

Between Discipline and Direction: The Unfinished Story of Israel Falana

By Diego A Rodriguez

Israel Falana didn't drift into discipline. He built it.

Long before most students were awake, before the first bell or the first hallway conversation, Israel was already in the gym. The echo of the ball hitting the hardwood and the squeak of his shoes filled the quiet space. 6 a.m. wasn't early to him—it was necessary. While others slept, he was putting up shots, chasing something he believed he could earn through effort alone.

“I thought if I just worked harder than everyone else, it would come,” he said.

That belief defined him.

At 6-foot-4, with a natural presence and a quiet confidence, Israel stood out. But it wasn't just his size—it was his consistency. He didn't party. He didn't cut corners. He studied, trained, and stayed focused, guided not only by ambition but by a deep sense of faith and responsibility.

Raised in a strict Christian household, discipline wasn't optional. It was expected.

“My parents didn't play around,” he said. “It was school, home, church. That's it.”

That structure shaped him into the kind of student teachers trusted and peers respected. He was kind, level-headed, and thoughtful—but also deeply competitive. He didn't need to show it. He lived it.

And for a long time, it seemed like that work would lead exactly where he wanted it to.

Chasing Something Bigger

Basketball wasn't just a hobby for Israel. It was a goal—something he invested in daily, something he believed could open doors.

At Bolingbrook High School, that goal came with a different level of difficulty. The program was stacked—full of talent, depth, and players fighting for the same spots. At point guard, the position Israel played, the competition was especially intense.

“It wasn't just about being good,” he said. “Everyone was good.”

That meant effort alone wasn't always enough to separate yourself. Still, Israel believed it would.—a belief that would be tested as his path began to shift.

He didn't make varsity his first year trying out.

“That was tough,” he admitted. “Because I felt like I was doing everything right.”

Instead of quitting, he doubled down. More early mornings. More reps. More focus.

By his junior year, he finally made varsity—but barely.

And even then, it didn't feel like the breakthrough he imagined.

“I made it,” he said, “but I didn't really get to play.”

He was labeled a bench player. Minutes were limited. Opportunities were rare. And what hurt more than the lack of playing time was how he was treated.

“Some of the things that were said... it felt disrespectful,” he said. “Like I wasn’t really valued.”

For someone who had spent years sacrificing—waking up early, giving up a social life, staying disciplined—that experience hit deeper than just basketball.

Still, he kept going.

Senior year came, and he made the team again. This time, it felt like things were finally about to change.

On Top—Before the Drop

Despite everything happening with basketball, Israel’s senior year still brought a moment that felt like confirmation that everything had been worth it.

He won prom king.

It wasn’t something he had chased, but it meant something.

“It felt like... everything paid off in a way,” he said.

It reflected how people saw him—not just as an athlete or a student, but as someone respected, grounded, and present. For a moment, he was on top of the world.

But that moment didn’t last.

A Different Kind of Loss

Just as Israel reached the level he had been chasing, his path shifted again—this time, not because of performance, but because of circumstance.

His parents made the decision for him to step away from basketball.

“I didn’t really have a choice,” he said. “That was probably the hardest part.”

At the same time, he went through a breakup with his longtime girlfriend—another emotional hit layered on top of everything else.

“It felt like everything was just stacking,” he said.

The high of senior year quickly turned into something else.

And then came another reality.

No offers.

Despite the years of effort, the early mornings, the sacrifices—nothing materialized the way he had envisioned.

Losing Direction

After graduating, Israel enrolled at Joliet Junior College (“JJC”).

It wasn’t the plan.

He had imagined something more—something that matched the level of effort he had put in throughout high school.

“That messed with me,” he said. “Because it’s like... what was all that for?”

For the first time, the system he trusted—work hard, get results—felt broken.

“I thought I had already gone through the hardest part,” he said. “And then everything just... stopped.”

That’s when the motivation dropped.

The direction he once had disappeared.

When Discipline Isn’t Enough

At JJC, the challenge wasn’t just academic—it was internal.

The structure that once guided him was gone.

“You go from knowing exactly what to do every day,” he said, “to having to figure everything out on your own.”

Without that structure, even discipline can fade.

“I didn’t have the same drive,” he admitted. “I didn’t see the point.”

For someone who had always been defined by consistency and effort, that shift was difficult.

The Bounce Back

But Israel didn’t stay there.

Slowly, something changed.

He turned back to something he had always been good at—speech.

“I started focusing on that more,” he said. “And I liked it.”

Speech gave him a new outlet. A new way to compete. A new way to apply the same discipline he had built over the years.

And this time, the results came.

At the Illinois Speech State Tournament, he placed fourth in Dramatic Interpretation, third in Prose, and fourth in Program Oral Interpretation. He also finished third in the state for individual sweeps among community colleges—an achievement that reflected both consistency and range across multiple events.

More importantly, he found something he had lost.

“I feel like I’m back on track,” he said.

A Different Definition of Success

Israel’s story challenges a simple idea—that if you work hard in school and sports, everything will go exactly as planned.

Because sometimes, it doesn’t.

Sometimes you do everything right—and still face setbacks.

Sometimes the results don’t match the effort.

But that doesn’t mean the effort was wasted.

“I used to think everything had to go a certain way,” he said. “Now I see it doesn’t.”

That realization didn’t come easily.

It came through loss, frustration, and having to rebuild from a place he never expected to be in.

Still in Motion

Right now, Israel's path looks different than he imagined.

There's no basketball scholarship. No clear continuation of the plan he once had.

But there is something else.

"I still want to go far," he said. "Just in a different way."

He's now focused on taking speech as far as he can—and still plans to reach a high-level university.

The goal didn't disappear.

It just changed form.

The Space Between

Israel Falana's story exists in a space that doesn't get enough attention.

It's not failure. It's not a straight success story either.

It's something in between.

A space where effort doesn't immediately pay off. Where identity gets challenged. Where direction has to be rebuilt.

For some, that space breaks them.

For others, it reshapes them.

For Israel, it did both.

“I’m not done,” he said. “Not even close.”

An Unfinished Story

It would be easy to focus on what didn’t happen—the missed opportunities, the setbacks, the path that didn’t go as planned.

But that would miss the point.

Because this isn’t a story about things not working out.

It’s a story about what happens after they don’t.

The same discipline that got him up at 6 a.m. is still there. The same mindset that pushed him through setbacks is still there.

And now, it’s paired with something new—perspective.

“I know what I’m capable of,” he said. “I just had to find it again.”

The Point

Working hard doesn’t always guarantee the outcome you expect.

But it builds something deeper—something that lasts beyond one goal, one plan, or one setback.

For Israel Falana, that’s what carried him through.

And that’s what’s still pushing him forward.

His story isn’t finished.

If anything, it's just getting started.

Israel at his last Speech competition



Israel and Me

