

“Eight three-hundreds on the three forty-five. On the top.”

For the unfamiliar, these instructions might as well be in a foreign language, but for swimmers, they translate to a challenging long-distance set designed to push even the toughest of athletes to their limits. Despite knowing the physical and mental challenges I'll have to endure at practice, why do I keep coming back to the pool? Why do I swim? The workout foremost, my teammates, and the competitive nature, all contribute to an incomparable experience.

My swimming career began when my parents enrolled me in swimming lessons fourteen years ago. At that time, the pool was a fun place to be. When I completed lessons, my parents encouraged me to join the Aurora Swim Team, which is one of the best things they've done for me.

Being on the team, swimming was no longer playtime. It was about training to compete. Since I had zoomed through swimming lessons, I assumed I would excel in the competitive world, but those first few years were a rude awakening. Throughout my elementary and junior high years, I came to practice inconsistently with a relaxed attitude toward training. Due to my lack of effort at times during difficult sets my coach would tell me, “You have to control your swimming with your mind, and not let your body dictate how hard you try, even when it hurts.” Unfortunately, my body continued to win the war, and I struggled to push myself when it mattered.

Then, my first high school season arrived. I redefined my stroke to a more arm driven, rather than leg driven strategy. I was now able to swim faster and with greater efficiency. This revelation opened new doors for me, physically and mentally. Competing on a more elite level, I had a newfound confidence that made me attend practice consistently. Finally, my coach's words clicked. I had discovered new limits and developed the mental toughness and motivation to push myself through every practice. Through this entire process, my team was there for me, helping me develop into a better swimmer and person.

Swimmers are a unique breed. No other sport is as solitary, yet team-oriented. During our two hour practices, we communicate for twenty minutes, if that, between set intervals. This time, however, has yielded some of my fondest memories. Through conversations as trivial as whose Pokemon was the best, to discussions about the definition of a derivative, my teammates and I have formed lifelong friendships.

The remainder of practice consists mostly of looking down at a black line at the bottom of the pool. While some might consider this activity boring, this aquatic sensory deprivation promotes freedom of the mind. Looking down, this line has acted as a blank template for my thoughts, absorbing and reflecting on ideas while being insulated from outer distractions. It's an opportunity to explore, imagine or meditate. I might mentally sing songs, do math homework, brainstorm college essay topics, or simply encourage myself to push harder through the set. The possibilities of the mind are endless and it's what makes me thrive in the water.

I've been able to take the experiences and concepts I've learned from swimming with me in my everyday life. It has taught me to be more patient in my studies, more focused on any given task, and to always get the job done. Through the pleasure of training alongside my teammates, I've learned that no idea is too out of place, no set is unconquerable and consistency is the key to success. Even when I know just how difficult something might be, thanks to the life lessons swimming taught me, my first thought isn't how agonizing it will be, or how much effort it will require. Instead, I think of that challenge as that black line at the bottom of the pool, the blank template waiting for me to dive in.