

# EXPOSURE



## AN ADVOCATE ON THE COURT

*Beyond the sport: Haile Watson*

Story by [Fresno State](#)

November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Having been on the receiving end of racial discrimination, Haile Watson knows what a dysfunctional team looks like.

One day in high school, her volleyball teammates came together before a game, and one teammate shouted, “White power!”

“My mom is white and my dad is black,” Haile said. “It was shocking that she would say something like that.”

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There was a lack of diversity in northern Idaho, where Haile grew up, and she said that wasn't the first time she faced discrimination. Bullying, stereotypes and microaggressions were frequent in high school.

Just going to school was difficult. But even more difficult was pursuing her volleyball dreams. Haile set her sights on earning an athletic scholarship and playing at the collegiate level, but focusing on volleyball was a challenge when her relationship with her teammates was tumultuous.

"I went to the administration, telling them all of these issues that were going on," she said. "They covered it up and swept everything under the rug."



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## PUSHING THROUGH ADVERSITY

Eyes set on her college dreams, Haile made it through to graduation. She earned two varsity letters and 2013 second-team all-state honors in volleyball. Upon graduation, Haile received several athletic scholarships from various universities. She accepted an offer from Eastern Washington University so that she could remain close to family. But after two years, she decided to transfer to Fresno State in 2016.

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“It was really different being so far away from home, but everyone was just so welcoming and I could see myself being really successful as a student and an athlete at Fresno State,” she said.

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The rich diversity of Fresno State is a stark contrast to her environment in Idaho. The University is a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution, with 50.9% of students identifying as Hispanic, 19% identifying as white, 12.8% identifying as Asian, and 2.8% identifying as black or African-American.

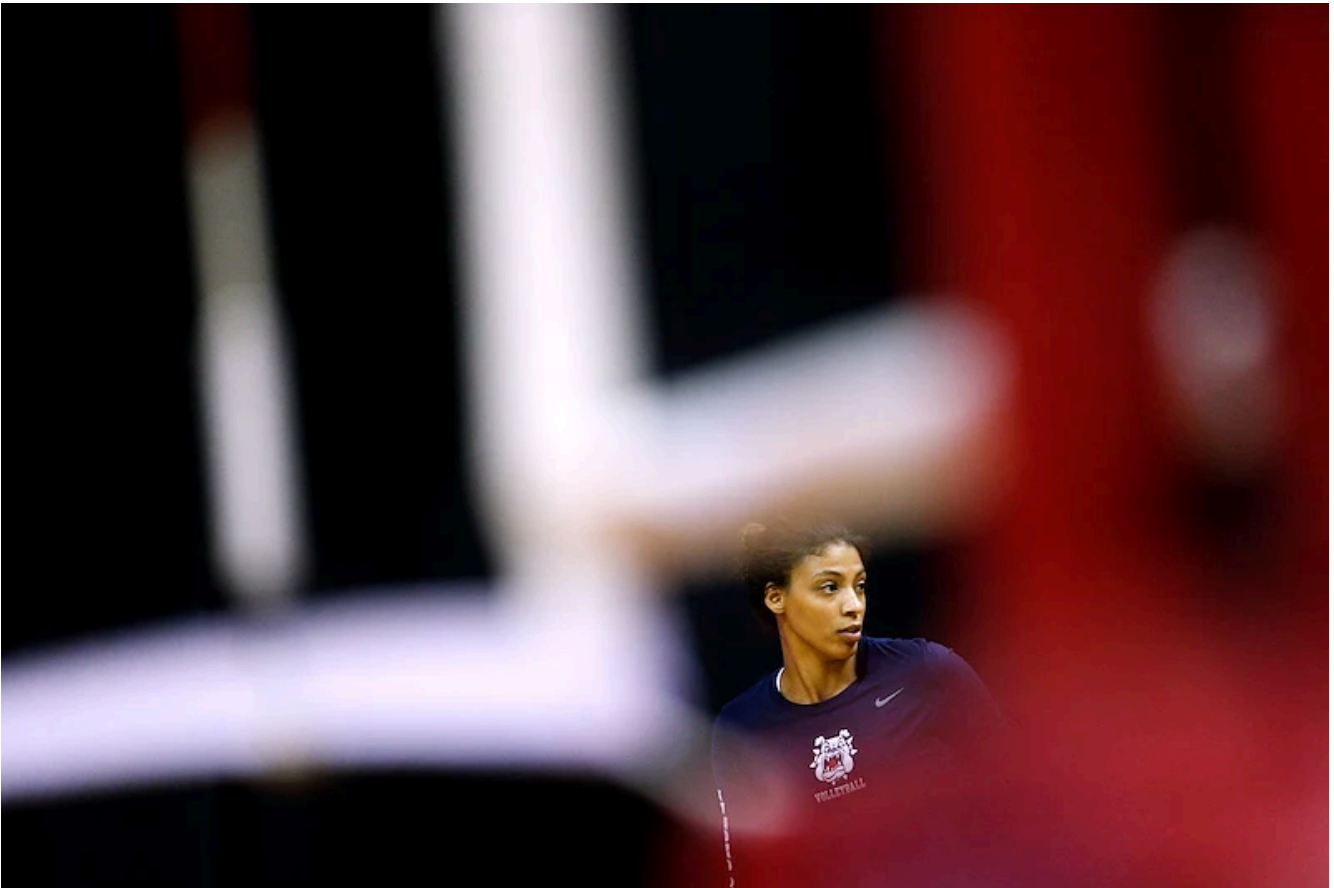
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And at Fresno State, Haile has found success. In her first season, she started in all 29 matches for the Bulldogs and earned Academic All-Mountain West (MW) Honors. In 2017, Haile started all 30 matches, leading the team and ranking second in the MW with 148 blocks and 1.31 blocks per set. She was named to the 2017 MW Global Challenge All-Star Team, which competed in Europe.



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“What made me feel that I could succeed is the coaches having faith in me, believing in me as a player and seeing my potential,” she said. “It’s also my teammates — they’re so welcoming, it makes me feel like this is home.”

Haile continues to lead the Bulldogs through a historic 2018 season. Fresno State has won 20 matches for the first time in 15 years and has clinched at least second place in the Mountain West, the program's best finish since joining the league in 2012, after being picked to finish seventh in the preseason poll.

“Our two biggest goals are to be the best learning team and the best prepared team,” Haile said. “We have a pretty high standard, but if that standard is met, it’s not like we’re going to stop. We’re just going to keep growing and set new standards for ourselves.”



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# SETTING HIGH STANDARDS

But Haile's past still stays with her today. Her experience in high school led Haile to channel in on her academic and career goals — she aims to pursue a graduate degree and become a sports administrator, hoping to be an advocate for student-athletes who face discrimination or bullying.

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“I still think about what I went through,” she said. “I think, because of my past, I’m really passionate about student-athlete success. I just want to make sure that every athlete feels successful. I want to change the culture.”

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As an advocate, she added that “it’s important to listen to issues, to believe people and not sweep what they’re going through under the rug.”

At Fresno State, Haile sees how successful student-athletes can be when they have a functional, supportive team environment. Haile confided in her teammates about her experiences facing discrimination in high school. She said it brought the team closer and created a trusting environment.

One day, she hopes to foster that same inclusive environment for the next generation of student-athletes.



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“I feel like I can come to my teammates and tell them anything,” she said. “They definitely have my back.”



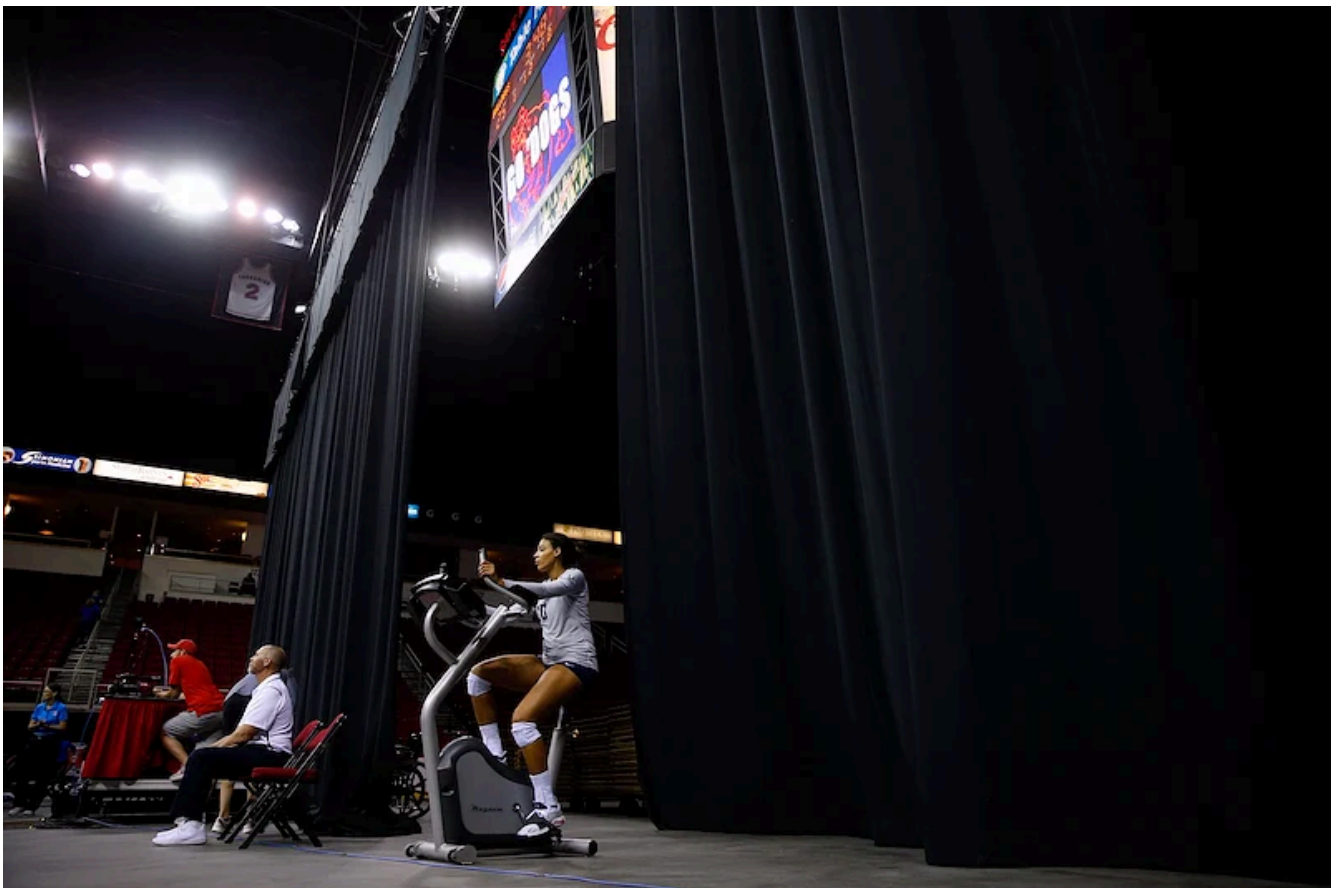
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## SUPPORT HAILE AND OUR STUDENT-ATHLETES.

Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Esra Hashem — University Brand Strategy and Marketing*

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