

How swimming has contributed to who I am today by Cameron Gossett

I wake up every morning, and try to find a shirt to wear. I open up my closet, and all I see is a rainbow ocean of fabric, a conglomerate of shirts from swim meets long gone, ranging from small invitational meets, to Junior Olympics and out-of-state meets. Picking a random shirt, the muscle knots in my shoulders tense up, my nose somehow picks up the ever-present, distinct smell of chlorine, and the muffled yet piercing sound of my coach yelling somewhat unintelligible words, that I somehow know is his way of cheering for me, reverberate inside my ears. Swimming lives and flows through every aspect of my life, whether it be succeeding in math due to quick addition, or tolerance to any challenge, and ultimately contributes to who I am today by providing me a constant place where I feel like I belong.

My parents had me start swimming lessons when I was three, because we live in Alaska, and there's usually a body of water in any direction within one's line of sight. With some enthusiasm from my parents, I eventually fell in love with swimming, with this newfound control over such a simple, yet overwhelming element of this Earth, water. After taking several years to advance to a skill level that is suitable for joining a team, my parents encouraged me to try out for the local swim team, in September of 2007. Northern Lights Swim Club (NLSC) had moved out to the Mat-Su about 8 months prior to this, and the opportunity to join and help build a relatively new team seemed like a promising place to advance my swimming skills. Five months later, in February of 2008, my parents entered me into the local Valentine's Day Invite, my first event being the 50 Freestyle, and hoped that I would have fun and succeed. Diving into Lane 2 of the shallow end of the ice bucket that is Bartlett HS Pool, I earned a time of 56.95, which is now slower than my 100 Freestyle time. I consider that one event to be the beginning of my true, love-hate relationship with swimming, as it opened up the doors for me to swim events of increasing intensity.

Swimming has contributed who I am today by showing me that even if a challenge can be persevered by an individual, that challenge sometimes requires the help and motivation of others to persevere it. Every day is like a team-building exercise. We all read the set, and communicate who needs to go in what lane to make compatible groups. During the set, the assigned stroke may change, which causes people within the lane to communicate to one another about who should go ahead for the next 50, or what stroke the person behind someone is doing. If one person miscommunicates or goes too early or too late, then problems can arise, and the set may have to be restarted. By learning how far basic communication can take someone, especially in the frantic and somewhat emotional environment of an aerobic 100's death set, I have been able to apply those skills in real life, such as working on a calculus portfolio as a group, or organizing a set as an assistant coach for Special Olympics. Being able to remain calm under stress and communicate with my group, especially while undergoing a daunting challenge, is a skill that I've learned from swimming, and apply to life every single day.

Swimming has provided more to me than just communication skills, the ability to beat a challenge as a team, or even the opportunity to enter new realms that were previously closed off to me. The main way swimming has contributed to who I am today is that it's always been a constant in my life, since I started NLSC almost a decade ago. I arrive to practice, and know who I'll be swimming the main set with, and what lane I belong in. I know that my teammates will always be there for me if the set is going terribly, and because swimming is a year-round sport, I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to get to know my teammates personally as the years progress. Because of that, I know that the people that I swim and suffer with everyday accept me for who I am, and are fine with letting me join into their lane if I can't find one to enter, even if it's already crowded. Swimming every weekday gives me something to look forward to and rely on, and know that it's a definite part of my schedule that won't change unless the pipes break or the filtration goes out.

Swimming has contributed to who I am today because it shows me that even after a particular set has absolutely wrecked us, there's still a little bit of compassion and reliability left within us, and that's something that I try to pay forward when the going gets tough, and the challenge at hand seems impossible to conquer. The 2017 Alaska Junior Olympics will be my last scheduled swim meet, and since 2008, I have swam approximately 96,276 yards worth of meet events alone, over the course of 99 club meets and approximately 45 high school meets, with the upcoming JO's meet being my 100th club meet. The drive and passion within me, the forces that have pushed me to swim every yard of that total, will continue to push me as I study to earn a degree in mechanical engineering, with a minor in aerospace, with the same intensity as used when enduring the greatest sport on Earth.