

What Swimming in the NHSA Has Meant to Me

“Why do you swim?”

The question surprised me, coming from the coach of a team that was not my own. Through eyes made red by tears, I looked at him and then down at the swimmers in the pool, contemplating.

It was New England Age Groups of Summer 2012, and at 13 years old, I was experiencing the frustrations of the dreaded “plateau” after a disappointing race. On top of that, I was in a position where I was preparing to make a team change. Hungry for more wins, best times, and a team restored, I was asking myself the same question.

Standing by the warm down lane, I shrugged. “Because it’s fun.”

A pause, then: “Remember that,” he said.

This short exchange was possibly one of the most impacting moments of my swimming career. It is a question to which I have returned many times. When I spoke, I gave what I knew to be the only “correct” answer, but was it really swimming that I loved... or was it winning?

With one simple question, the coach had refocused my attention, the emphasis, from “Why am I *doing* this?” to “*Why* am I doing this?” Instead of focusing on the *doing* and the physical, measurable results of swimming—the medals, the cut times, and the records—I began to focus on the intangible *why* of swimming—friendships, early-morning Saturdays, and the breathless joy of physical challenge. With one simple question, he inspired me to take a step back and reconsider my priorities. Now, when I looked around, I saw teammates and coaches eager to support me through the plateau, and I realized they had been there all along. I learned to track my progress by setting practice goals, like improving my streamlines or moving up to do the faster intervals.

This is what swimming in the NHSA has meant to me: having a small-scale, localized swimming community where I get to swim against the same swimmers and coaches at the same pools season after season. Seeing these same people at meets every weekend, I have built connections across New Hampshire’s swimming community. And at Age Groups, even when my own coaches couldn’t be there for me through disappointment, a coach from a neighboring team could.

At 13 years old, it was scary to leave behind the pool facility, teammates, and coaches I had always known. Yet once I worked up the courage to make the change, my fears were assuaged, as I found many welcoming, familiar faces among my new teammates. These were the friends I’d met through countless NHSA meets, whose hands I had shaken at the ends of races—and now they were my teammates. Even though I’d ventured to a new facility with new coaches and new sets, I was not swimming through uncharted territory.

With consistent competition in local meets, I have developed friendly rivalries with swimmers from around the state, who have pushed me in the race to touch the wall first.

Swimming in the NHSA means that I can have a group of teammates from beyond my own team, and although we may be competitors in the pool, behind the blocks we are friends.

For me, swimming has become more about staying fit, enjoying friendships, and challenging myself than it is about winning, although every time I leave the block, I am still determined to finish first! I will cherish my memories with teammates forever, even though I have no medals to show for them. I will remember my first NHSA States with my new team, a timid eighth grader among the high schoolers on Friday night. They were so excited just to have a fun last meet together before the seniors graduated, and I was honored when they let me in on the fun as they mixed-and-matched colorful bikinis over their suits in warm-up. I will remember the excitement of cheering at the end of the lane, ecstatic as my teammates broke NHSA State records and happy to have swum alongside them at practice. And I will certainly remember the thrill when, in my junior year, I became one of these record-breakers myself, alongside my 200 Medley Relay team. Although records can be broken, these memories will never be lost.

Now, having finally broken through my plateau, personal best times are more rewarding than before because I know that improvements do not always come easily. I hope to inspire others who are fighting the plateau to stay positive and find greater reasons to love their sport, just as my NHSA family has done for me.

Why do I swim? The answer comes easily now.

“Because it’s fun.”