



Turning toward failure

Jen Fisher (Jen): Back in college I was a midfielder for the University of Miami's women's soccer team. I don't play anymore, but I am still passionate about the sport. In fact, many of the lessons I share in my chief well-being officer role are rooted from my college soccer experience. When it comes to well-being in the workplace, I think there is a lot we can learn from sports about resilience, team work, and purpose.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, Chief Well-Being Officer for Deloitte, and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well being.

[Teaser] Abby Wambach (Abby): *I got into soccer and basketball, so I was 5 years old, and my mom loves to tell this story, but the first three soccer games I ever played in I scored 27 goals.*

Jen: I am here with Abby Wambach. Abby is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, a FIFA world cup champion, and the highest all-time international goal scorer for male and female soccer players. Abby is also an advocate and author of a best-selling book and the co-founder of Wolfpack Endeavor, an organization which focuses on leadership development for women in the workplace.

Abby: Yeah, so I will go back to the very beginning. I come from a big family, I am the youngest of seven, and all of my brothers and sisters from the time I was born were playing sports, so I was the kid that was getting toted from this soccer game to that basketball game, to that baseball game, and that was just like my early childhood memories, which is like being on my mom's hip, I did get left at a few playgrounds, this is not to fault my parents, I was just one of those kids that was just always getting into trouble. I got into soccer and basketball at a very young age, so I was 5 years old and my mom loves to tell this story, but the first three soccer games I ever played in I scored 27 goals, and I was feeling myself I think.

I'm like 5 years old and I think from the very beginning I was just out to prove my worthiness through my athletic achievements.

I remember walking off the field those days early on and my mom saying Abby, why don't you pass the ball more and I hadn't really learned the lessons of humility yet, and I just matter of fact said to her "well I don't understand what the big problem is, if the whole idea and the point of soccer is to score more goals than the other team and I have the ability to be able to do that, I don't see what the big problem is!" And so my mom kind of made a mental note, okay, we are going to work on her humility a little bit here, but I was just a pretty confident little kid.

I literally won lottery by getting a chance at winning gold medals. Even to play on the women's national team was a total blessing, so I got lucky, I got super lucky that I was able to match up my abilities with my passions and with the trends and forces of the world because I think that if I was born 50 years ago my life would look very different.

I've had a beautiful life, I played at the University of Florida and got a chance to play professional soccer early on when I left college and then I got a chance to play in the women's national team alongside Mia Hamm which was life-changing.

I mean I think everybody knows who Mia Hamm is.

Mia was really a force for the driver of women's sports, just people understanding that it even existed, when I was 16 years old, this is in 1996, the Atlanta Olympics was in the US and our team won gold and before then I had never seen the women's team play on television. So because of that tournament and because they won, like it did something to me, it changed me, and Mia was the face of that team and everybody knew who she was, so I am proud not just because I won, but because I stayed in it for so long.

I did it for 30 years and by the way, they weren't all great years, like I suffered a lot, I had injuries and it took me a while to fall in love with the game because I didn't really know what it was going to truly give back to me.

Jen: We, being society, all know you are synonymous with winning, I mean that's who we know you to be, but you talked about many, many failures and suffering whether it was the loss of the game or...?

Abby: Well, I think that the word failure has to be reclaimed. I think our whole lives we are trying to avoid it like a plague and every single person on the planet has failed, every single successful person on the planet has failed and made something of it and so I think back to the times of my life that I am most proud of. All the successes that I ever had playing, all the medals, all the championships, all the awards they were directly related to recent failures that had happened. Recent things that I had to overcome.

I have some unique failures of my life, I know this sounds super weird, but I broke my leg in 2008. Five days before we got in a plane to go to the Olympics in China.

Though that was an accident. I very much input that into my brain, into my spirit as a failure. I had spent the whole of that year training. I was the fittest that I had ever been. I was so excited about this idea, the possibility of representing my country again and winning another gold medal and so when I think about that time I had to get really honest with myself in the moment of the game.

In the moment of the game when I broke my leg, I lost myself, what my teammates would call, I turned red.

I was angry, we are playing against a really difficult Brazilian team, the referee in my opinion at the time wasn't taking care of the players because this was the last game, she wasn't calling fouls like I thought she should have, so I went into this tackle a little bit recklessly.

And so that's on me, like I could have very easily chalked that up as "you know what, stuff happens, this is sports, this is part of the game," but that wasn't it. Everybody knows what it feels like to fail, you get embarrassed and you have that pit in your stomach and you don't want to share it with anybody. And turning failure into an opportunity is a mindset shift.

I was 16 years old, I was playing on the youth 16 national team and our women's national team was in residency at Chula Vista, the Olympic Training Center and we got a chance to tour their locker room. I was one of those weird kids that went around and I touched every single one of the cleats there. I was not offended by dirt or germs. It was like every locker room you have ever walked into it smelled a little bit weird and it was a little bit messy, but what was most shocking to me is there was this little picture right next to the door, all the players would see leaving that locker room before training every single day and the picture wasn't of them winning a championship, it wasn't of just like positive thing, the picture in fact was of the previous year's Norwegian National Team celebrating the win over the United States, knocking the US out of the 1995 world cup. And at 16 years old I thought "what is that?" I had never seen anything, I never understood that kind of failure to be celebrated or honored, maybe no, no, they are not celebrating it, they are honoring it and I thought that's what they do here, they don't do failure like other people do failure, and that picture has stayed with me because that was the culture when I stepped into the national team failure was inevitable, every single day we all were feeling it, but we didn't have to be okay with it, it is the mindset shift and it is something that can be trained and learned. I'm specific, like I'm an example of how that's possible and even now, you know, weird failures of my life through parenting, sitting and taking moral inventory with my wife every single night, I find out that I have got to apologize like the next day, and when is the last time you ever apologized to your kid or when is the last time your parent actually ever apologized to you? It's like this thing that doesn't happen, like we can't admit as parents that we've made a mistake because then that shows fallibility and then maybe our children might feel less safe and that's just such BS, like there is nothing more false that I have learnt than that, failure is something to turn towards.

Jen: Yeah, I love that, "failure is something to turn towards," I'm going to quote you on that. Self-care and recovery, and kind of taking care of ourselves, you've talked about it as, it was a lot easier for you when you were on a team and that was something that you all did together. No longer being in that team environment, what does that look like for you just because it's the thing that we all sacrifice, we give so much of ourselves to everybody else?

Abby: Well, first of all, I think that people really get the notion wrong of this whole concept of work-life balance and the reason why I know this is because I have spent 30 years doing this job of playing soccer consistently on a daily basis and I made it my life and I think that's a big reason why I was able to find so much success at it. I think it's life, right?

Because hopefully you are doing something that is good, hopefully you are doing something that you enjoy, hopefully you are doing something that is making a difference in the world, and I learned this lesson actually pretty interestingly shortly after I retired my body was really, I had put my body through the ringer. I wasn't one of those athletes that was kind to my body, towards the end of my career this whole idea of regeneration and science really kind of got into all of us and the new technologies and modern medicines allowed me to truly brutalize my body, so I needed to take some time off, and so I didn't really do anything physical for about 18 months. You could probably imagine I got a little bit bigger, which was not great on the good old ego. I have a healthy dose of body dysmorphia because when you are pro-athlete I just assume my body should look like a pro-athlete's body. After those 18 months, I was like all right, I got to get back into this, I have to be healthy, and I started running. Don't you think like I am like this Olympian who is out trying to like run marathons and like break records, like no, I am slow and I...

Jen: But you are out there doing it!

Abby: Yeah, but here's the thing, I hate every step of it. I really, really do.

Jen: I love your honesty.

Abby: But truly, every single day I would come home and I was baffled, I was really baffled by this idea that I could be a former Olympian, who hated this activity that I was doing, so I started to branch out, trying to find different exercises, different things that I was in to and every single time I come home and I just kind of didn't feel like I thought I should feel; for instance, two nights ago I laid in bed with my wife, during our moral inventory talk and I was like "why is this so difficult, why is life so hard, why can't I had just figured this out, I am almost 40 years old and I am an accomplished successful person, I know a lot of stuff, but I am also, every once in a while I will just get real fed up with all of the stuff that I know and I just don't want to do it anymore and I just want to eat unhealthy, and I just want to not have to work out and I just want to be!" And my wife just said to me, she is like, "you don't have your teammates like, I mean what do you expect?" And I was like "oh, that makes sense, I don't know why I was so dumb that I never thought of this before." The truth is suffering shared is less painful. I mean that is just like real truth and when you are doing sprints, like I have vowed never to do another sprint again, but here I am doing some sprints with some friends because I learned that I need to have people around me especially when it's around a subject or a topic that I know I struggle to be motivated to do. So, I have had to like create a pack of a new team of my own that holds me up, that makes me feel stronger, that holds me accountable.

Jen: So, talk to me about Wolfpack, and this whole concept of Wolfpack, I know it was born I think out of this famous commencement speech of yours.

Abby: The Barnard speech was an exercise in figuring out what it was that I knew to be true. The success of that speech made it clear that what it was I knew to be true resonated with people, and what I knew to be true was kind of an important thing that women need to understand, need to know. I was getting this EPSN icon award, I don't know if you guys know this, but I am an icon.

Jen: We know it.

Abby: And this is at the end of my career, I just retired and I just found myself on stage sitting next to Kobe Bryant and Peyton Manning, and I just felt like "wow, here we are, we women, we finally made it." I am sitting next to Kobe and Peyton like two of the most iconic athletes that have ever played sports period and I am in this category, and all three of us trying to walk off stage and a different feeling started to rise up inside of me and I thought "oh, all three of us walking into three very different retirements." My biggest concern was how the hell I was going to pay my mortgage. This is a true story. So, I laid in bed that night and truthfully like being on the women's national team, I fancied myself, I was getting paid more than any other female soccer player in the world, our women's national team is the most paid women's sports team in the world, so we were at the top of the top in the sports world, but what women were getting paid was so much less than what the men are getting paid, and it wasn't that we weren't getting popular moments when we would have world cups or Olympics. So I laid in bed that night after the Espy's and I was like "something has to change," because I believed from the time that I was 5 years old that I was badass and I never stopped believing it until I was hit with the reality that the world doesn't think so, yet. From that point on I have been on kind of a mission to make sure that Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe don't have that same experience that I did when they retire and that women are seen with more equalized from everyone on the planet.

So, the Barnard speech, I got an e-mail one day from the president, she asked me to be the commencement speaker and I said yes, but I was nervous because I was actually yet to graduate from college, so let's put that aside for a second. I was like what could I actually bring to these kids, they have done it, they have graduated. And I really wanted to be good, I am athlete, I am a competitor, I actually wanted it to be the best commencement speech that ever was, so that's how I went about writing it, truly I know that it sounds silly. The Barnard commencement speech was literally me writing down what made the women's national team special, what made a bunch of women together to be able to win and be able to win in the way that made people want to watch them.

There is a lot that goes into the concepts and the philosophy behind Wolfpack, but the totality of it, and I will kind of sum it up really simply.

There are pieces to the whole puzzle that make the engine real work and the most important piece of that puzzle is by doing it together.

I talked about being grateful and demanding what you deserve. I talked about demanding the ball, Barnard college is women only, so a lot of what my experience was really resonated with these women, you know finding your pack, finding your people I think that's probably the overarching most symbolic theme that I have to keep reminding people of. The whole point down here is to do stuff together and the only reason I was able to win championships or even score as many goals as I did or even win individual awards is because of my teammates. I never scored a goal, not a single one without the help or the pass of a teammate, so the idea of championing each other, women are pitted against each other from beginning of time and we have to actually stop doing this in order for all of us women to get ahead. So demand the ball, lead from the bench, making failure your fuel, leading from the bench is a really interesting one because in 2015 I was put on the bench during the world cup, my last world cup for team USA and everything I needed to learn about leadership was sitting right there for me on the bench and I didn't know it, I didn't know that this was an opportunity. Too often I think people take a benching and they are

not unable to actually work through it and understand that leadership is still happening while you are sitting there on the bench and we know what it's like to feel benched and we know what it's like to be left off the promotion or left off the project or dare I say breastfeeding at home while you are on maternity leave, watching your colleagues get ahead. There are all kinds of benching and look it's okay to be disappointed by the benching, but what is not okay is to miss your opportunity to lead from the bench.

When you step inside of the bubble of the women's national team, there are sets of rules and expectations that I didn't even really know existed until I sat down to write this Barnard speech. All of us felt like we were each individually some of the best in the world, rightfully so. I was doing this event a couple of months ago with Mia Hamm and I had kind of offhandedly said well, you know, I wasn't like the fastest player and she immediately shut me down and she was like no, no, don't do that because Abby where your weaknesses lie is right where my strengths butt up to it and actually allows us to facilitate this idea and truly move this team forward in this beautiful way, so your weaknesses are just as important as your strengths because it allows me to step in and I think that's a very, it's like a high-level way of leadership.

The first generations of our women's national team were full of women, who would not accept anything, but best. You would get on the field, you would play as hard as you could crushing each other and then you would walk off the field and be friends, so they developed this culture and I don't know I couldn't be more proud to be a part of the system that is what we know to be the women's national team now because I know I had a part in developing it, every generation has to put their new spin on it, and watching them go and grow I think about the women, who started it, so yeah, all of those women who came before me, those are the women who truly deserve the honors and the awards and the trophies. I think drawing a line back from the time that I was 5 years old, scoring all those goals to my advocacy now, I think that a big reason why people do love watching the women's national team is because we have been reeling against the rules that we were taught, I mean if you think about it my mom was trying to put me into a little girl's box and though I think she was trying to teach me humility and humble pie lessons, I think that the lessons here is that I don't think we have to be, especially when I am 5, I am 5 years old and I am pretty good at something, I should be celebrating that and especially as a little girl, whom I was playing in set of boys, you know, I was on a coed team, it wasn't like I was playing against little girls like, I was really good and I think that we have to, from the time that we are born know that there are messages about what it means to be a girl and also by the way what it means to be a boy, and we have to fight against that and make sure that the messages that you teach yourself and the lessons that you want to learn are about you and they are not about what society is throwing at you. So, I have kind of been on a mission ever since I retired and the commencement speech and Wolfpack of going around and trying to like embed myself inside the corporate structures to facilitate not just leadership programming, but like to actually facilitate belief systems around getting the right people at the tables where decisions are made, but I think that all of my teammates in different ways inspired me, the way that I see some of them raising their children now, retired from the game, the way that I see some of them interacting with their professional life and trying to create new platforms for themselves, it's really, really amazing to see, for the whole of my life, women's soccer, it was still something you can make a little bit of money doing it for the early parts of my life. The Mia Hamm's that generation, they basically did it for free so that I could do it to make a little bit of money and then I did it to

make a little bit of money so that Alex Morgan can make lit bit more money and Megan Rapinoe could make a little bit of more money and so I look at some of the women who came before me. The Michelle Akers', Julie Foudy's, Kristine Lilly's, the April Hendricks' like women, who really put women's soccer on the map and they did it for nothing. They did it because they had this belief that there was more true and beautiful world that they could envision.

When you get women who create something like that and then you get other women who want to back that up and you get more women who want to back that up, generation after generation, what you have is the current team that you see, what you have is Megan Rapinoe unapologetically showcasing not just her talent on the field, but also her personality off the field and that is because so many women came before her to give her the platform because truthfully 4 years ago when I was playing, we won the world cup in 2015. The world wasn't ready.

Jen: I am so grateful Abby Wambach could be with us today. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various pod catchers using the keyword WorkWell to hear more and if you like the show don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on twitter at jenfis23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback and of course, if you like what you hear please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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