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# Covered Bridge Days!

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## COVERED BRIDGE DAYS



### LEADING OFF

## Learning to play your role

With the fall sports season officially kicking off, I wanted to provide current athletes with a lesson I learned while playing collegiate softball: learning how to accept your role on a team and working for the role you want.



**Natalie Dillon**

At the beginning of my freshman year of college softball, I didn't start. It was a hard pill to swallow, as I was an Honorable Mention All-State and three-time First-Team All-Conference and All-District pitcher in high school. I was used to starting every game and making significant contributions on both offense and defense. Now, I cheered on my teammates from the dugout and was lucky to get a pinch at-bat or play the field every other game. I went from the big fish in the small pond to the small fish in a big pond.

Instead of sulking about it, complaining that my coach had no idea what he was doing or quitting after the first few games, I embraced my role and made the best of every opportunity I had. I was utilized for my speed as a pinch runner, so between every inning I would run from the dugout to the fence and back to keep my legs fresh. In a tight game going to the sixth and seventh innings, I went to the bullpen behind the dugout to practice lead offs. I didn't want to go out there. I didn't want to be replaced and not be ready.

Because of the hard work I had put in to stay focused and ready for my coach, I was given a pinch at-bat against Carthage College in a doubleheader. I worked a full

count and drew a walk after fouling off numerous pitches. The next game, I started in right field and went 1-for-2 at the plate with an RBI.

In that doubleheader, I earned an opportunity for a bigger role because I had played my smaller role to the best of my ability.

I ended my freshman season as a NCAA Regional All-Tournament team member, going 4-for-7 with a double and two RBIs. I started both games in the Super Regional – the furthest the UW Oshkosh softball program had gotten in the postseason at that point.

I don't say this to brag, rather to show high school athletes that going from a bench warmer to a starter can happen if you play for the team and work hard.

This doesn't apply just to college sports. I've seen it at the high school level, too.

As a senior, 2013 graduate Breaun Ambrose was the best bunter and base runner on the Monroe softball team. She didn't start every game, but she played in the most crucial situations. Coach Dale Buvid called upon her to play her role, and she executed.

Last season, Wes Saunders joined the football team to be a kicker. The Cheesemakers struggled to find someone consistent and healthy, so Wes stepped up. He didn't ask to be anything more, and instead hit the ground running on his new role.

Sports revolve around a team, and not everyone can be the star player. Smaller roles are needed for the team to be successful.

Athletes, if you find yourself in one of those smaller roles this season, I encourage you to embrace it. If you are rotated in for volleyball just to serve, if you are tasked with guarding the best player in basketball instead of scoring, if you are that fifth scor-

er in golf or cross country, do your job to the best of your ability. Hone in on what makes you a great athlete and the skills that your coach trusts you to bring to the team. Don't pout, don't complain to your coach or on social media, don't quit because you aren't playing the role you want.

If you want a different role, you have to work for it. While I was loosening my legs during games for everyone to see, I was doing work behind the scenes so I could see the field more often. I hit off a tee by myself outside of practice time, I asked my coach how I could get better, and strengthened my weaknesses. Athletes, you can't wait for success to come to you. You have to work for it.

Parents of athletes, encourage your kids to work hard. If you have time, catch their pitches, rebound their shots or bike with them while they run. Help them put in the extra work. Don't let them take the easy way out by quitting and certainly don't complain to the coach about your kid's playing time. Let your kids advocate for themselves and develop a healthy relationship with their coach.

We all want to be the star player that hits a walk-off, drains the winning 3-pointer, scores an overtime goal or catches a touchdown pass. If we all played those roles, we wouldn't have the players that got on base to score, that stole the ball or puck and passed it off for an assist, or blocked giving the quarterback enough time to get the pass off. Teams need every player, and the role you play is important.

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### Preparing for Week 1



Local football teams Monroe, New Glarus-Monticello, Darlington and Black Hawk-Warren prepared for Week 1 of football with scrimmages on Friday, Aug. 11. Their seasons officially kick off on Friday, Aug. 17. Monroe hosts Beaver Dam, New Glarus-Monticello travels to Cambridge, Darlington faces Platteville and Black Hawk-Warren play North Fond du Lac.



RJ photos: Casey Lindecrantz

