

Opinion: The Value of the Detour

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When Dr. Nancy Major told students to “do it your way,” I initially assumed it was the kind of encouragement speakers often offer at the end of a talk. But as she described her journey, beginning with her service in the Army, then her work as a radiologist, and later her involvement with elite athletes and international mentoring programs, it became clear that she meant something much more serious.

Her path challenged the idea that a successful life must follow a perfectly designed plan. Instead, her story showed that meaningful work often grows out of unexpected turns, new opportunities, and a consistent willingness to serve others.

Dr. Major originally planned to build an extensive career in the military and hoped to eventually reach the rank of general. That plan changed abruptly when a running injury prevented her from continuing that path. She described the experience almost casually as a “hiccup,” but it completely redirected her life and eventually led her into radiology and sports medicine. As a BYU student who has experienced a few unexpected academic detours, I found that moment reassuring. It suggested that the moments that disrupt our plans may not be signs that we have failed. Instead, they may open doors we did not know existed.

One of the most interesting parts of her lecture involved her work with Duke University’s basketball program. She noticed that the team repeatedly lost players to stress fractures in their feet. Rather than accepting this as unavoidable, she began reviewing old X-rays to see whether a pattern existed. That observation led her to ask a practical question: could MRI scans detect bone

changes before athletes experienced pain or suffered fractures? With support from Nike and Coach Mike Krzyzewski's permission, she began scanning players' feet to identify early warning signs. The work eventually helped lead to customized orthotics and footwear adjustments designed to reduce pressure on vulnerable areas of the foot. During the time she described, Duke avoided the stress fractures that had previously sidelined players. Her experience showed that research does not always begin with complicated theories. Sometimes it begins simply by paying attention to a recurring problem and deciding not to ignore it.

Her time at Duke also illustrated how opportunities often appear through relationships rather than carefully mapped plans. Because she worked closely with athletes and coaching staff, an advisor asked her to teach a course on sports injuries and radiology. She initially capped the class at twelve students because she assumed few people would enroll. Instead, the course grew to include more than 50 students. She later learned she could have been paid and did not need to teach the course every semester, but she continued teaching it because she genuinely loved it. What mattered most to her was not the enrollment numbers but that students talked about the class outside the classroom. In an academic culture where success is often measured through publications and professional titles, that detail offered a different picture of what meaningful influence can look like.

Her work also revealed how complex the world of professional sports can be. When athletes she had worked with moved on to the NBA, she saw how injuries were evaluated not only medically but financially. Contracts, insurance policies, and entire careers could be affected by how an injury was understood. She often found herself advocating for athletes to ensure their injuries were evaluated and treated. In those moments, she was not simply interpreting medical images. She was helping protect the long-term futures of the athletes she served.

Service became another important thread in her life. Through connections with Coach Krzyzewski, she became involved with the V Foundation for Cancer Research. Years later, she continues to contribute to that work. She described attending an Olympic event where she met a woman who had survived breast cancer because of advances in medical research. Standing beside her, Dr. Major realized how the distinct parts of her life, including medicine, athletics, and service, had connected in ways she never could have planned.

She also spoke about the Global Sports Mentoring Program, in which she mentors women from around the world who want to create opportunities for girls in sports. Many of these women return home to countries where girls' athletics receive little support and must present their ideas in male-dominated environments. Dr. Major helps prepare them for those situations by teaching them how to present proposals, navigate resistance, and maintain confidence when they feel out of place. Because she spent much of her own career as the only woman in the room, she understands the challenges they face.

One of the most memorable moments of the lecture came during the question-and-answer session. A student asked what advice she would give her younger self. After pausing for a moment, she said she would not change anything about her path. The mistakes and unexpected turns gave her empathy and perspective, and they allow her to guide students who feel uncertain about their futures. As someone who sometimes worries about falling behind, I found that response reassuring.

Watching the lecture made me realize how tightly many students hold onto the idea that success requires a perfectly planned path. Dr. Major's life suggests something very different. The most meaningful careers rarely unfold neatly. They grow through curiosity, relationships,

setbacks, and a willingness to serve even when the outcome is uncertain. For students like me, the challenge is not avoiding detours but learning to recognize the possibilities within them.

If I had to summarize her message, it would be this: stop waiting for the perfect plan. Pay attention to what is happening around you. Ask questions. Try new things. The unexpected turns may shape your life far more than the plan you originally imagined.

Sources

Major, N. (2026). Guest lecture presented in the Kennedy Center Lecture Series, Brigham Young University (viewed via recorded lecture).