

Identity Outside of the Ace

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Jane Horner (left) posing in front of the infamous “I Love Charlottesville” sign with younger brother Charlie and older sister Emily (right). Photo courtesy of Jane Horner.

For the first time in restless months, California native Jane Horner can finally breathe in the fresh Virginia air on that rainy day. Her eyes swollen but her heart beaming with joy, she strides out of the cold office with the heavy wooden doors of Division I Volleyball closing behind her. She may have let seventh grade Jane down, but an instinctual feeling in her stomach reassures her of her decision.

Second year libero/defensive specialist, Jane Horner never used to identify herself as “the volleyball player,” until she arrived at the stuffy Memorial Gymnasium at the University of Virginia. A star on the Division I ACC Varsity volleyball team consumed with training, practice, games and traveling, Jane soon realized her new east-coast identity was volleyball.

I. The Love of the Game.

One of four siblings, sharing the burden of being the middle child with her younger brother Charlie, Jane and her siblings were raised in a typical California-styled home built on the

principles of love, support, and respect. Growing up in sunny Orange County California, tall and athletically gifted, Jane Horner seemed like the perfect candidate to play volleyball. The sport, which was introduced by her father, Mike, on recreational terms, would soon present a promising future for both Jane and her older sister Emily.

On nice days, young Jane, Emily, and their father would play in the street just in front of their house or pick up a ball at the beach and hit over the net for fun. Throughout their childhood, volleyball was just a fun activity and hobby for the Horner girls.

II. Finally, onto the Court.

A lanky preteen still morphing into the athletic body she was fortunately gifted with, Jane stepped onto the court of Newhart Middle School radiating excitement about the chance to finally play competitive volleyball. Having anticipated this moment for years, Jane threw on her royal blue and gold uniform, equipped with spandex, knee pads, white crew socks, and volleyball shoes and raced out of the locker room.

The suspense Jane felt towards playing competitive volleyball resembled the impatience of a driver at a red light waiting for the quick flash of green signaling “go.” Jane’s parents decided to prolong their daughters’ submersion into competitive volleyball in order to protect their fragile bodies from the straining physical demands the sport requires. However, nobody could have predicted the severity of the psychological strain this passion would later inflict upon Jane.

III. Giving Thanks.

As a junior at Santa Margarita Catholic High School, Jane received intriguing offers to play volleyball from two nationally ranked academic schools: one was only a thirty-minute drive from her childhood home while the other was 2,580 miles across the country.

Upon her official visit to the University of Virginia, Jane took in the perfectly shaven green grass on the lawn and the ancient bricks paving the path to the rotunda and infamous corner. Right then and there, Jane decided “I need to come to this school.” With Thanksgiving two weeks away, Jane committed to UVA and knew she had a lot to be grateful for at this year’s family gathering.

Back on the west coast, Jane starred on both her high school and club volleyball teams. Composed of the best Southern California talent, her high school team motivated her to push herself and become a better player. Although she dedicated hours and weekends to volleyball, she never let the sport define her. Sure, Jane played competitively, but she also served on student council, as athletic rep, social rep, spirit commissioner, peer ministry, link crew leader, and president of national charity league. High school Jane was more than the perceived *volleyball player* that would later come to define her first two years at the University of Virginia.

In addition to her high school extracurricular activities, Jane had the support of her motley close-knit group of high school friends, a diverse group of teens ranging from theater stars to photographers that bonded over their different passions and involvements. This liberal atmosphere made the transition into an exclusive environment of Division I athletes, specifically volleyball players, extremely difficult for Jane to cope with.

IV. East Coast Identity.

Like any student athlete, Jane was excited to start this new chapter of her life. Years of strengthening and conditioning her body would finally pay off as she headed to Charlottesville to represent the Cavaliers in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

After the first two and a half weeks of preseason inside the stifling Memorial Gymnasium off of Emmett Street, Jane felt defeated. Although she could *physically* bear the training and practices, she *mentally* struggled and her passion for volleyball began to slowly wither away as she distanced herself from her love of the sport.

Surrounded only by her teammates and other athletes and playing six and a half hours a day for weeks straight with only one day off, Jane realized her identity to the people she met on the east coast had transitioned into the dreaded label as *the volleyball player*.

Uncomfortable in her new skin layered in orange and blue and Nike symbols, Jane morphed into an isolated and unfamiliar version of herself. She struggled to rediscover the high school bubbly character who prided herself on her diverse friends and extracurricular involvements and never outwardly flaunted her association with volleyball. Confined to the exclusive club of athletes who lived in new dorms, ate at John Paul Jones Arena, carried blue backpacks, and traveled around grounds on mopeds, Jane struggled to fully assimilate in an environment in which she felt she never truly identified with. Her disconnect from the majority of her teammates and the sport in general did not go unnoticed. Jane soon found herself as an outsider looking into the only community she had been introduced to at UVA.

V. A Whole New World.

A foreigner to her teammates, Jane found encouragement in reconnecting with her old identity through joining Tri Delta sorority and meeting one hundred and seventy-nine new welcoming faces in January of her freshman year.

Both members of the Greek system at their respective schools, Jane's parents encouraged her to join a sorority, but they also cautioned her of the unrelenting party stigma that clings to sorority girls and fraternity boys. The stigma certainly followed Jane's athletic career. The staff constantly prioritized volleyball and even implemented what her former teammate Harley Sebastian coined a "don't ask, don't tell policy" towards players joining Greek life. Already an outsider on the team, Jane's expansion into Greek life involvement furthered a hostile environment between herself, the coaches, her teammates, and the staff.

Meeting new people and placing herself into what she called, "a whole new world" of college, Jane's passionate attachment to the once beloved childhood game slowly deteriorated. Her failed attempts to bond with her teammates and her growing connections with a new community of friends furthered Jane's status of an outsider on the team.

Her new existence in a welcoming community in the spring of her first year showed her an entirely different perspective of college. A pool of opportunity she did not have the chance to dive into because of volleyball's consumption over her life. Upon this realization, volleyball

began to inch its way towards the ticking time bomb of anxiety that infested Jane's mental capacity.

VI. The Mental Toll.

One of the three players not receiving scholarship but sacrificing just as much time and energy as her financially covered teammates, Jane grew resentful of her underappreciated contributions to the team. Unquestionably a star on the court and key to Virginia's success, Jane felt undervalued as she perused through game day cards, posters, and banners and never once recognized herself. These feelings of disrespect from the program boiled inside of Jane everyday as she immersed herself into an unwelcoming environment that permitted her to feel undervalued and disrespected.

Jane, being the optimistic character she is, hoped things would get better and tried to stick it out for the seventh grader who fell in love with volleyball. However, her misery prevailed. After a long day of volleyball, class, and the library, Jane would go to set her alarm for another 6 AM practice. A rush of anxiety and depression would invade her brain, keeping her awake for hours dreading the thought of returning to the hostile atmosphere of volleyball. Her sister, Emily, recalled a few nights in which Jane would text her "I can't wake up. I don't want to wake up. I really can't get out of bed for this."

Things got worse when her best-friend on the team, Harley, quit in January of her Jane's second year. Completely alone and surrounded by enmity and fear, the thought of volleyball began to feel like a punch in Jane's stomach. Jane started a new pre-practice ritual to deal with the fear: shedding a few tears and hugging the porcelain bowl and relinquishing her previous meal.

Despite her misery, Jane tried to present the perfect middle-child she had always wanted to be. Unless it was provoked, her discontent was hidden to the world. However, once she realized the stock on her mental speedometer was close to zero, she informed her parents and the athletic department of her difficulties. After several attempts to convey the severity of her mental state, the athletic department eventually put her on medical hold on January 29, 2018, the same night tragedy struck Charlottesville when a first year on the men's rowing team committed suicide.

"For the state that I was in, if I wasn't such a strong person, most people would've done severe actions."

VII. Relief.

On Tuesday, March 20, 2018, the day Jane officially quit the volleyball team, she could finally sigh in relief. A month after her medical hold release and weeks of meetings with the coaching staff, Jane could finally step away from the sport that caused her so much pain and anxiety.

Looking back on her time spent playing volleyball at UVA, Jane does not regret the decision to play at the collegiate level. Without this experience she would have never known if she could have been great or if she could have gone through college as a student athlete. She respects herself for all the sacrifices she made to get to the collegiate level and is satisfied with proving to herself she could do it. Now that she experienced it, she is content with closing the door on volleyball and has learned "it's time to move on."

Since resigning from sport that consumed most of her life, Jane has not felt one inkling of nostalgia for the court. In fact, she is her happiest version of herself here at UVA and has surrounded herself with those who love and care about her. Jane can appreciate the little things average college students take for granted such as having time to dress up for class, walking to class instead of whipping around her red moped, staying up late at the library without worrying about being tired for an early practice, exercising on her own schedule, and focusing on school work.

Prior to resigning, Jane's mother, Kim, used to look down at her lit-up phone and prepare herself for a hard conversation with her daughter sobbing to her on the other side of the country. Now, Kim Horner does not automatically tense up upon hearing Jane's ringtone and can anticipate a pleasant conversation from her happy daughter.

"On my honor, as a student, I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment."- Kathleen Taylor