

Lindsey Wagner:

Dear Five-Year-Old Me,

I know your palms are sticky, your breathing is shallow, and your stomach is tingling

with butterflies as you anticipate jumping into the pool for your very first swim practice today. Take a deep breath because you have no reason to be nervous. You are about to embark on a journey that will stick with you like the wonderfully pungent smell of chlorine. Just know, swimming won't always be easy. Your coaches will write sets to challenge you physically and mentally (like the infamous 100x100s, but you have years ahead of you before that one!). At times you may even question why you chose swimming over soccer, but let me assure you that in the end, you will never regret your choice to swim because your teammates will become part of your family.

Amidst all of the muscle cramping moments -- the wheezing breaths, aching pulls, and burning kicks -- you and your teammates will learn to depend on each other. While the friendly competition will motivate you to work harder, you will never forget the advice of one of your favorite assistant coaches: "Happy swimmers are fast swimmers." So, as you savor your fleeting break at the wall in between repetitions, don't be afraid to shamelessly belt out the lyrics of Justin Bieber, Britney Spears, and even Michael Jackson along with your teammates and your coach, who will probably mix up the words up on purpose. Trust me, practice is much more fun that way.

And, just wait until your first swim meet because the electric thrill of competition will inspire you and make the practices worth it. You will be a part of some of the most suspenseful relay races at the State Meet. Just as the anchors begin their final lap, the building will roar with a contagious energy as you and your teammates nervously shriek waiting for the outcome. Other swimmers and coaches, even if their team is not in the water, will line the sides of the pool jumping and cheering. Just as the two swimmers touch the wall, too close to be judged by the eye, the deck will go silent for a split-second as everyone turns to the scoreboard for the verdict.

The sense of pride that washes over you when you see the number "1" next to your team's name never gets old. But, win or lose, it will keep you coming back for more. It did for me.

Even when you leave the meet and go back to your hotel, you are with your teammates. In the early years, you will slide notes to your friends under their hotel door, prank call them on the hotel phone, and have toilet paper sent to their room. But even though you will eventually outgrow these silly memories, swimming, especially in the NHSA, will allow you to keep reliving some. At your first State Meet, when the older girls want to write "Eat My Bubbles" on your back in permanent marker and plaster your tiny body with team tattoos, let them. You are going to do the same thing to the younger kids when you are older because you remember how special it made you feel being part of that supportive team. At the very same meet, you will see the psych-up cards taped to the walls of the pool deck that you get to make once you reach the "Junior 2" training group, and

this will motivate you to work hard because you can't wait to be a part of that team tradition.

And, even when you are hundreds of miles away from your teammates nervously sitting on the pool deck waiting to race at your first Junior Nationals, you will be able to count on your teammates to FaceTime you because they want to distract you from your nerves. But, the support doesn't end when you hang up the phone to go race because they will be live streaming your swim, cheering you on from home. Even without your friends, you will still have your coach, and nothing beats the feeling of making him proud. Getting a hug, a high five, and a smile after a race will continue to make it all worth it.

At the end, you won't remember the specifics of the grueling workouts, but you will remember the obscure memories created with this special group of people. These are moments you will be able to look back on 13 years from now because many of these people will still be in your life, after all, you are family. As your journey begins today, mine is not coming to a close. Rather, it takes a new step, and my family grows. Good luck, have fun, and enjoy every moment because it truly flies by.

Love, Your 18 Year Old Self