

I started swimming in the NHSA when I was nine years old. As little as one year before that, I hated the water, and greatly preferred soccer or basketball to being in a pool. I was convinced by the lifeguard at my local pool to give swimming a shot after I had greatly improved over that summer. That was ten years ago- I cannot imagine how different my life would be if I had not listened to his advice.

Participating in the NHSA has taught me so much over the course of my swimming career. Since I joined, I've grown exponentially, both as an athlete and a person. Swim provided an outlet for my often overzealous competitiveness. It's been a healthy way for me to pit myself against others and continually strive to improve my times. Though there were times I became far too mad over a midseason meet outcome, swimming taught me the importance of healthy competition and gave me a space where I could overcome these mental barriers and push myself to become better at the sport. I've learned the importance of being disciplined and focused, values that my lifelong coach has impressed on me with countless punishments of butterfly sets or extra racing after goofing off during practice. It was never fun swimming those extra yards, and I distinctly remember wanting to quit after those practices on numerous occasions. But as I sit here now writing this essay and reflect back on those days, I find myself grateful that I gained the ability to know when to buckle down and focus on the task at hand. My coaches were and are role models for me, which is a luxury that I remind myself not to take for granted.

But by far most importantly, I've made innumerable friendships in those nine years. Joining the team introduced me to a whole new crowd of athletes who weren't just from my school and town. I met swimmers from all over the map and forged relationships that turned teammates into lifelong friends. Having access to so many new people was perfect for me as an outgoing kid, and I'm grateful that I found a sport that allowed me to make these connections.

Every year, I've looked forward to driving up to UVAC and competing against hundreds of other swimmers in the state at NHSA championships. It was at that meet where I discovered my love for the 500 freestyle when I was 14; and it was at that meet where I broke one minute in the 100 backstroke the following year. I have photos of myself laughing with my friends at that meet when I was nine or ten, with my events scribbled in Sharpie all over my arm. Some of my absolute favorite childhood memories can be connected back to the NHSA. Even though we won't be in Vermont this year, I'm still extremely excited to participate in NHSA championships one final time. It will be bittersweet, but over the past few weeks, as my swimming career winds down, I've been reminding myself to simply be appreciative of what the NHSA and swimming has given me and taught me: discipline and determination, the importance of hard work, lifelong friendships and connections, and a sport that I can cherish and remember for the rest of my life.