Warm May breezes. The salty tang of David’s sunflower seeds. The crack of the bat and the pop of a ball in a mitt. Bases set a perfect 90 feet apart. The soothing scent of leather and the punch of hard-earned sweat. Baseball is more than just a game for me. I’ve loved the sport ever since I was a little boy. I’ve watched plenty of games, but playing was the way I knew how to really experience baseball. That all changed on February 28, 2015.

A simple day of skiing in the Poconos on the weekend before high school baseball tryouts seemed routine enough, until I made a serious miscalculation in the terrain park. I caught too much air on a massive jump and ended up sprawled on my back, my right leg exploding in white-hot agony. Instantly, I feared it was broken. My worst nightmare was confirmed at the Pocono Trauma Unit; I had fractured my femur. By ambulance, I traveled to St. Christopher’s in Philadelphia, where, in a four-hour procedure, the surgeons inserted a metal rod in my leg from hip to knee. The next few days were a pain-filled, drug-induced blur. The doctors told me I wouldn’t be able to run or jump for six months. My baseball season was over before it had even begun. I was devastated, convinced that nothing good would ever come of my accident. For several weeks after my surgery, I wallowed on my couch, until something unexpected, yet fitting, pulled me out of my abyss: baseball.

No, I couldn’t play; but I could contribute--from the dugout. Despite never playing a single inning, I learned more that season than I had in any other. Not being able to run out onto the field was tough at first, but I gained essential insight into how to manage situations and how the game flows when I’m not out there between the lines. The intricacies of making decisions for 9-year-olds were challenging, and approaching the game from a more cerebral viewpoint was eye-opening. As a player and as a student, I had the tendency to underestimate how important strong leadership and communication skills were to success. My perspectives on coaching were completely transformed. I learned coaching wasn’t just about being knowledgeable (although that is crucial). It was more about being able to convey ideas effectively, to teach, and to give constructive criticism in a way that inspires. As I already knew as an athlete, the best coaches aren’t soft; they motivate players to earn their respect. I learned to strike a balance between being a friend and being an authority figure by blending firmness and fairness. Maybe, most importantly, I learned that coaching 9-year-olds required patience and understanding. It was my hope that by season’s end, my players would have improved their skills, recognized that I cared about them, and felt a little bit more love for the game.

When I broke my leg, I was convinced that nothing positive would ever come of it. However, now that I’ve fully recovered, I can look back with the clarity hindsight provides. I would not go so far as to say that getting injured was a blessing, but it certainly paved the way for an enlightening opportunity. Having the chance to experience baseball as a coach instead of as a player was transformative. I discovered that in order to really understand and appreciate something you love, it is imperative to view it from a different perspective. Since then, I have never viewed baseball (or life) quite the same way.

I’m back on the field now, getting bumped and bruised as a catcher, covered in dirt from head to toe, and loving every minute of it. However, I haven’t stopped coaching. Now, that I’ve experienced both sides of the game, it’s impossible to give up either one.