

ANTHONY BIELECKI, PHX: What Swimming in the NHSA has Meant to Me

I had my first swimming lesson at the age of four. I was the only one in the group who always wanted to swim the entire length of the pool rather than get out halfway. I was so excited to be just like my two older brothers who swam for what felt like hours on end and who always got out of the water with a smile on their faces. When I jumped into the water for that first swim lesson, I couldn't imagine the impact this sport would have on me. That simple jump has shaped me into the athlete and the leader I am today.

Swimming is more than just a sport to me; it is a lifestyle. Swimming six days a week, 10 months out of the year has become a routine. At six o'clock on a Saturday morning, you may hear me yell "Let me go back to sleep!" from beneath a mountain of blankets. And sure, on a Friday evening, the most enticing thing to do might be hanging out with school friends and grabbing a bite to eat. But while I may groan at the thought of a frigid jump into an over-chlorinated pool during the time most "normal" people are eating dinner, truth be told, there's no other place I would rather be.

This lifestyle comes with all the emotional ups and downs and physical highs and lows that take toll on my mind and body. Swimming is a sport where I constantly question why I choose this sport, but I know I choose it because the pay off for the hard work is all worth it in the end. From winning my first medal at five, to making zones as an eight year old, then becoming a state record holder, all the way to making sectional cuts as a high schooler, has molded me into, not only the swimmer, but the woman I am today.

Swimming has taught me that things in life never come easy. With determination and hard work, comes satisfaction in the end. With swimming 14 hours a week, along with AP classes and keeping straight A's, being president of clubs, and trying to get enough sleep, time management has become a huge piece of my everyday life. I have realized that those two months out of the year that I am not swimming is when my time management would completely diminish. As a small girl in elementary school, who never really stressed or had homework, to a senior in high school who is up every night until 12 trying to finish her homework, was a hard transition. At the end of my freshman year, I chose, to stop playing field hockey after eight years, in order to focus on my swimming goals. Swimming then became my oasis. If I have a bad day, I know the minute I jump into the pool my whole day is about to get a lot better, no matter how hard the practice. Because of swimming, I have learned that every minute of my day plays a role into my success, both on the pool deck and in my life outside the pool. I started my career as the little shy girl in lane one and over time became a confident senior in lane six. This transformation was only possible with the help of my teammates. This sport has allowed me to make connections with my people that will last a lifetime. I don't think of my teammates just as friends, they are my second family. It is like having a core group of "brothers and sisters" whom I can rely on. No matter the situation, we are always there for each other. My teammates know me better than I know myself and have been there for me whenever I need it. We have a lot of comradery for each other. As a little girl, I always looked up to the older swimmers in lane six. I developed a strong work ethic hoping to one day be as fast and as good as them. I realize now that it is my responsibility to be a role model to the younger swimmers, just like my older teammates were to me. And now that I am older, I have reached the point where I hope the younger swimmers look up to me; I can reflect back on how hard I worked to get to where I am today. Sure I have given up on lots of fun things because of swimming like sleepovers or trips to the beach with friends, but I believe that it was all worth it. I have been able to experience the long-lasting friendships the NHSA establishes between swimmers, whether they are teammates or not.

Swimming takes a lot of determination, perseverance and hard work. It is not easy on the mind or the body. Swim has been my whole life and has taught me values in life that I could not have learned anywhere else. Being around the pool for almost eighteen years has shaped me into the athlete I am today. The pool is a part of who I am; I take pride in walking around never being able to remove the smell of chlorine from my body. No matter how many painful kick sets, dreadful sprint nights and long distance sets, my time as a member of the NHSA has made me become a stronger and more confident individual in and out of the water. If someone were to ask me "What does swimming in the NHSA mean to me?" but I could only use one word to answer: it would be simply, Everything.

#13--What swimming truly means to me is embodied by my experiences in the first few months before and after entering the sport I've come to love.

I just sat there aghast, ashamed, and vulnerable. My dad, fully-clothed and soaked from head to toe, was searching for his glasses at the bottom of the hotel pool. I didn't understand what the "8 ft." sign on the side of the pool meant, or how to keep myself afloat, but 7-year-old me wasn't afraid. I just

wanted swim like one of “the big kids” or like an Olympian you would see on TV. That was my drive. That was my ambition. That was my dream.

A couple weeks later I was standing on the pool deck, nervous but excited. It was the first day of swim lessons and I stayed up all night watching replays of Michael Phelps at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. I did all sorts of novice exercises to mimic my heroes like kicking while holding the wall and floating on my back. While I struggled to grasp the concepts of swimming, I could say for a fact that I was the best “bubble blower” in the pool. My early difficulties never dampened my spirits and I came to lessons every day, determined to be the best swimmer I could be.

It'd been a few months since I started swim lessons when my parents received a letter from my instructor. My instructor wrote, “I'm impressed with how far Anthony has come and the work he's put in the pool. I was wondering if he'd be interested in joining the swim team.” Elation coursed through my veins and the next thing I knew I was back on the pool deck, preparing for my first swim practice. Ready to set the world alight, I dove into the water, thinking I was God's gift to swimming. Unfortunately, after getting run over by every other swimmer in the pool, I realized that this would not be as easy as I had imagined.

After a week on the swim team and constantly struggling to keep up, I learned what was holding me back. My strokes were stiff and my kicking was inept. I wasn't athletically-built like my teammates and my feet turned outward like a duck. I lacked the talent and swimming didn't click right away for me. I was determined to not let my deficiencies define me and at every practice, I did everything I could to improve. At one practice I kicked for 2 hours straight just to make my kicking a little faster. My first swim meet was around the corner, so I continued to push toward my ambition.

My debut swim competition came in the blink of an eye. My teammates and I wished each other good luck and we began to prepare for our races. I put my cap and goggles on and lined up behind the starting blocks. I anxiously jumped around and tried to warm myself up before my race. Spectators, parents, and swimmers alike were all fixated on the event at hand, cheering and urging the racers onward. A chill ran up my spine as the starter called my heat and the crowd's ovation waned to a deafening silence. I stepped up, heart in my throat, and took my mark. The starting blare shattered the silence and I took off.

I extended my arms as far as I humanly could and slammed into the touchpad. Time slowed to a crawl as I turned to see where I ended up placing. Satisfaction, pride, and jubilation bloomed in my chest as I realized I had won the race. After months of struggling in the pool and trying to polish my flaws, I achieved what I set out to do and swam like “one of the big kids.” I calmed down and quickly dried off and began preparing for my next race, as the swim meet was far from over. This was my dream. And I'm still dreaming.