

My family is drawn to the water. The majority of them have grown up on and around the beach, and every one of us loves to swim. I grew up frequenting neighborhood swimming pools and visiting East Coast beaches with my family, admiring my older cousins' swimming technique, and hoping that someday I would be on a swim team, just like them.

However, for a variety of reasons, I never joined a swim team. I practiced on my own, or with my father, trying to understand the fundamentals of freestyle breathing. Because I learned how to swim in the ocean, my primary means of motion was through breaststroke. Freestyle was very difficult for me, especially the breathing, but I was determined to swim. I had watched my cousins race, and I watched as Rebecca Soni win gold in the 100M and 200M breaststroke at the 2011 FINA World Championships; I was ready to join a team.

So, in truth, my career as a competitive swimmer didn't begin until my freshman year of high school. I started the West High swim team in August of 2011, not at risk for immediate drowning, I certainly could not move through the water with efficient forwardly motion. I ended the season with a 48-second 50 free and a 3:24 in the 200 IM, the only two events that I swam that year. I joined a recreational swim team after freshman year with the goal of staying in shape so I would be ready for the next season. My sophomore year was a year of breakthroughs. I swam many events that I had never swam before, and I met a coach who inspired me to push past my comfort zone into new levels of competition. After sophomore year, I joined the YMCA Swim Team, and have since qualified and attended the AK Junior Olympics swim meet, YMCA Northwest Regions, and earned two varsity letters from West High. At the conclusion of my senior high school season, I was given the Hammer Award, an award we give to indicate the hardest worker of the season. I have come a long way.

But despite the gratification that I feel when I swim a new best time, or try a new event, or make a faster interval in practice, the fact that I am improving is not the reason that I swim. Nor is the reason because my parents made me, or because all my friends swam, or because I wanted to lose weight: I swim because swimming gives me something to be proud of. Swimming gives me time and space to think deep thoughts, or to play bad pop remixes on repeat for hours. Swimming gives me camaraderie and competition and an amazing group of supportive peers. Swimming gives me goals to work towards, and a kind of mental toughness that I have found to be invaluable. Swimming taught me how to not quit.

On our team we have four rules: show up, honor your teammates, do the right thing, and don't die. There have been days when each of those rules have been very hard to follow. In January of my junior year, a month before YMCA Regions, I tore my upper pectoral, and was told by my doctor that I was not allowed to swim for the next six weeks. Those six weeks made rules one and three especially hard, but I showed up. I cheered and congratulated my teammates who were able to attend Y Regions. Most importantly, I did the right thing: I refused to quit. I spent practice time doing dry land exercises to strengthen my core and legs, and I told myself that when I was allowed back in the water, nothing was going to stop me from reaching my goals.

The determination that I had, and still have, to continue to strive for the next level in my swimming is a product of the lessons that I have been taught, and the environment of family that I found on the swim team. I may have started swimming with few friends on the team, but today, as I prepare myself for graduation, the people who I swim with are counted among my closest friends. They have pushed me to the limits of what I though was possible for a vertically challenged late bloomer; they have shown me how to give my all to the sport, and they have supported me when I reached for a goal that I was not ready to make.

Despite the fact that I came into the sport as a newcomer, I feel that the lessons I have learned from swimming will follow me for the rest of my life. Because swimming has taught me how to focus, how to hone my skills to achieve the exact result that I want, and how to continue pushing even when it feel as if there is nothing left to push with, I feel prepared to face the world. I know I will continue to swim competitively because swimming has become such an integral part of being that I cannot see myself without the athlete I have become, without the choices I have made, one of the most important of which was to keep on swimming.

I swim because it reminds me of the fact that nothing worthwhile comes easy. I swim to honor my teammates. I swim to honor my coach. I swim for me: for the exhilaration I feel; for the strength I know; for the determination that drives me each and every day to be the best that I can be. I swim because I love everything that it has made me, because the lessons it has taught me have saved me from despair, and because there is nothing as satisfying as knowing that you have given something your all.