

PERSONAL STORY

Rick (58): I remember the day I sat in the neurologist's office after I had been hit by a softball during a league game. I was sliding head-first into third base when the lights went out. I was standing at second base when my buddy hit a sharp one-bouncer at the first baseman. I took off for third and the first baseman thought he could throw me out. The ball struck me in the temple on the left side of my face. It broke my cheekbone below the eye and just in front of the ear. I remember everything around me being black. I was confused and yet, I could hear voices. One voice said roll him over he's not breathing. I am told that when they rolled me over, I began to breathe on my own. I guess it's a good thing. The worst part was that it left me with a brain bleed, and a doctor telling me I needed to be done.

The doctor did his assessment and recommended that I retire from playing due to this being my eleventh concussion. This was the second similar incident; in 1995 a softball struck me just below the nose fracturing my face in four places and leaving me with concussion number ten. In short, my playing days were over.

As a lifelong athlete of basketball, baseball, and football, the game was all I craved. It came before everything else in my life, which is not always a good thing. Fast forward to today, I have spent the last five years not doing the thing I love most, sports.

As I was ending a 32-year career as a law enforcement officer and 7 years as a Sheriff, I was involved with creating a mental health program in the Sheriff's office I was part of. To show the guys it was a needed program, and it would possibly be beneficial, I volunteered to go first and

meet with a professional. It was there that my suspicions were realized. I had PTSD from the job and the years of seeing and being involved in so many extremely traumatic events.

There is something to be said about the relationship between sports and PTSD. No matter what I was going through on the inside, I could walk onto a basketball court, and it was like shedding a layer of unwanted skin. The kind of skin that was heavy, dirty, scratchy, and unfeeling. When I walked into a ball game I was in my quiet place. I could see the game, the people moving and I could read the court like it was all in slow motion. I also loved that usually when I was on the floor, I could create a sort of music in the movement of the players. The dance was real, and I always led. Once this feeling and activity were gone, I fell into depression. I somewhat lost my identity. As I watched people play the game, I would have conversations in my head about how badly they read the game, and how untalented they were. I have never really suffered from any addiction and what the withdrawal may feel like, but I felt like death may be better than feeling like I had lost the best part of me.

It was a buddy who invited me to play pickleball. I went and thought it was a silly game. I played a few times and was impressed that I could get a sweat up, but I was not impressed with the game itself. As I kept going for the “work out” I began to feel a small twinge of competitiveness rise in me. I began to see others who were showing an actual talent for the game. They could place the ball anywhere they wanted. They could make me move wherever they wanted, and I soon began to see the other players making their music like I was able to do on a basketball court. I am not good at this sport. I do not frustrate people because of my prowess and skill when I walk onto a pickleball court, but I have found a place where I can still shed that old nasty skin.

I am just starting to see the game for what it really is, a place to be ourselves and to be with the people we love, friends.