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Subject: Letter to My Younger Self Ray Allen very good read

Letter to My Younger Self

RAY ALLEN

SHOOTING GUARD / NBA

PRESENTED BY

The Players' Tribune has partnered with Chase for a special edition of "Letter to My Younger Self," a series where athletes reflect on their biggest lessons learned, from finance to relationships and careers.

Dear 13-year-old Ray,

When you get off the school bus tomorrow, you're going to be in a whole new world. This is nothing new. Every time your father gets stationed at a new Air Force base, you have to say goodbye to your friends and start a new life. It's

the same routine once every three years or so. New school, new culture, new faces.

Northern California. Then Germany. Then Oklahoma. Then England. Then Southern California.

And now, Dalzell, South Carolina.

You're used to being the kid that nobody knows. The majority of your existence has been about trying to find new friends, trying to show people that you're a good person and that you mean no harm. You're used to being an outsider. You've gotten pretty good at it.

This time is different though. It's the middle of the school year. Everybody already knows one another. You're at a critical age, and kids are just....

Kids are just mean.

You've grown up in a military household your whole life. Until now, your friends were all from military families. You walked around the neighborhood with your I.D. card hanging around your neck like a dog tag in case some unfamiliar MPs rolled by. You spent your formative elementary school years in Britain. So you don't even realize it, but to some people, you speak very proper.

When you step off that school bus in South Carolina tomorrow and open your mouth, those kids are going to look at you like you're an alien.

"You talk like a white boy," they'll say.

You'll look around the school and see groups of kids all paired off, and you'll feel like you don't have a place.

You'll think to yourself, *I don't understand. Who am I supposed to be?*

I'm going to be 100% honest with you. I wish I could tell you that it will get easier, and that you're going to blend in, and that it's going to be alright. But you're not going to fit in with the white kids, or the black kids ... or the nerds ... or even the jocks.

"You talk like a white boy," they'll say.

You'll be the enemy to a lot of people simply because you're not from around there.

This will be both the toughest and the best thing that will ever happen to you. What I want you to do is this: Go to the basketball court. *Stay* at the basketball court. You can build your entire existence there.

The world is much bigger than Dalzell, South Carolina. If you stick to the plan, you'll see. Remember that when when you're lying in bed on Saturday and Sunday mornings and you hear the engine of your father's old Trans-Van start up outside.

You know that sound. It's not pretty.

All you'll want to do is sleep, but grab your sneakers and run down the stairs because he *will* leave you. You have exactly two minutes before the heat kicks on in the van and he's backing out of the driveway. He's on military time, and if you don't get to the Air Force base court by 0900 on the dot to put your name at the top of the sign-up sheet, you're going to have to wait around all day to get a run in.

You'll learn a lot on that court. As a 13-year-old kid playing against grown men, you'll learn to play in transition out of necessity. You'll play so fast that all the airmen will start calling you "Showtime" when you walk into the gym.

In between games, when you're on the sidelines, I want you to listen very

carefully to all the stories these guys tell.

You're going to hear a lot of, "Man, I coulda ..." on these courts.

Man, I wish I could go back in time.

I'd have gone D-I.

Booze got the best of me.

Man, I coulda....

Man, I shoulda....

I wish I could go back, young fella....

Don't ever put yourself in the position to wish you could hop in a time machine, Ray. You need to stay focused, because things will only become more complicated as you have more success on the court.

When you start getting attention from colleges, some of your own teammates will say things like, "UConn? You'll sit on the bench for four years." Just because you don't drink, they'll say, "Man, you're gonna be an alcoholic once you get to college. You won't be ready. All they do is drink there." A lot of people don't want to see you succeed. Don't get into fistfights with these kids. Trust me, it will accomplish nothing. Instead, remember exactly who said those things. Remember *how* they said it. Remember their faces.

Keep these voices inside your head and use them as fuel every single day when you wake up.

And the voices telling you you're the man? Those are the voices to keep out. When you start getting some national attention in high school, you'll hear things like, "Ray's jumpshot is God-given."

Listen: God doesn't care whether you make your next jump shot.

God will give you a lot of things in life, but he's not going to give you your jump shot. Only hard work will do that.

Don't be so naive as to think you're ready for college ball.

Young fella, you're not ready.

In high school, you might *think* you understand what it takes to be a great basketball player, but you will truly have no idea. When you get to UConn, your coach will show you what hard work really is.

His name is Jim Calhoun. Don't get on this man's shit list.

When you walk into the gym for that first practice, get ready for hell on wheels. You're going to be all excited to put on your Huskies gear and start shooting around. But then Coach Calhoun is going to flip the script.

"Freshmen!" he'll say. "You think you deserve to wear this uniform? You don't deserve the privilege. Not yet."

Then the assistant coaches will start handing out these plain grey shorts and T-shirts to all the freshmen.

"I want to see some sweat," Coach will say.

Up until that very moment, you'll think basketball is all about going out and putting up some jump shots and showing your skill.

When you get put through Coach Calhoun's first practice you'll realize, *Oh, this game is a sonofabitch.*

You will be put through the hardest workout of your life. You'll be gasping for air, hunched over. But the thing is, the gym in Storrs is air conditioned. Your body is used to playing in the sweatbox gyms in South Carolina, where there's no air conditioning.

At the end of the practice, coach Calhoun is going to line everybody up and walk down the line, looking at every player.

When he gets to you, he'll look down at your shirt. There will be a single bead of sweat trickling down your Adam's apple.

He'll look at you. Then he'll look at the little bead of sweat. Then he'll look back at you.

"That's it? Huh ... well, I guess we didn't work you hard enough, Allen."

The next practice is going to be even tougher.

This man is going to damn near break you, but he's going to make you a much better player and person. This will be your introduction to what it *really* takes to be great.

A few days later, you're going to have one of the most memorable moments of your life. You're going to wake up at 5:30 a.m. and go the weight room to get

your workout in, and then you'll come back to the dorm and shower before class.

You'll put on a shirt and tie, throw your backpack over your shoulder and walk across campus to your first class of the day.

It's early, so it's still quiet. The leaves are crunching under your feet. You're sore, but your clothes are on point. You got your work in. You're prepared. You have a purpose.

I don't know what it is about this moment in particular, but as you're walking, you'll think, *Wow. I'm a college student. No matter what happens at the end of this tunnel, I'm going to make my family proud.*

When you get to your public-speaking class and sit down, this girl will turn to you and say, "Hey, why are you so dressed up?"

You'll say, "Because I can."

In that moment, it will feel like you have conquered the world.

I could end this letter right here, and you would still probably be excited about what you are going to accomplish in life. But you still have an 18-year NBA career ahead of you.

How do I sum up nearly two decades in the NBA? What do you really need to know? What's truly important?

You'll get to play against your heroes: Michael Jordan and Clyde Drexler.

You'll play alongside Hall of Famers: Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, LeBron James, Dwyane Wade.

Sometimes you'll be afraid.

Sometimes you'll think you're out of your league.

But you'll keep showing up every day, putting in the work.

You'll put up more than 26,000 shots in your career. Almost six out of 10 won't even go in. I told you this game was a sonofabitch.

Don't worry, though. A successful man is built of 1,000 failures. Or in your case, 14,000 misses.

You'll win a championship in Boston.

You'll win another in Miami.

The personalities on those two teams will be different, but both teams will have the same thing in common: habits.

Boring old habits.

I know you want me to let you in on some big secret to success in the NBA.

The secret is there is no secret.

It's just boring old habits.

In every locker room you'll ever be in, everybody will say all the right things. Everybody says they're willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to win a title. But this game isn't a movie. It's not about being the man in the fourth quarter. It's not about talk. It's getting in your work every single day, when nobody is watching.

Listen: God doesn't care whether you make your next jump shot.

Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, LeBron James, Dwyane Wade. The men who you are going to win championships with are all going to be very different people. What makes them champions is the boring old habits that nobody sees. They compete to see who can be the first to get to the gym and the last to leave. Your peers who think this is a cliché, or who think this doesn't apply to them because they have God-given talent, will play their whole careers without winning an NBA title.

But I want you to understand something deeper. The championships are not the point.

Yes, there will be a sense of validation and vindication when you raise the trophy above your head, remembering everyone who ever said you wouldn't amount to anything.

Four-year benchwarmer.

Alcoholic.

White boy.

But if I'm being real with you, what you'll realize after you win the first title is that the thrill is fleeting. The vindication is fleeting. If you only chase that high, you're going to end up very depressed.

The championships are almost secondary to the feeling you'll get from waking up every morning and putting in the work. The championships are like when you were sitting in class at UConn with your shirt and tie on. They're just the culmination.

Your winding path to those moments, just like your walk across campus on that quiet fall morning in Connecticut, is where you will find happiness.

I really mean it from the bottom of my heart: Life is about the journey, not the destination. And that journey will change you as a person.

Let me tell you one final story that may help you understand what I mean.

It's the early morning hours of June 21, 2013. You're 38 years old, and just a few hours ago you won Game 7 of the NBA Finals with the Miami Heat.

You are an NBA champion for the second time.

You lay down in bed at about five in the morning, but you just can't sleep. Finally, around seven o'clock, you give up on sleep and creep downstairs. All your friends and family have come over to your house to celebrate — they're all passed out on couches, sound asleep. You tiptoe around them on the way to the kitchen to make some breakfast. The sun is coming up, the house is quiet. You have achieved exactly what you set out to do. But you're still restless. So why do you feel this way? Isn't this what you worked so hard for? Around 7:30, you get into your car and go for a drive. You park your car in front of a white office building. They're just opening up. When you walk in the door, the receptionist looks at you and says, "Ray? What ... what are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"But ... you just won the title."

"Yeah, I just wanted to get out of the house."

"But ... it's eight in the morning. And you just *won the title*."

"Well, I still got some work to be done on this tooth. Is he in?"

Your dentist walks out of his office.

"Ray? What are you ... what?"

"Couldn't sleep."

This is what success looks like for you. You're the kind of guy who goes to the dentist the morning after winning an NBA title.

I know, man.

I know.

But in order to achieve your dreams, you will become a different kind of person. You'll become a bit obsessive about your routine. This will come at a heavy cost to some of your friends and family.

Most nights, you won't go out. Your friends will ask why. You won't drink alcohol, ever. People will look at you funny. When you get to the NBA, you won't always play cards with the boys. Some people will assume you're not

being a good teammate. You'll even have to put your family on the back-burner for your job.

Most of the time, you will be alone.

That won't make you the most popular person. Some people simply won't understand. Is the cost worth it?

Only you can answer that.

Who am I supposed to be?

Tomorrow when you get off that school bus in South Carolina, you'll have to choose.

Every day for the rest of your life, you'll have to choose.

Do you want to fit in, or do you want to embark on the lonely pursuit of greatness?

I write this to you today as a 41-year-old man who is retiring from the game. I write to you as a man who is completely at peace with himself.

The hell you experience when you get off that bus will be temporary. Basketball will take you far away from that school yard. You will become far more than just a basketball player. You'll get to act in movies. You'll travel the world. You will become a husband, and the father of five amazing children.

Now, the most important question in your life isn't, "Who am I supposed to be?" or even, "What do I have to do to win another championship?"

It's, "Daddy, guess what happened in math class today?"

That's the reward that awaits you at the end of your journey.

Go to the court. *Stay* at the court.

Get your work in, young fella.

Most people will never really get to know the real *you*. But they'll know your work.

RAY ALLEN / CONTRIBUTOR

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