

Christopher Chung
Central Area Swimming Scholarship Essay

When I was 5-years-old, my parents brought me to a Hawaiian beach to play in the water. When the tides began to viciously pull me away from the shore, I grasped my mother's hands, but I still felt as if the ocean was tearing my arms away from my body and dragging me to my eventual death. Ever since that traumatic childhood experience, I did my best to avoid water. Little did I know that water was going to become a huge part of my life.

In order to counter my hydrophobia, my parents enrolled me in Swim America when I was seven so that I could learn the essential survival skill of swimming. Going to West High and learning how to blow bubbles in the water was the symbolic start to my swimming career. Eventually I graduated from the swim lessons. I joined the Aurora Swim Team in middle school, but I never truly began competitive swimming until my freshman year of high school.

Joining the Dimond swim team as a timid newcomer, I started out swimming in lane 6, the slowest of the practice lanes. I was barely able to keep up with my peers and dreaded drowning from exhaustion, but watching the upperclassmen push themselves to their limits in practice gave me motivation to try harder in the pool. There were times where I wanted to give up because swimming was so physically taxing, but my coaches Cindy and Scott acted as my greatest leaders. Teaching me that swimming is mostly a mental war, I trained to hone my strokes and not let my body fool me into throwing in the towel when I became fatigued.

In competition, I began with 1:07 100 Freestyles and over 30 second 50 Freestyles. The improvement that came with dedicating myself after school every day to swim came slowly but surely, and the feeling of gratification when I swam my first sub-minute 100 Freestyle gave me a sense of pride and joy. I truly began to realize that diligence yields positive results, and the drive to becoming faster is what kept me from swimming aimlessly. With 3 years of intense training, I finally worked my way up into becoming a team captain.

My greatest swimming memory was my senior year high school state championship. We faced a dilemma. Our team could hope for a miracle to win, or we could give up our seven-year winning streak in exchange for a chance to make history. Being the realist I am, my preference was not to let fate decide: "Let's rewrite the record board." Although winning the state title was important, the collective effort to achieve something greater was also a worthy objective that had to be prioritized. I conveyed this to our team and coach Scott, and we decided to trade our slim chance of winning the title and try for something with a longer lasting impact: state records in the 200 and 400 free relays.

Some of my teammates were reluctant to give up our chance at winning since Dimond High School is a prideful, powerhouse swim team. However, the math showed that we were going to lose by a slim margin unless our rival, Kodiak High School, disqualified in a race. I did not want our team to lose the title without making a splash in the Alaskan swimming scene. As captain, I convened this meeting and our consensus was to stack the two relays and try to break both records which were set by Dimond swimmers in 1998, the year I was born.

Reed, Nathan, Max, and I knew that we were not only competing against the seven other relay teams, but also the team from 18 years ago. The shrieking whistle blow of the referee signaled the first leg swimmers from each relay to step up onto the starting blocks. Reed pulled his swim cap low to just above his racing goggles. After the shuffling of feet onto the blocks, silence. I heard a deep voice say "take your mark," and every swimmer reflexively curled down and gripped the blocks. There was unbearable tension and the silence made the chilly water seem even more daunting. The loud buzzer sounded, and I saw Reed explode off the blocks and gain a slight lead with his powerful stroke. Nathan connected with a safe relay start and expanded the lead. When Nathan rushed back, I traced his approach with my arms and leapt in. Pain ripped through my adrenaline-fueled muscles and I propelled forward for the team. I slammed my hands into the wall and looked up to see Max fly above me. Thunderous cheering ensued as we watched the time count down. We did it! The 200 free relay state record fell. Less than an hour later, ditto for the 400 free relay record. Although our team finished second overall to Kodiak, breaking two long-standing state records lifted our spirits and encouraged the underclassmen to set goals of their own.

Nothing is better than achieving a set goal after working incredibly hard towards it. Passing each milestone whether it is beating a personal best time or even breaking a state record helps motivate me to set more goals as incentives to work towards. Swimming has taught me this important life lesson, and although the practices are grueling, the dry-land training is intensive, and the swim meets are protracted, the sport is my life. It has given me a healthy outlet to prevent burnout from intensive academics while simultaneously teaching me the time management skills for a student-athlete. The networking skills I developed from leading my teammates, racing my rivals, and learning from my coaches have also helped me appreciate the small swim community in Alaska. I am grateful for the camaraderie, bonds, and memories that have resulted from my swimming career that began with hydrophobia. For the rest of my life, I will follow coach Scott's advice: "Just shut up and swim."