

## When One Door Closes: An Athlete's Story of Perseverance

*When he was young, Aaron Scheidies dreamed of being a professional soccer player, but as his vision began to decline, his aspirations of playing soccer became unobtainable. He struggled with his mental health, and was eventually diagnosed with an eating disorder, depression, and OCD in high school. Eventually, he discovered swimming—at his big brother's recommendation—and realized the path to becoming a professional athlete was still open to him. Now, at 40 years old, the seven-time Paratriathlon World Champion is a TrueSport Ambassador focused on helping the next generation of athletes develop resilience and persevere through challenges in life and sport. Here, he's sharing a few important lessons he learned along the way.*

When I started playing soccer as a kid after my big brother started playing, I just fell in love with it. As many kids do, I wanted to be a soccer player when I grew up—that's natural when you're young and you're good at a sport and you love it. But when I was nine, I started losing my vision, and it got increasingly difficult to play. By seventh grade, it was becoming clear that I wouldn't be able to play at the level I knew I could compete at if I had full vision. On top of that, during your teenage years, there's a lot of 'trying to be normal.' I had to come to grips with the idea that I wasn't 'normal' like everyone else. I found myself questioning everything.

At first, I tried to just work harder. But everything was becoming more difficult. Mentally, I was telling myself, 'If I just work harder than everyone else, I can still compete.' But at some point, if you don't have vision, and you're trying to play a sport where you have to see the ball, it doesn't matter how hard you work or how much you train. It's not going to be realistic to keep playing against people with full vision.

Looking back, I realize that perseverance isn't just a linear progression. My perseverance in trying to play soccer despite failing vision wasn't going to be realistic or fulfilling. And because I kept pushing, I fell into a downward spiral. I developed obsessive compulsive disorder, an eating disorder, and depression, and looking back, much of that was because I was trying to have control over things I couldn't control.

We've been taught to think of perseverance as pushing through any obstacle, and we're told that if you do that, eventually you win. That's the success story of perseverance. But while I think perseverance is doing whatever it takes to conquer an obstacle, there has to be the caveat that sometimes you need to redirect your perseverance. You can still have perseverance in another direction and with another obstacle. When I hit my rock bottom in high school, that was when I started to understand that I couldn't just keep going down that path of trying to achieve something that wasn't possible. I've since learned to notice what I'm trying to control and ask if it's working.

My older brother is the one who got me started on the right path after I hit rock bottom. He had been swimming for a couple years and encouraged me to try it. Because swimming is done in a standardized environment, I was able to participate in a way I couldn't in soccer. And the freedom of being in the water had a calming effect for me: It gave me an outlet, a place where I

could feel confident again. That brought me back to a better place mentally, and I was able to shift from this dream of playing soccer to sports that I could do, like swimming, track, and cross country. Naturally, that combination led to triathlon.

I was lucky that my parents were also supportive. They worried about my safety, but never sheltered me. In 1999, my senior year, I signed up for my first triathlon and I had never done anything like it before. By that point, while I still had some vision, I was legally blind and there were a lot of hurdles in order to compete. I hadn't swum in open water and there was no guide for the bike or on the run, so we just did what we could to be prepared. My parents had driven the bike and run the course with me the night before, which helped me learn key landmarks. Without my vision, my memory has taken over as an enhanced sense, so I can remember where landmarks are and navigate that way. I knew where to position myself on the road because I could somewhat see the white line and the yellow line for the bike and run. In the swim, I couldn't see the buoys, but I could follow splashes. The problem was that I got out in front... then, no more splashes!

I loved it. That first race was great. And that's how I did triathlon for the first five years of competing, before I started racing with a guide. Most importantly, that race was a turning point. It opened a new door in sport and in life for me. When I went to Michigan State for college, I started the triathlon team there. That gave me another network of support, and surrounded me with people to train with and people who could work with me as guides as I started racing more seriously.

None of that would have happened if I had continued to persevere with soccer, or if I hadn't been willing to look for something different. Part of the battle is just continuing to move and grow. Everyone needs an outlet to get out of negative thought spirals, and for me, that's always been exercise and moving my body. Even now, as I've shifted to coaching rather than racing, I stay active and exercise is still my primary stress reliever.

Making the shift from high level elite level sport into coaching has been a challenge in recent years. Getting married and having a family with young kids made it easier to see that I needed to take a step back and look at my life as a whole to decide my next step. Even when you know you're making the right decision, it's a big mental challenge to step away from the sport. Finding the next goal to persevere towards led me to coaching, and that's been hugely gratifying.

Ultimately, I believe that perseverance is a learned skill. It develops from facing obstacles and challenges, and learning how to navigate those obstacles. Sometimes you have to change the path you thought you'd be on, but you can still persevere on that new path.



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