Opinion: NBA's Jeremy Lin rejected the bullies, dared to be different

People who ask me about my experiences with bullying are often surprised when I tell them that I have been singled out for my race on the basketball court.

Growing up, it wasn’t very common for an Asian-American to be investing as much time as I did in a sport like basketball. On many of the teams I played for, I was either the only or one of very few Asian-Americans. This made me an easy target for opponents, and unfortunately, I was often mocked for my ethnicity.

In middle school, some of the players on opposing league teams called me a “Chinese import” or told me to “go back to China.” When I started playing basketball at Harvard University in Boston, the bullying I faced became even more open. During some of our games, people would openly call me hurtful racial slurs or even ask me if I could see the scoreboard with my eyes. They heckled me by chanting Asian foods like “shrimp fried rice.”

Playing In A Rage

I was shocked that people could be so glaringly racist in a college environment. And I felt furious that they would use my race, something I was proud of and considered an asset, to try to embarrass or hurt me. During one game, the comments got to me so much that I began to play in a rage. In my anger I started committing offensive fouls and playing uncharacteristically badly in an important game. My assistant coach at the time, Kenny Blakeney, could see what had happened and pulled me aside after the game. He told me that when people use offensive racial slurs against me, they’re trying to get under my skin and mess with me psychologically so I’ll play badly. When I react in anger and lose control, they have succeeded at what they’re trying to do.

He told me about his personal experience of being bullied because he was African-American. He shared grim memories of when people would throw things at him while he was eating a meal or call him the n-word. I was shocked at all that he had gone through. He told me that I could let the negativity get to me, or I could use it as motivation to become a better basketball player and a better human being.

Using Bullying To Become Stronger

Hearing about how he had overcome the negativity in his own life gave me hope and encouragement. Instead of letting his experience make him angry and bitter, my coach had channeled his experience into something that made him stronger and that I could now learn from. Maybe I couldn’t control what people said to me or used against me, but I could choose how their words affected how I felt about myself.
Bullying often comes from a place of deep insecurity. When people bully, they are trying to elevate themselves by pushing someone else down. To do that, they might try to find something that is different about you to use against you. But the differences that you have from the rest of your peers are what make you special. When you get bullied, you may be tempted to want to erase whatever makes you unique to just blend in with everyone else.

Embrace Your Differences

But don’t do it. Hold on to what makes you unique and embrace it; it may be what makes you a talented artist, an accomplished scientist, or an important influencer one day. It could help you be a unique role model in the future to others who feel the same way you do. You’d be surprised how many people you admire now were once bullied for being different in the past. If you aren’t experiencing bullying right now, become an advocate for people around you who might be singled out because they don’t look or act like everyone else. Speak up for the people around you who are being bullied. Likewise, help them find someone in whom they can confide.

Being pulled aside and encouraged by my coach made me feel less isolated and helped me remember not to let negativity get to me. Learning about what makes your peers different from you can help you appreciate just how those differences make them special. No matter how old you are, you can help create an environment where people feel safe to be themselves.

Representing My Culture, Loving What I Do

After years of bullying, I am extremely proud to be an Asian-American in the NBA. If I had let the name-calling get to me, I wouldn’t be able to go to my dream job every day with the Charlotte Hornets. If Coach Blakeney hadn’t taken me aside and encouraged me to persevere through bullying, I might have continued to lose my temper or given up.

Now, I’m grateful to be able to represent my culture and do what I love. I love being able to teach my teammates Chinese phrases and to introduce them to my Asian culture. Most of all, I love being able to use what makes me different to encourage young people to be proud of their own differences.

Answer the following questions in complete sentences ON A SEPARATE SHEET OF PAPER.

1. What actions does Lin encourage people to take when they are confronted with bullying?
2. In one sentence, summarize Lin’s belief about bullies.
3. Lin states that when he was called derogatory names during basketball games, he would begin to play in rage and then the bullies would win. What would you do in that situation to ensure that you did not lose your cool? How would you react to being called names while playing a certain sport or activity?
4. Summarize the section “Embrace your Differences”.