

Professional Athlete Stephanie McCaffrey Pursues Business in Her Life After Soccer

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Until March 2018, soccer was Stephanie McCaffrey's life. An all-star forward, she led her high school team at Buckingham, Browne & Nichols (BB&N) in Winchester, Mass., with 38 goals and seven assists in her senior year alone. She dominated on her Boston College team from 2011-2014, getting drafted to play professionally with the Boston Breakers, part of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), in her senior year. She went on to play for the better part of a year with the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team alongside such well-known stars as Megan Rapinoe. The U.S. qualified for the 2016 Summer Olympics, but McCaffrey wasn't named to the Olympic Team.

She played for both the Boston Breakers and the Chicago Red Stars in 2016 and 2017, and had big plans for her career in 2018. "I was hoping that 2018 would be my break-out year where I would evolve from a raw, talented kid to a professional — become a league all-star, have a shot at a major tournament and so on," says McCaffrey. "These were goals that I had for myself and that I was working toward. I woke up in March 2018 and I couldn't feel the left side of my face. My face had been twitching the day before and I'd had really bad back pain...The doctors weren't really sure what it was. When you rule out all other options – ALS, autoimmune disease, stroke – it has to be some kind of virus."

Soon after, due to the viral attack on her nervous system, McCaffrey decided to hang up her cleats. In the nearly two years that have followed, she has had to reinvent herself, a process that included getting accepted to Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania to pursue her MBA, where she is studying finance.

We caught up with McCaffrey on campus to discuss her soccer career and life-altering circumstances, and how business is lighting her path forward. An edited version of our interview appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Have you always been interested in business?

McCaffrey: I chose Boston College because it looked like I would play soccer professionally. I wanted to go to a university with an undergraduate business school, so when I was coming out of professional soccer I would at least know what a balance sheet was. My dad is in real estate. I saw business as the next phase of an ambitious life after soccer. It was less a specific area of business at the time and more about ambition, drive and what I could do that was competitive after soccer. I had an inclination that business might be what I wanted to do. You're deciding when you're really young. I was 15 and a half when I had to decide, which is absurd.

I've always been a quantitative kid with an eye toward numbers more than verbal cues. When we were younger, my brothers liked to read and I liked to do flash cards. I majored in finance [at BC] because I felt it was the most quantitative aspect of business. I also thought it would give me the most options for career choices.

KWHS: Did you think enough back then about your post-player career?

McCaffrey: I was smart, but very soccer-oriented early-on. What my high school BB&N taught me, which was one of the reasons why I was able to excel academically at Boston College, is that school is as important at sports. I can't stress the importance of academics enough. Your academic performance is the launching pad that affords you different opportunities. If I didn't have the academic attitude that I had at Boston College, none of this happens. As soon as I wake up and the left side of my face is numb, I'm in a very different position than if I slacked off and got a 2.0 GPA.

KWHS: What lessons have you taken away from the adversity you've faced?

McCaffrey: I got to play with the Women's National Team after the World Cup in 2015 and 2016 and leading up to the Olympics. That was really cool. I had some of the best times of my life. I got released from the Olympic Team prior to the competition. I was young and raw. That was really hard at the time. It was the first time someone had said, 'You're not good enough. This isn't happening.' I was 23.

I reacted poorly to that at first. I looked outward for reasons why it didn't happen, instead of looking inward. It was the first time I had faced adversity. When something negative happens to you, if the first thing you do is look at reasons other than yourself as the cause, you're going to end up worse off in the end. I came out of that better. I had some empathy for myself for the first time. I said, 'Look, if you get beat out by Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan as a forward, it's not a bad thing. You're a 23-year-old kid.'

The second thing is that it taught me to be grateful for the experience and the time I did have with that team, because a lot of girls don't get to be with that team for the better part of a year. Finally, it was changing my definition of success from: Was the end result what I wanted? To: Did I do everything possible to make that work? If you're trying to get a good grade on a test and you study as much as humanly possible and get a D, it's a lot different than if you don't try and get a D. The success is how you prepare and how you treated yourself in the process, with the respect and time that the process deserved.

KWHS: Have you been able to draw similar lessons from your career-ending diagnosis?

McCaffrey: I had faced a tremendous amount of adversity getting cut from the Olympic Team. When I got sick, it was different circumstances but a similar response: OK, I'm backed into a corner here. I can either fall prey to my circumstances and never get back out, or I can dig my heels in and fight for a new life and a new chance. Even though it was really hard to accept and there were days and weeks that were really, really difficult, coming to Wharton was a goal that I set for myself. Getting in here and being here has been a huge milestone for my mental recovery.

The hardest part has been mental. The physical stuff sucks, but it's when you've been defined by something your entire life and lose that instantaneously, you lose a large part of your identity. I also think that when you are playing professional sports, other parts of your identity tend to atrophy because that takes up so much space. I said, what am I if not a soccer player? All those other aspects of myself were underdeveloped. To be as elite as I wanted, I had to put everything else on the back burner. The more painful part of it all, despite the physical part of it, was figuring out who I wanted to be.

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KWHS: Has your nonprofit helped you figure out who you are during the past few years?

McCaffrey: Yes, I started a nonprofit prior to getting sick. It is called Hidden Gem Soccer. I raise a pool of money to pay girls I played with in the NWSL to coach girls (ages 6-14) within existing nonprofits. In women's soccer, to make more money someone like myself or my teammate would get paid \$150 to \$300 an hour by a family in the suburbs to train their daughter, who was good and a great kid, but wealthy, white and — a lot like me — already had every option affordable to her. It dawned on me one day that if you could move the money, you could move the clientele. So, we built a little network with America SCORES in Chicago, starting out, where the girls in the Chicago Red Stars replaced the America SCORES coaching staff for a spring season. The next season we did Houston, Salt Lake City and Chicago. The goal eventually is to have one team for every NWSL city. As the league blossoms and becomes more secure in its infrastructure and every team has a community outreach person, that will be a lot easier for us.

This has taught me so much. Your bar to be happy can't be that you're a professional athlete who is living the dream, making a lot of money and is famous. That's not a sustainable life. When you start playing professionally and you are fortunate enough to be called up to the national team, there's a switch that goes with social media these days. It's interesting for a 21 or 22-year-old kid to deal with. You suddenly have that external validation you always knew was there but weren't necessarily aware of. I would find myself scrolling through social media and checking my Instagram every 5 to 10 minutes. There's always someone commenting on your pictures. Hidden Gems taught me that the basics of happiness aren't dependent on anything external, particularly social media and particularly the outside validation we get as professional athletes. Validation has to be inherent to what you're doing and who you are.

KWHS: What are your future plans, for Wharton and beyond?

McCaffrey: I haven't officially declared my major yet. What I do know is that I will do finance and I will continue my nonprofit. I'm taking advanced finance and statistics, advanced accounting, real estate development and advanced analysis. I'm looking at real estate private equity. My second year, I'd love to take a class in social impact and corporate valuation and dig through the real estate major. Even if I don't go into real estate, I see myself investing in real estate on the side.

The reality right now is that when I get started at different places — I'm looking to work in banking and private equity — it's not going to be possible for me to be on the ground running my charity. I have been cognizant this year of raising money to hire a player in addition to the player-coaches who would be the point person at each site running Hidden Gems. The goal long-term would be to go into finance or fields that would allow me to make good money and flush it back into the nonprofit that someone else is running for me.

KWHS: Is financial success a priority for you?

McCaffrey: I don't want to make a lot of money for the sake of having money to spend things on. I want to make a lot of money to flush it back into things I'm passionate about, like my nonprofit and women's soccer. Long-term, I'd like to buy a women's soccer team. Also, I think financial equality plays a huge role in gender equality. I think that if men continue to control the capital, they will continue to control the narrative. Women need to be more shameless in saying, yeah, my goal is to go make a lot of money not because I want to buy a beach house or a Ferrari, but because I want to do X, Y and Z. For me, I want to pull women over the fence when I get there.

KWHS: Did your time with the Women's National Team (which has been fighting the United States Soccer Federation for equal pay) influence your ideas about gender equity?

McCaffrey: I was a deer in the headlights back then. But I did have the privilege of sitting in the back of some of those [gender equity] meetings and listening to Abby Wambach or Megan Rapinoe, people who are just so boldly and unapologetically themselves. I came to appreciate that nothing goes unsaid with them. That's one of the most important lessons I've taken away from that team as part of the feminist movement. If something goes unsaid that's wrong, that's inherently more unequal than anything. It really has taught me to not be afraid to be more outspoken in issues of gender equity that I believe are important.

Having the privilege of being on that team and being exposed to them, I'm more comfortable than the average woman in that I feel like I deserve to take up space and I deserve to be heard. I had the privilege of learning that from some of the most powerful female leaders of our generation. I've noticed that it's something that women are still struggling with. Anything I can do to help pull women over the fence or to be an advocate in that arena, I'm going to do it. I want to tell young girls that you have a voice and if you have an opinion, don't stay quiet. If someone is telling you no and that you can't do it, kick the door down in their face. I like that it's a somewhat aggressive message. Fight for your dreams and never say die.