might be a cliché, but it made me realize that my normal life is so priceless. My normal life isn't normal, it is wonderful. I got the chance to go to University, to play tennis as much as my heart desires, and to have fun with my wonderful friends all at the same time. I sometimes complained about how busy I was, but I now realize that being busy is a hundred times better than being bored.