

WHERE TO

A resource dedicated to student-athletes and their Life after Notre Dame.



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WHERE I'VE LANDED: FROM BURNOUT TO BUTTERFLY ROAD

By Ginny McGowan (ND'18)



Is it possible for a student-athlete playing soccer at the highest level to feel both devastation and relief at her team's loss in the Sweet 16? I can answer the question out loud today, but as a senior at Notre Dame facing a pivotal decision about my life after graduation, I kept that "yes" to myself.

I couldn't tell my coach and teammates that my sense of relief served as a clear signal it was time for me to leave the sport I had devoted my blood, sweat, and innumerable tears to for almost two decades.

I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like if I had played soccer professionally, even for just one year. But that's me thinking about this scenario with the mindset I have now, not the one I had six years ago, when I was burnt out from my long-standing struggle with performance anxiety.

As far back as I can remember, I would cry before taking the field. Imagine sobbing about a game you love playing! But performance anxiety replaces positive thoughts with negative ones and causes an athlete to self-criticize, hold unrealistic expectations, and focus on failure.

SPOTTING THE GOLDEN DOME

My parents encouraged me from a young age to try a number of sports, but soccer was my first and final love. As a kid, I couldn't wait for the weekend to watch the Premier League. I had my eye on Wayne Rooney, a former player who is now the manager of Birmingham City, and came to appreciate not only soccer's teamwork but its global appeal. As the world's most popular sport, it binds humankind together with love for "the beautiful game."

Once I got to middle school, my watchful eye turned to Notre Dame women's soccer. My dad, an alumnus, took my siblings and me to campus every year (car rides included a prize of one dollar to whoever spotted the Golden Dome first) and as my dedication to soccer grew, I realized these trips had served their intended purpose. I started collecting signatures on my soccer ball of everyone on the national championship team roster, and when I committed to Notre Dame as a high school sophomore, with hopes of adding my own name to a winning roster, my full circle moment arrived.

But there were too many other moments, not so fulfilling, when my performance anxiety kicked in. My parents had encouraged me to see a sports therapist beginning in middle school, and at Notre Dame, during a brutal sophomore year when my team had never worked so hard to improve our skills and cohesion, my therapist at the time asked me to picture my life after soccer. When I did so, I felt the happiest emotions.

CONNECTING THROUGH BUTTERFLY ROAD AND LAND

When I left Notre Dame and soccer to begin my career in marketing, I was determined to address my demon of performance anxiety. This time I would do it out loud and broadly, and try to reach other student-athletes struggling with their own mental health. Butterfly Road is the podcast my fellow alumna Cari Roccaro and I founded in 2020. We saw it as a natural progression from the supportive texts we'd been sending each other while I was at Notre Dame, and she was starting her professional soccer career. Our podcast tells the mental health stories of the biggest names in sports, includes interviews with Notre Dame alumni, and hopefully helps reduce the stigma surrounding athletes' mental health through example.

At 43 episodes and counting, we've heard from listeners that the topics we explore on Butterfly Road are deeply relevant to them. It's gratifying to know that our conversations are benefitting others just as much as they help Cari and me.

Finding commonality and community with others who share our experiences is vital for former student-athletes as they transition to life after sports. One of my greatest challenges after graduation was adjusting to the sudden end of a long, intensive effort to achieve a singular goal with my teammates. Another challenge was discovering how to channel my innate competitiveness into new endeavors.

This is where Project LAND comes into play, with its leadership team and Class Reps, like Cari and me, who understand what it means to be a former student-athlete of Notre Dame, used to grinding it out minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, year after year toward the win. Instead now through LAND, that win can come in the form of a new career, improved physical or mental health, or connections with new people and experiences.

These days when I see the Golden Dome emerge on the horizon and cheer on the excellent play of the women's soccer team, I experience the special feelings that only Notre Dame can provide, unclouded by the fearful ones of years ago. Overcoming my performance anxiety has been difficult, but it's also made me a better colleague and leader as I've developed a deeper understanding of what others may be going through. Yes, my life looks nothing like what I thought it would on graduation day 2018, and that's not a bad thing. Not at all.

Genevieve (Ginny) McGowan (ND'18) was born in Lake Forest, Illinois. In high school she played field hockey – winning back-to-back state championships – and soccer, for which she was a freshman MVP and all-conference, all-state and all-academic selection. Among many achievements, Ginny was ranked No. 11 out of 150 players in the 2014 Top Drawer Soccer Girls IMG Academy, and reached No. 1 in the Midwest Region and No. 3 among all defenders nationally. As a player on the Women's Premier Soccer League Chicago Red Stars Reserved in 2014, Ginny helped the team win the Midwest Conference title and reach the WPSL semifinals. In her junior year at Notre Dame, she started all 21 games and played a key defensive role as her team surrendered just nine goals and 9.8 shots per game on the season. Ginny's penalty kick during a final season match against Texas A&M helped Notre Dame advance to the Sweet 16. Ginny is Associate Creative Project Manager at Merkle and is co-host and co-creator with Cari Roccaro (ND'16) of the Butterfly Road podcast, launched in October 2020. Ginny and Cari offer "lighthearted insight, relatable stories, and straight-up positive vibes for anyone that wants a brutally honest and refreshing take on mental health in the sports world and beyond." A Class Rep for Project LAND, Ginny often returns to Lake Forest to visit her parents Karen and Michael McGowan (ND'83) and two younger siblings.