

Hi everyone,

I hope people are staying safe and healthy during these crazy times.

My name is Grace Zhao, and I swam on PASA from 2012-2017 before heading off to compete for Stanford across the street. For people who know me well, they know that I like to have everything in order, planned out, linear. I like to know what I'm doing the next month, I like to come up with plans to solve my problems, I like to do the hard work knowing in full confidence that what I've put in has a linear effect on what I'll get out.

In a time as uncertain as this, my tendencies and expectations are taking a turn on me. Before, my way of organizing my life around me provided me with a sense of security and control. Now, I am unsure of how to take things one week at a time, when before I would plan months, even years, ahead. Although I am struggling (as I'm sure a lot of the rest of you are), I know for a fact that my experiences as a student-athlete at Stanford have made me better equipped to handle a situation like this.

I think what's so important about participating in a sport like swimming is that we learn to commit ourselves to something that carries meaning. No matter how I look at it, swimming carries the most significant meaning in my life (outside of friends and family). It was the first cause that I deeply committed to and the only thing that I have sacrificed and put in so much for.

I have spent 20+ hours a week in the pool for the past 6 years, pushing my body and mind to the brink of exhaustion. I have given up winter vacations with family to train. I have woken up to an alarm at 4:30am to drive myself to morning practice. The point is, I understand deeply the sacrifice for a cause or work that I am passionate about.

And when things don't turn out the way I expect, it hurts the most with swimming.

Over the past year, I've encountered obstacles that I had never come across before in my swimming career. A lingering shoulder injury crushed my confidence and impacted how I approached training. I struggled to communicate with my coaches about how I was losing the motivation to keep pushing. I had to recommit myself to the sport and invest even more emotional and physical energy into swimming than I had ever done before. Even with my newfound drive, it wasn't enough and I fell short of my goals.

It was devastating.

But I noticed something very important. When I "failed", I was not regretful of my actions leading up to that moment. I was relieved of the burdening question of "What If?" because I knew that I had done the best I could.

I think the sport of swimming has taught me about finding strength in times of crippling weakness. The ability to relinquish control when you know you've done all that you can do, and just ride the wave out. It has made me more resilient.

In a way, I am better prepared to deal with the effects of this pandemic because of what I went through during this last year in the sport of swimming. It's hard not to think about the what-if's when we've lost so much of our normal lives. The reality of it really sucks. But I know I have the strength to get through times of change and hardship.

This is all very cheesy, but it's something that I've thought a lot about over this past month. I'm extremely grateful for this sport for giving me an opportunity to care and to be challenged and to grow. I'm also so, so thankful for this sport to have provided such a supportive community (from both PASA and Stanford) that have made these hard times (and life in general) more enjoyable.

- Grace