

## GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health

*[ Phone rings ]*

**Spenser Powell:**

Hello?

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Hi, Spenser, this is Zoe.

**Spenser Powell:**

Hey, Zoe – how you doing?

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

I'm good. How are you?

*[ GTTP theme fades in ]*

**Spenser Powell:**

I'm good, thank you.

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

To start, I just want to give you a quick reminder that we are recording just to let you know.

**Spenser Powell:**

I appreciate it.

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

All right. So all good? Yep. All right. I'm going to start I'm going to give a quick intro, which should only take a couple of minutes, and then I'm going to end it off with just welcoming you in.

**Spenser Powell:**

Okay. Sounds good. Let's do it.

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

All right, perfect.

*[ GTTP theme fades out ]*

*[ 00min 41sec ]*

**Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Welcome to Getting to the Point. I'm Zoe Chrisostomides, your host for today. This morning I'm here talking about the serious matter of mental health and college athletes. You may think that competing on a college level is exciting – which, don't get me wrong, it most definitely is. But what are the consequences to competing at this level?

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

We just finished enjoying the NCAA basketball tournament, which many of you know as March Madness. And it was very exciting to see college athletes competing on the biggest stage. Or, should I say court – Go Huskies!

But what happens to the athletes on the road to competition? What are their challenges and what support do student athletes have when it comes to the issue of mental health?

[ 01min 20sec ]

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Joining me today on Getting to the Point, a former student athlete who just happens to play the same sport as I do – soccer. Spenser Powell. Welcome.

### **Spenser Powell:**

Thank you very much. I'm excited to be here today.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

And we're excited to have you. So I'm going to start off by asking you: your college collegiate career ended not too long ago. So why don't you start by telling us who you are and what you do now?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Absolutely. My name's Spenser Powell. I played soccer at Adelphi University down in Long Island, New York, for four years between 2013 and 2017. And currently, I work as a retention marketing manager for an apparel company called 100 Thieves.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

That's awesome. And do you still play soccer in your free time?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Oh, absolutely. It's still a massive, massive part of my life. If I don't play for a week, I will start to get a little, little crazy and feel like I need it in my life. So whether I'm photographing it or playing it, it's still very much in the front of my mind at all times.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

I feel the same. I can't get rid of it. [ *laughs* ] So I know you already covered what college you went to. So why don't you tell us why you wanted to play soccer at the collegiate level?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Absolutely. I mean, to be completely honest, I wasn't always the best student, and I knew that I wanted to further my education somehow. And for me, I was definitely a much better athlete than I was student.

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

So being able to take my athletic ability and kind of roll it into my end to my academic experience was something that I really had to lean heavily on.

*[ 2min 58sec ]*

### **Spenser Powell:**

So it was just for me, it was kind of a no brainer. If I wanted to continue to go to school, then I definitely had to keep playing. And I was lucky enough to get recruited by a number of schools: Adelphi University, Franklin Pierce and then UMass Amherst.

And, you know, talking to friends and family, we felt that New York was the best fit for me. And it definitely was. We had a great group. It was a Division II school, so it wasn't – you know, it wasn't my entire day was just playing sports, although it was a good portion of it. But it was a great experience and one that I'll cherish forever, for sure.

*[ 3min 33sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

So I know you just kind of told us that a big challenge for you was your schoolwork. So why don't you describe a typical day in terms of what you had to juggle between classes and soccer.

### **Spenser Powell:**

Oh, man. Yeah. So my day was a little bit crazier than most on the team just because I was a goalie. So we would wake up – probably 5:30, 5:45. Goalie practice started at 6:45, so you had to be on the field ready to go at 6:45, and that was before the team, the rest of the team got out there, so we'd have our goalkeeper training until eight when the rest of the team joined us.

And then from 8 to 10:00 we'd have team practice. Once team practice ended at ten, that's when we could go grab breakfast and get to our first classes.

We'd go to class from usually 10 to 1 and then from 2 to 3:30 or 2 to 4:00. We'd go to our strength and conditioning sessions. So whether it's just an extra running session or lifting weights, it was, it was a lot to take in all at once.

And then once that ended, you know, you had the shower grab a quick snack and you're back to classes from 5 to 8:30, 9:00, depending on your major.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Wow. That does seem like a lot. So it kind of sounds like your day consisted mostly of soccer. How did you fit schoolwork into that?

### **Spenser Powell:**

It definitely took a toll. It was very difficult to find a balance. But I think the school did its best job to put a system in place for us to say, "okay, you guys have been training a lot" because they

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

wanted to make sure that we are focused on our academics. A big thing that they would always say is that we're "student athletes, not athletes students."

So we knew that we were there for school first and athletics second. So it really just came down to a lot of knowing yourself and knowing what you're able to do.

For me, I know that I get a lot of work done between the hours of 10 p.m. and around 1 a.m., so that's when I would really kind of go into high gear and just do most of my work for that week.

*[05min 35sec]*

### **Spenser Powell:**

There are definitely a lot of Red Bull flowing back in those days.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Definitely. So since you just end it off on that note, I want to now get into the topic, which is why have you as a guest and that is the discussion on mental health and student athletes. So why don't you name a time where you recall being extremely stressed as a student athlete?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Oh, man, I could tell you many a time. So I think the big one year is my junior year of college. We had just finished the season. I picked up a pretty, pretty decent injury in the last game of the season, and I wasn't in a super great headspace. I wasn't having as much fun as I used to have with soccer.

And, you know, after every season you have those postseason meetings with your coach and the coaching staff just to say, "okay, how do you feel? What do you think you could have done better? Where do we want to work on this upcoming off season?" And I went into that meeting with my coach not knowing if I was going to come out a member of the team.

### **Spenser Powell:**

I just felt like I was very frustrated and I wasn't enjoying the game. And I always told myself that if I'm not happy and I'm not smiling when I'm playing, then something's wrong and I have to figure out what that is. So yeah, I walked into that meeting and just kind of put all my cards on the table, said, "Coach, I'm not happy. I'm not enjoying this. I understand that we had a really great season and we were winning and I played a decent role in that. But it's just some thing's changed and I have to take time for myself to figure out what that is."

So I actually ended up walking away from the team for about a month and a half to two months and just trying to figure out what it is that I or who I was without soccer.

I knew that it's not, I wasn't always going to be able to be a part of my life. And having 23, 24 brothers around at all times, it's, it can take a lot out of you mentally, physically, emotionally, even just socially.

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

You know, there wasn't really a time where you could go walk around campus and not see another teammate and just, you know, get wrapped up in something.

So you really have to put yourself first. And for me, I felt like I wasn't doing that.

So, like I said, I stepped away from it, was able to really just discover my passions and who I was outside of soccer. So for me, a big one was getting lost in photography.

I was about a 30, 40 minute train ride away from New York City and just being able to wander New York City streets with a camera and take lots of photos was a great, great way for me to just express myself creatively and just completely kind of zone out from the world.

*[ 08min 05sec ]*

So yeah, it was a very stressful time walking away from soccer and not knowing what was next. But luckily, once I did that, um, you know, as they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. And I was lucky enough that my coach is very understanding of that and allowed me to come back for the spring season. And then we took over and had a fantastic final year.

We won the regular season and the playoffs. We won a couple of trophies that year and, overall, we set a lot of school records. So it was definitely one of those things where I look back and I'm like, "Yeah, it was the right call for me to figure out who I was outside of soccer" and not just think about it all day, all night, like I have been for the past, you know, 20 some odd years of my life.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Wow. That is definitely a hard thing to choose between. How did you make that decision? Because for me, I know I would be restless thinking about that. So how did you, how were you able to choose between your mental health and your love for the game?

*[ 09min 01sec ]*

### **Spenser Powell:**

That's a really good question. You know, I don't really think there was a time where I sat down and thought about it, so to say, I think I walked into that meeting and said to myself, you know, however, I'm feeling in that moment is what I'm just going to say to coach.

And that for me was, you know, I think I do need to take a step back because as you're just word-vomiting things out there, you start to realize like, "oh, okay, maybe I'm not in the greatest frame of mind or maybe things aren't as healthy as I had thought."

It wasn't until I made that decision to step away where I really started to dissect my mental health. And I got in contact with the school's psychology department and just started working

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

with a therapist through that, and it was probably one of my favorite things I've ever done. I think from that point in 2016, I've talked to at least a mental health professional once or maybe once every two weeks for the past seven, eight years of my life. And it feels weird when I don't do it now. It's just become such a habit and something that I wouldn't have started had I not made that decision to step away.

*[ 10min 10sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

That's great. And I also know that you found photography helped you get away from reality and that's something that you enjoyed. Do you want to talk a little bit about the moment you captured with your camera and how that made you feel great again and caused you to go back to the sport you love?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Absolutely. I think for me, like I said, being in New York and just being able to freeze little moments was something that I really overlooked. And a lot of people, this is kind of the time when Instagram was like starting to take off a little bit. It wasn't super big, but it was, you could get by with just your iPhone.

So that's kind of how I started, was just taking photos with an iPhone and I got a cheap little Canon camera. But you walking around New York City, I don't know if you've ever been, but it's – it is chaos at all times. You know, people aren't really looking at you or looking at the person around them. They're just so focused on their own little world that you can.

I've never felt more surrounded by people and yet more alone at the same time. And then something that really made me, like, stop and think of, like, “Oh, okay, no one really cares what I do or or how I feel when you're in the city.” For me, it was just like, “okay, how can I explore this?” And being able to capture moments that people often overlook.

So whether it's, you know, a little kid getting that first ice cream cone with sprinkles on it and taking that first buy or at the street food vendor who's cleaning off their car at the end of a long night. It's things like that where I was like, Oh yeah, this is the kind of mundane things in life that you really start to appreciate.

And through that, and just editing all those photos and staring at them for hours on end, I started to appreciate more the work and the grind that kind of went into playing soccer. And I was like, Okay, maybe this is something that I definitely missed having stepped away.

And it's, you know, you have those teammates beside you at all times that are going through the same thing and it's like, Yeah, this just, it just felt right to go back.

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Yeah. So I actually am from New Jersey, so I've definitely been to New York quite a lot, quite a few times. And you explained it as "There's so many people around you, but you feel lonely." Did you ever feel that way with your team?

### **Spenser Powell:**

I would say there was definitely a part where I felt at time when I felt that with some with my team. You know, those first two years when you step on campus and you're, you know, you go from being at least for me, it was a – I was pretty well known when I was in high school. Right. So going into those first two years and no one knows who you are. Your teammates don't care because they all have that same kind of edge and that same It factor, so to speak.

And it's really just a battle of all-stars being put together. And for me it was a big reality check being I was used to having two goalies on the roster and my first two years I think we had six. So it was a lot to take in and I was definitely in my head. A lot of those practices where I'm like, am I in the right?

I made the right place, am I good enough to be playing with these guys? And, you know, it wasn't until I would say midway through my sophomore season where I really felt that I was at home and it wasn't even a certain game or certain practice. But there was just those bonding moments of, you know, you're on a six hour bus ride and everyone's playing card games or watching the same movie, throwing stuff at each other across the bus.

And it was one of those things where I was just like, "Okay, yeah, no matter what happens on the field, I know that these guys are going to be a part of my life for forever, and that's the way I want it to be."

*[ 13min 48sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Moving on to college, did any of the teammates go through the same stresses you? You said that you walked away for a little bit, which is probably the best thing for you. But did you, do you think you influenced any of your other teammates to do the same?

### **Spenser Powell:**

I wouldn't say I influence them to also walk away, but I feel like I definitely had an influence on people taking better care of their mental health. You know, once I came back to a team, you know, the first couple of weeks, everyone was like they were kind of walking on eggshells. No one wanted to know or well, everyone wanted to know, "hey, what happened?" Or, "Why are you all of a sudden back?"

You're like, You never left. And my coach actually made me stand up in the middle of a team meeting and was like, "All right, Spenser, you know, everyone wants to know if you're actually

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

here, if you're just going to leave us again. So just break down what happened? Your frame of mind and why you wanted to come back to the team.”

And it was a very difficult thing talking to, you know, 24 guys who I would say weren't necessarily they knew what mental health was at this time, but it wasn't really a big topic like it is now.

And just telling them, “hey, look, you know, I had a lot going on in my life in a short period of time. And I guess last thing I wanted to worry about was soccer.”

And, you know, after that meeting, quite a couple of guys came up to me and were like, “Hey, you know, no matter what, we're always here for you. You know, we have your back. It's something that everybody goes to at some point in their life. And you just happened to go through it sooner than most people. So don't feel bad. We know that Coach wants to put you in the doghouse for what you did, but we're not going to hold that against you as long as you're here for us, you know, we're going to be here for you as well.”

So that was always refreshing. And knowing that I could share that same sentiment with the guys was a big part for me too, because you have those captains who are leaders on the field and off the field, but no one is really that leader in mental health.

So I think that's where I kind of, kind of took a role and said, “you know, we have these great resources at Delphi. We need to make sure that we're taking advantage of that.”

*[ 15 min 57sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

That's awesome. And then at Adelphi, how did you help others get in touch with their mental health? Like what were the steps that they had to take to get back on the right track?

### **Spenser Powell:**

It was actually really easy. We had a great sports medicine department and, you know, every team was assigned the same trainer for almost all four years unless they left or something along those lines. And I got really lucky that my trainer genuinely cared about who I was and, you know, my state. So I talked to them and I was like, “hey, you know, I'm not really in the greatest frame of mind.”

And they referred me to our the general schools psychology department like they offer, whether it's other students who are just learning and get in the process of getting their degrees, graduate students who are, you know, going for their doctorates and PhDs or it's just someone who already has that and is just looking to take on some extra client work.

And it was all free of charge because I was a student and it was during the school. So just making sure and it was something that I hadn't known about until I talked to our athletic trainer

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

and then telling, you know, telling the team like, “hey, you guys know that we have this?” We don't have to pretend like lifting weights is a good enough therapy because I know for some it is, but for a lot of guys, you know, we do need to talk and we do need to have those harder conversations.

So yeah, just spreading the word that those assets were there was a big help. But I was also a part of the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, so I was able to really talk to not just my team, but the entire athletics department.

Every student athlete across every team was required to attend at least one meeting. So I made sure to bring up mental health in every single meeting, and I think it kind of turned the tide of athletics at that school.

*[ 17min 45sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

That's really amazing. And it seems like it was really, really helpful in your life because you said that you still talk to somebody to this day, correct?

### **Spenser Powell:**

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Her name's Jess. Shout out to Jess. She is the greatest therapist. Let's see, I've been working with her now almost, I think four or five years and I wouldn't know what to do without her.

Once I left school I thought things are going to get a lot easier, but they did not. You know, my first job out of college was in the medical field, medical marketing, and it was a shirt, tie, gray cubicle. And I hated every second of it. So I would come home and just be in tears because I was like, I don't know what to do. This is the rest of my life now.

You know, you have that midlife crisis at 22 and you start to, you start to panic a little bit. But finding, finding my therapist and working with her really gave me the strength and the platform and just base knowledge of realizing, okay, this isn't forever.

I'm still young. Even if I was old, I could still make a change in my life. And, you know, as long as I'm happy, then that's what I should be doing. So yeah, it's been a big help and something that I recommend to everyone in my life now.

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

So you've had a pretty long journey with mental health and it seems like right now you're in a great spot. So what advice would you give to me and other student athletes who are going through the struggles of playing at the collegiate level?

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

### **Spenser Powell:**

The number one thing I would say is you have to put yourself first, right? I think, if you – it's kind of like the age old adage of like when you're on an airplane and the oxygen mask drops, you have to put yours on before helping anyone else around you. And I think that's true with mental health as well.

You know, your friends come to you and you and they can vent and they can ask for advice, but it doesn't – it's no good if it's not advice that you would take, and it's not something that you strongly believe in. Now, whenever a friend is like, "Hey, can I talk to you?" My first response to them is, "Yes, but I need you to tell me what it is that you would like from me. Is it do you want just a shoulder to cry on? Do you want what I would do in that situation, or do you just want me to also be angry with you so you're not angry alone?"

And that's been a big help because, again, if I just want to vent it out and I don't really want advice from someone and then they start to give advice after I talk about my situation, I just get extremely frustrated and you know, you feel like they don't get it.

So just be honest with everyone around you, be honest with yourself and make sure that you're taking steps to get help if you need it. I think a lot of people see you going to therapy as weak or it's something that's frowned upon and it's not the case.

You learn a lot about yourself. You learn a lot about other people. And I really can't recommend it enough.

*[ 20min 35sec ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

That's amazing. It seems like therapy actually has really helped you grow and you kind of seem like a little therapist yourself, so I'll definitely keep that in mind.

*[ GTTP theme music fades in ]*

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Spenser, I can't thank you enough for your discussion today. I know it definitely will help other athletes who are going through the same thing, and I know it has helped me think differently about managing my mental health as a student athlete.

That's it for today on *Getting to the Point*. Thank you so much for tuning in.

*[ GTTP theme music fades out ]*

## **GETTING TO THE POINT (S1E1, Pilot): Student Athletes Mental Health**

### **Zoe Chrisostomides (host):**

Getting to the Point is an affiliate of The Point, Fitchburg State's student newspaper. If you're interested in working on the podcast, register for our College Newspaper Production – ENGL 3830.

*[ Perseverantia theme music fades in ]*

### **Dr. Lisa Gim:**

This is Professor Lisa Gim in English Studies, and you're listening to *Perseverantia*, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

*[ Perseverantia theme music fades out ]*