

Kate Hassemer

### Just Shy of First Place

I had just turned 8 years old. It was my first summer season with the Blue Devil Swim Club (BDSC). My parents weren't at all surprised when I followed in my older sibling's footsteps and joined the swim team. After all, I had grown up at the pool watching my brother, Luke, and sister, Emma, swim competitively for years. Competition, the smell of chlorine, and aqua blue pool water was ingrained in my young self. I was so excited to swim my first meet in a 50-meter pool. The BDSC swimming pool at our local high school where we practiced everyday was only a 25-yard pool, much smaller than the olympic sized pool this swim meet was held. As I stepped onto the pool deck, the energy around me was contagious. My flip-flops slapped against the wet pool deck, as I worked my way around dozens of swimmers to the starting blocks for my event. I chatted with my teammates excitedly as I glanced down at my arm where my mom had written in black sharpie each event and heat I was swimming this morning. I felt excited, but also nervous. *Man, that pool is big.* I was in the final and fastest heat in Lane 1 swimming the 100-meter backstroke. My goal was simple; win my race! I was determined to touch the wall first and collect that blue ribbon.

Swim cap on... Check! Swim goggles on... Check! In the right lane... Check! This was it! I was going to rock this 100 backstroke. When it was my turn for the event, I jumped into the water in lane one and got settled into the position needed to push off the wall to dive backwards. My hands reached up for the bar under the diving block. My knees were bent and feet braced

on the pool wall. Silence. That's what filled the air. The swimmers who weren't swimming that heat, coaches, family members and friends in the bleachers; every single person was silent. The only thing I heard was my own breath, a steady rhythm. Once I heard the keywords "Take your mark...", I knew the beep was about to blare out, telling me to arch my back, push off into the water, dive deep, streamline to the surface, start kicking and move my arms in a backward circular motion.

My mind was in complete control and focused on winning the race. I made tsunami-sized splashes with my feet as I was kicking hard and fast, adding a fair amount of water onto the little one inch blue tiles on the soaking-wet deck. That's okay. I was working hard. At that same moment, I was moving my arms backwards as straight and fast as I could, helping my body glide through the water faster than the seven other girls in my heat. With every kick, with every spin of the arm, I went faster and faster. After what felt like a long time, I finally saw the colorful triangle flags hanging above me from a string tied to both sides of the pool. I knew that I was about to reach the wall on the other end of the pool. It was time to set myself up for a flip turn. One stroke. Two strokes. Three strokes. Four strokes. Five Strokes. Last, but most important, on the sixth stroke from the flags, I turned onto my stomach, flipped my body into a tight somersault under the water and pushed off the wall with my legs. All of my power rushed through my body and into my legs to give me a powerful push to put me on my back again on the water's surface.

A quick peak to my side showed I was still in the lead, but not by much. Now in my second lap of the 100 backstroke, I quickly swam toward the other end of the pool. I saw and heard my teammates and coaches cheering me on to stay strong through the rest of my swim. This motivated me to keep my small lead. I was going to win this race! That's when the confusion began. My mind started to worry as it didn't know if I should stop at the other end or if I should do two more laps. I always swam four laps in the BDSC pool when practicing the 100-yard backstroke. But this was a 50 meter pool. *Should I do two more laps, or am I supposed to dive hard to hit the touchpad which stops the clock and record my time?* I started to freak out. I had absolutely no idea. Once I saw the flags, I knew I had to make a decision. I decided to do my six strokes and do another flip turn to keep going.

That was the wrong decision. Right after I brought my face up to the surface following my flip turn, I saw my coach frantically waving his arms, screaming for me to stop. As soon as I noticed him, I realized that I had made a big mistake. That mistake cost me the race. The extra flip turn slowed my momentum down just enough to allow the swimmer in lane three to reach the wall first and just out-touch me. I lost the race by half a second. I was too young and inexperienced to realize that I was supposed to do two laps in this much longer pool, instead of the four laps I was used to in practice.

When I heaved my tired body out of the water, I was told that if I hadn't done a flip turn, I would've placed first and won. It was very embarrassing and I was beyond upset that I had made this mistake. Water droplets rained from my body, drip, drip, dripping onto the tile.

Reaching down, I grabbed my blue and yellow towel and headed to talk to my coach, like I always did after every race. That's when I started balling my eyes out; my tears mixing in with the water droplets as they fell from my cheeks. I was so distraught about ruining my chance of winning. Everyone tried to cheer me up. I was comforted by my coaches, other teammates, my sister and brother who were also swimming at the meet, my mom, who was the president of BDSC, and my dad, who was a referee.

That event was the closest I had ever been to getting a first place ribbon. Despite this, I swam for five more years after this meet and continued in my pursuit for that pretty, ruffled blue ribbon. It just wasn't meant to be. Looking back at this memory every now and then, I find myself laughing. It really is a funny story. How I felt back then in that moment is not what I feel now. It pushed me to try harder, never give up and accept my accomplishments, whatever they may be. I ended up with a nice collection of lovely red second place ribbons. If you ask me, the color red is just as nice as blue.