Introduction

For athletes, there's nothing like the feeling of winning and seeing all your hard work pay off in a big victory. I started swimming competitively when I was six years old. Training and working hard have always been a part of my life, and I swam miles and miles over the years so I could feel the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes with winning. But when I won my second Big Ten title in the 100-yard breaststroke as a sophomore at Penn State, I hurried away from the mob of my teammates, coaches, and family members celebrating my victory to hide in the locker room and cry.

For many people athletics and extracurricular activities are a huge part of childhood and growing up. The memories and friendships made while participating can play a major role in a child's development. Throughout my entire childhood, I was very active. I participated in swimming, gymnastics, basketball, softball, and track. I also played the piano and sang in the choir. Swimming was the one activity that I stuck with and truly found thrilling and exciting. During my swimming journey I learned many great life lessons and developed numerous qualities. I learned what hard work, determination, dedication, perseverance, and passion can do for an individuals' life. Many of my behavioral traits, I believe, are inherited and have been with me since a young age. The whole argument of nature versus nurture is relevant in athletes. For example, I have always been a competitive person and intensely driven. Whether I would be swimming, doing school projects, or playing with my sister, I would always want to be the best. Those characteristics helped me accomplish many great things in swimming and my personal life.

When I reached my teen years, my swimming times started getting faster and while seeing that improvement I also enjoyed the daily grind of the sport. Before the age of eighteen, I swam for my country in two international events, broke a high school national record, was named Female High School Swimmer of the Year, and was offered a full scholarship to numerous Division 1 colleges. Every accomplishment motivated me to continue to train harder and set higher goals. I loved to push myself. I also enjoyed competing and reaping the rewards of all my sacrifices.

By the time I was twenty years old, a lot of the pressure my coaches, parents, teammates, and I put on myself caught up with me. I hit a wall—my swimming times got worse and my emotions became uncontrollable. I stopped feeling the rush of adrenaline and excitement before my swimming races. That was when I started to develop signs of career burnout and I fell into a deep depression. I struggled with failure and authority. I lashed out at my coaches and teammates and started to surround myself with negative people and influences. I also struggled with learning how to deal with new and different emotions towards a sport that I had always loved and been so comfortable participating in. I found myself saying I hated swimming and I could not stand to be around my team, my coaches, and the pool. Those emotions were completely out of the ordinary for to me. Swimming had always given me confidence and self-esteem and for the first time it was doing the complete opposite. It was making me feel worthless and alone. A few months after Big Tens my sophomore year, I gave up my full scholarship and all the glory that went with it and quit swimming. And after all those years of being viewed as a huge success by everyone around me—my parents, my teammates, my peers, and my coaches—I left my team and was viewed as a quitter. But I was so burned out that I couldn't stand the smell of chlorine.

And I stayed like that for months before I realized I was more than an athlete, and whether I won or lost a race didn't have to define me as a person and control my happiness.

That was years ago, and I've changed a lot since then. I eventually came back to the sport with a clear head and finished my career by earning my fourth Big Ten title. Although I don't compete anymore, I still swim for exercise. I work for Dolphin Swimwear and I'm still involved in the swimming community. When I travel for work I meet swim families who are a lot like I used to be. I can see their intensity and dedication to the sport, and I see a piece of myself in each of them.

I believe that having an intense drive and dedication to a sport, hobby, or special interest is a blessing. I also believe that if you find your passion in life, you must recognize that failure will occur at some point in time. Being able to accept failure, learn from it, and grow is the key to success. For example, many people join swim teams, soccer teams, drama clubs, or whatever and do not experience an intense emotional high when they win, succeed, or excel. They simply choose to play a sport or join a club for the experience and fun of doing it. They can separate their self-worth from that activity. It is only one part of their life. They do not let the activity define who they are as a person. I, on the other hand, depended on swimming to give me confidence, self-esteem, and meaning. My life had no balance. I didn't understand how to live life and enjoy it without the sport of swimming. And when I put so much pressure on myself to always win and improve, I couldn't handle swimming anymore and I felt like I was left with nothing.

When a child shows athletic promise, which often starts at a young age, many parents start thinking about college scholarships and athletic careers. They want to know what it takes to raise a child that can compete at a high level. And when the parents I meet when I travel for

work find out that I once broke a minute in the 100-yard breaststroke, I placed fifth in the Olympic trials, and I won four Big Ten titles, they ask me questions like, "Should my ten-year-old daughter be swimming six days a week?" "How can we find the right coach?" "Should we put her in this swim club, or that one?" I hear these questions all the time, and I tell the parents what they want to know. I tell them about how dedicated and competitive I was and how I switched clubs to find the right coach. Coaches have such a big influence on athletes that athletes have to really trust the person if they want to improve.

But I also remind them to let their kids take a break. It's okay if they don't swim every day for ten years. Taking breaks every once in a while is helpful—both mentally and physically. And if a child doesn't want to go to swim practice one day, then take them for ice cream or a movie instead. Life doesn't have to revolve around swimming, especially at such a young age. When I tell parents about my year off, how I was burned out, and how my break actually taught me a lot about myself and my love for the sport, some are really interested. But others hear the word "quit" and just view it as my own personal weakness. Burnout, depression, and mental health carry a stigma in sports, particularly at the higher levels. Athletes are expected to be strong. No one really talks about mental health in athletics, and many people don't understand what a difficult challenge the mental side of sports can be, even though athletes who seem to be at the top of their careers struggle with these issues all the time.

When I started researching sports and mental health, I was surprised to find out that even though burnout and depression are common among athletes, the topic is taboo. "Prisoners of Depression," an article written by L. Jon Wertheim for *Sports Illustrated* in 2003, describes several elite athletes who were isolated by their conditions. Jim Shea, a world champion bobsledder, said he felt empty when he won a spot on the 2002 Winter Olympic U.S. Team.

“It was total emptiness, like I didn't even care,” he told the reporter. “The joy of winning? I could have broken a world record and won the lottery on the same day and not been happy about it.” The article explained that Shea came from a family culture of strength and stoicism, and when he was diagnosed with depression by a U.S. Olympic Committee psychologist, Shea's reaction was: “Me? Depressed? How could that be? I'm an athlete.”

Ricky Williams, the NFL's 2002 rushing leader, suffered overwhelming social anxiety from a young age. Through college and into professional football, the article suggests, the problem was exacerbated by his success and the attention it drew. When he injured his ankle playing for the New Orleans Saints, a team of trainers and rehab professionals checked on him almost daily, but no one noticed his antisocial and avoidance behaviors.

“There’s a physical prejudice in sports,” Williams told Wertheim, “When it's a broken bone, teams will do everything in their power to make sure it's okay. When it's a broken soul, it's like a weakness.”

Although I was never diagnosed with depression or another mental illness, I experienced several of the symptoms: trouble sleeping, anxiety, feeling out of control, mood swings, low self-esteem, lack of motivation and interest, all-or-nothing thinking, social withdrawal, trouble with authority, and crying episodes. When I look back on everything that happened to me and the way the events unfolded, I know I went through a mental breakdown, which is defined as a sudden, acute attack of mental illness, such as depression or anxiety. The term is not recognized by the psychological community because it has negative connotations, but this phenomenon is a normal and relatively common response to chronic stress. Often, the breakdown is a manifestation of career burnout.

I was probably born with my strong desire to compete. Swimming and the successes I experienced starting with that first lap in the pool heightened my ability to set, work toward, and achieve goals. These personal characteristics combined with pressure from others to succeed drove me to huge achievements, and also to an unbalanced, unsustainable career. Everything in my past led me to the moment when I was at the peak of my career and all I could do was cry. I was lucky, though, having been able to pull myself out of my burnout and feelings of depression and finish my career on my own terms.

When I look back on my story, it's obvious that all the events in my career, which are described in this book, led me to that breakdown my sophomore year in college. The signs are so clear to me now, but no one ever noticed them then. Perhaps if they did, I could have avoided some of the hardships in my career. And of all the bits of advice I give swim parents, athletes, and coaches today, I most want them to understand how to recognize the signs and avoid burnout in young athletes that could prevent them from fulfilling their potential and enjoying their sport.

Chapter 1: Discovery

When I jumped in the pool for my first swim practice, I never thought swimming would become such an important part of my life. And I didn't realize I'd grow to love swimming more than anything, or that, at times, I'd hate it so much that I never wanted to get in the pool again. On that summer morning in 1988, I was just a chubby six-year-old excited to have something to do.

My parents, who always wanted to give my sister and me as many opportunities as possible, signed us up for the Muhlenberg Swimming Association primarily to develop my sister's athletic talents. Even at eight years old, she had the body of an athlete with broad shoulders, defined biceps, and strong legs. She never worked out at that age; we were just normal kids. But she was very muscular and just looked like an athlete. We had both been taking gymnastics lessons for a few months prior to swimming and my sister excelled at it without much effort at all. I was more of a tagalong, and not very athletic. But that didn't bother me.

The morning of our first practice, there were about thirty or forty other kids all standing around the pool in their suits, goggles, and swim caps. I didn't know very many kids my age at that time, and was excited swimming would give me the opportunity to meet a few. Practice started early in the morning and a slight chill hung in the air. And when the coach yelled for us to hop in and start warming up, everyone splashed into the water. The pool was heated and the water felt better than standing outside in my bathing suit, but when I looked I saw my sister still standing on the edge, crying. She didn't want to get in.

My sister was always more quiet and reserved than me. She never liked to be the center of attention and preferred reading to athletic competition. So while I was swimming my first laps in the pool, my mom was on the side trying to convince her to get in the water. I can remember wondering what the big deal was. Why couldn't she just get in the water? Looking back, I think she was afraid it would be cold, and she probably felt a little vulnerable and unsure. The temperature outside was about fifty-five degrees before the sun came up, and when it feels that cold and you're wearing nothing but a bathing suit, jumping in the water is the last thing you want to do. But I was fine, and I wanted her to try it. Eventually she did get in. And although she wasn't always as willing to try new things as I was, her innate athletic abilities shined as soon as she started swimming.

We practiced swimming for three or four weeks before meets started. As beginners my sister and I learned freestyle first. Once we got the hang of that, we learned the backstroke. Then we learned more complex strokes like the butterfly and the breaststroke. During swim meets, my sister showed her natural talent and won effortlessly. She never got too excited, but when she would dive in to race, she blew her competition away. She was stronger than all the other kids, but when it came to competing, she could take it or leave it.

I developed a little differently. At the first swim meet, my coaches noticed that I wasn't diving correctly. Instead of sliding into the water in a smooth line, I did more of a belly-flop. So after practice, I started staying a few minutes late with one of the coaches to work on it. We met to go over techniques for diving without hurting myself—and I was determined to get it. I don't remember ever being frustrated with myself, but I know I didn't think about anything else until I got it. All the other kids knew how to dive, and I was excited to be like the other kids. I looked forward to the end of every practice so I could work one-on-one with the coach. When practices

ended and all the other families started eating lunch and the kids started playing together, I practiced on my own at the side of the pool. And it took a couple weeks before I finally did it. Learning how to dive was the first time I worked toward a goal and achieved it, and it gave me such a feeling of accomplishment to see my hard work pay off. And once I figured it out, I couldn't stop diving.

At the end of the summer, our team held a banquet and awards ceremony to close the season. All the kids on my team and their families came for the picnic at the pool pavilion—probably a hundred people were all sitting on the picnic benches. We ate lunch and then our coaches lined up at the front of the pavilion to present the awards. They announced winners for the highest number of total points, MVP, most spirited, and several others. For each award, they said a few words about the swimmer before revealing the name and if I wasn't distracted by something else, I tried to guess who they were talking about. Then when the coach announced the name of the swimmer, everyone in the pavilion clapped and cheered. As a beginner, I looked up to all the experienced, older swimmers. And I was excited to see my teammates win their awards.

When they got to the last award for the "Most Improved," the coaches said this swimmer was very determined all season and always kept a positive attitude. Then they announced the name: "Kristen Woodring." I was so surprised to hear my name, and everyone in the crowd cheered as I walked up to shake hands with the coaches and accept my award. I couldn't believe it—all I'd done was figure out how to dive off the block. I was so young, but I felt so proud. Winning that award was the first time I had really won anything. I realized that I enjoyed working on my weaknesses, such as diving and finishing one lap, and seeing the hard work pay off instilled a passion in me for the sport of swimming.

As my first swimming season ended, many parents and coaches informed my family that if my sister and I really want to improve and become serious about swimming, we needed to swim all year round. That meant finding a winter swim team.

Around this time my parents sat both my sister and I down and asked us to choose between swimming and gymnastics, which we had done the previous winter. My sister was really good at both, and my parents said they wanted us to focus on one sport because swimming would keep us busy all year. A few months before, one of our gymnastics coaches said to my mom that my sister would need to slim down if she wanted to get serious. This, when my nine-year-old sister didn't have an ounce of fat on her body, kind of turned us away from gymnastics. It was fun, but I was too little to do anything but rolls on the floor. And so we focused on swimming.

That winter, my sister and I joined the local Reading YMCA. We knew other families in that program and they recommended it to us. We needed to swim all year if we wanted to improve, and winter swimming was much more serious than summer. The pool was indoors and bigger, and about three times as many kids swam on the team. We practiced almost every day, and even the practices were competitive. We were swimming against our teammates, with eight kids in each lane, but we'd all try to be the first one to lead the lane. I started looking forward to practices and also to racing at meets on the weekends. After a few months, instead of just finishing races and getting last in my heats, I started placing fourth and even third, which was a great improvement from summer.

And while my sister had all the physical advantages, I had a fire to compete. One meet I remember in particular was the Invitational Swim Meet at the York YMCA. The meet was on a weekend, and it lasted all day. I was still six years old and entered to swim the 100-yard

individual medley (IM) for the eight-and-under age group. The IM was a combination of strokes—butterfly first, backstroke second, breaststroke third, and freestyle for the fourth and final lap. This particular race probably had six heats of eight girls, so I lined up behind the block with the other seven swimmers and waited for my heat. I was in one of the middle lanes and next to me, lined up to swim in my heat, was the biggest eight-year-old girl I'd ever seen.

I've always been average sized, but this girl was tall and muscular, just like my sister, who swam in a higher age group. Seeing who I was up against, I got a little nervous. She was at least four inches taller than me, and seemed like a twelve-year-old. But I set my mind on swimming as fast as I could to beat her and win my heat. I looked over to my mom and dad, gave them a quick wave (a signature move of mine until I was about ten years old), and got up on the starting block. The gun sounded and I dove into the pool. When I popped up and started the butterfly stroke, all I could think about was moving my arms as fast as they would go. And I watched the big girl from the corner of my eye the whole race. In swimming, you can't look directly at the competition because turning your head creates drag in the water. But I could see her shoulders and cap ahead of me through my peripheral vision. Each lap became more painful, but I did not give up. I was behind her the whole time, but on the last lap, I swam harder than ever before in my one-season swimming career. I turned my arms over and kicked my legs as fast as I could, until I hit the wall and finished.

I don't even think I checked my time afterwards, and I was so young that I wouldn't have known what time was good or bad even if I had asked. I remember I was so tired and my arms were so weak that I didn't have enough strength to pull myself out of the water. One of the timers on the pool deck reached down and gave me a hand. I immediately walked over to my

parents—as I did after every race. I looked up at my dad and said, “My body hurts all over.” He just wrapped a towel around me and gave me a hug.

I placed second to the giant—by far my best race. Even though I had been determined to win, I don’t remember being upset or disappointed. Swimming at that point, and for many years later, was always a positive, exciting experience for me. And I knew that if I worked hard, I could do better the next time.

Years later my dad told me that when he saw me swim so hard that day, he knew there was something special in me. You can’t teach passion, drive, or competitiveness. I was a fearless athlete, even at such a young age, and when I raced I put forth a great deal of effort to beat whoever was swimming against me. Even at the age of six, when I’d been swimming for less than a season, I had a strong passion to compete and be successful.

I also enjoyed the lifestyle associated with swimming. Aside from frequent practices, I liked eating healthy pasta and going to bed early before meets. I liked traveling on the weekends and spending the whole day playing cards and hanging out with the other kids while we waited for our races. And I liked feeling my adrenaline increase when I stepped on the block to swim and compete.

With such frequent practices and meets, swimming eventually took over our dinnertime conversations. My parents got to know other parents sitting in the stands at meets and we started spending time with other swimming families outside of practices and events. It started that first summer and snowballed from there—swimming quickly became a major part of our lives. And by winter, we had become a dedicated swimming family.

Chapter 2: The Rise to Stardom

All swimmers have a best stroke. When I was nine years old, I started making the A relay team for the butterfly. My coaches saw during sets at practice that was my strong stroke, and not many other girls on the team could do it well, so I became a butterflier. That didn't last long, though. At eleven years old, while swimming for a summer club, our team's breaststroker couldn't race in the 50 breast at a meet. She may have been sick or out of town that day, I don't remember exactly. But they needed someone to fill in for her, and so the coaches put me in the event. I'd always known all the strokes, and I'd swum them all in the IM. So I swam the 50 breast, and that one event changed my career. I won the race, and set a team record. After that, I was a breaststroker.

As I got better and better at swimming, my parents were a consistent support system for me. They always took my sister and me to practice and meets. And most of the time I looked forward to swimming. But if I wanted to do something else, my mom and dad would say, "You made this commitment to swim, we're going."

After swimming at the Reading Y for nearly seven years, I changed clubs. In the swimming world, YMCAs only swim other YMCAs. We switched to a United States Swimming (USS) club because we'd have more opportunities to compete at a higher level. This decision didn't come easy for me. All my friends swam at the Reading Y, and although some went to my school, leaving meant I was giving up the team I'd known for my whole swimming career up to that point.

The decision to change clubs was also a turning point in another way. When we started swimming in the first place, it was because my sister had athletic talent. I had been the tagalong. But we changed clubs because I was so good and so dedicated to the sport. My sister treated swimming differently than I did, and my parents treated her differently as a swimmer—it was no big deal if she missed practice. She chose to have a life outside the sport, while I had the most fun when I was hanging out with my swimming friends. My parents saw how driven I was, and wanted to support me in advancing my swimming career. At the time, I had just turned thirteen and every time I got in the pool, I swam a little faster. But my parents felt like my progress had come to a stand-still at the YMCA. I had recently missed the Junior National cut by one second, and having gotten that close, we knew I could make it. I just needed the right coaching to get me there. Making the Junior National cut is the first step in making the Olympic trials—in other words, I was very close to a very big meet. Up until that point, I had always swum locally and regionally. But a whole world of highly competitive swimming existed beyond Pennsylvania. My first time swimming outside local clubs was when I swam on the Mid-Atlantic Zone team. There, all the kids had their sights set on Junior Nationals, and eventually the Olympics. After seeing all these new opportunities, I started taking swimming more seriously, setting goals, shooting for specific times and meets.

My eyes were opened, and so were my parents'. They learned what else was out there, and realized I was a better swimmer than they previously thought. And they wanted me to take it as far as I could. With so many kids at the Reading Y, my parents and I realized that if I wanted to work to my full potential, I needed to swim at a club where I could get more individual attention from the coaches. Although the Reading coaches were wonderful, the program was big

and getting bigger. The coaches had so many kids they couldn't focus their attention on any one swimmer for long.

After leaving Reading, we tried the Central Penn Aquatic Club, CPAC, in Harrisburg. But I didn't swim there for long because it was over an hour from our house and the drive every night to practice was too difficult. Around this time, we heard about a new coach at the Lancaster Aquatic Club. John Pontz, at twenty-six years old, was a new, young coach. He didn't have much experience or an ego. He was a former swimmer himself, but struggled with injuries and never reached the level he would have liked. However, everyone in our swimming community noticed him because when we swam against Lancaster at meets, almost every swimmer on the team had improved under John's direction. One athlete in particular caught my parents' attention—a boy named Kyle, who was also a breaststroker. My parents thought that if the new coach could help Kyle improve, he might be able to help me too. With Lancaster only a half-hour from home, the drive would be easier and I switched clubs. And although I didn't realize it right away, this decision changed my life.

Being the new girl is never easy. I had seen the girls on the Lancaster team at meets and their faces and names were familiar, but on my first day of practice with them I wasn't sure if they would accept me as a part of their team or not. Even though we were all swimmers and athletes tend to have a quiet understanding of other athletes in their sport, thirteen-year-old girls don't always accept each other with open arms. And I got quite a few that's-the-new-girl stares when I entered the locker room my first day on the team. After changing, I walked up the stairs to the pool by myself and found John waiting for me outside the locker room door. Although my parents had talked to him before, I never had. As he walked me down the pool deck to the blocks to start practice, he asked me about my day at school. Sometimes coaches can be a little

intimidating, but not John. He seemed genuinely interested in getting to know each kid on the team as a person, not just a record of swimming times. And with such a small club—about a quarter of the number of kids on the Reading team—he could give each athlete special attention. He thrived on seeing his athletes improve, and he had such a passion for the sport of swimming. From that first day of practice, I loved swimming with him. And my swimming started to improve right away, too.

Usually when you change clubs or start working with a new coach, it takes a while to adjust to the different workouts. But John's coaching style clicked with me right away. Swimming at Lancaster was basically the same as the Reading Y—the kids were the same and practices were the same. The only difference was John. He showed a passion for learning and being the best coach he could be. He had no problem calling fellow coaches to ask for advice and help. He also focused on each of his swimmers as individuals. Every Saturday morning, John had the senior team (the high school kids) over to his house for breakfast and he made each swimmer feel like they were someone special and an important part of the team, whether they were the best swimmer on the team or not. And he was the first coach I could ever laugh and joke around with. That's just the way he was. If I was stressed out about school or anything else, John would never let me get in the water unless he talked with me. He made me want to be a better swimmer and, therefore, I trained harder than I ever thought was possible. After training with John at Lancaster for just three months, I made the Junior National cut by a few tenths of a second. I didn't beat the time by much, but I made it during one of the first few meets of the season. This was a great accomplishment for a fourteen-year-old and I planned on it being the first of many goals obtained.

That school year, my eighth grade year, I was the manager for the high school swim team. This was really exciting for me because my sister, who was in eleventh grade, was on the team, and I loved being around all the older swimmers. My high school, Wilson, had a competitive team, and swimming was one of the most popular sports in my area. Being the manager let me be a part of the action before I was old enough to swim on the team. The coaches let me help out during home meets by taking splits, filling water bottles, and working the timing system. I even got to travel with the team for a few meets. My sister was friends with everyone on the team, but I was more the quiet observer just waiting for my chance to swim at their level. I felt like it would be a lifetime before it was my turn to be on the relays and sit on the bus with all the girls on the team.

Aside from getting a glance of high school swimming before I got there, being a manager meant I got to witness Kristy Kowal, in her senior year, break the High School National Record in the 100 breaststroke. Kristy Kowal was an amazing swimmer who years later won a silver medal in the Olympics. But even in high school, everyone knew she would be a star. She broke records practically every time she got in the water. Every swimmer in the county looked up to her and was impressed by her gift for the sport of swimming. When she walked out for meets, everyone in the crowd watched her. She was six feet tall and lean—she looked like she was made to swim. Not only was she from my home town, but she swam for the Reading YMCA, just like I did. She was also a breaststroker, which was my best stroke as well. For me, watching her race dual meet after dual meet motivated me to be viewed the same way. She was a local girl achieving amazing things in the sport, and having her so close at a time when I was improving so much made me feel like her level of success was attainable.

The summer Kristy made it to the Olympic trials for the first time, my dad and I drove out to Indiana to watch her swim. This was my first firsthand taste of Olympic-level swimming, and seeing Kristy there and being in the stands was very exciting. I know in the back of my dad's mind we made the trip so he could expose me to that meet. He wanted to plant that seed in my mind and see how I would react to it. At the time, it was just a cool meet—my goals were short term and making it to the Olympics wasn't something I'd really thought about. I was just excited to see Olympians and watch Kristy swim. I never thought I'd make it there, too.

When my freshman year finally came, I continued to train with John at Lancaster every evening until the high school swimming season started. Then when school practices started, my parents would drive me to Lancaster every morning to swim for an hour or so, and then take me to high school in time for class. This arrangement was unique—no other kids at my school got up early to practice a sport before class. The decision was mine, but it wasn't always easy. On days I didn't feel like going, my parents would remind me of the commitment I'd made and wouldn't let me skip. But I really liked working with John and wanted to stay in the water with him. The high school team practiced after school—so during that time, I spent about three hours in the pool each day. And although some high school programs have trouble getting kids to even sign up for the swim team, the Wilson team was big and very competitive. The coaches were experienced and our practices were as intense as any other practice I'd done in my career. I was fortunate to have a high school program that could help kids continue to improve if that's what they wanted.

Being a part of this team was like a dream come true for me. As the team manager the year before, I had watched my sister and Kristy Kowal swim for Wilson High, and finally being

a part of that team was very exciting. The night before our first high school meet, I tried on my team suit to make sure it fit. It was a black suit with our school letters embroidered on the chest. I pulled it on and looked at myself in the mirror and felt like I was on the verge of something really great. Swimming can be a very individual sport, but when you swim for a high school team, you swim so the whole team can win. Your individual times aren't as important as the team's performance as a whole, and this made swimming much more exciting for me. And even though I was a freshman, I wanted to show everyone how well I could compete, and I wanted to motivate people the way Kristy had motivated me. I wanted to show the coaches and my fellow teammates that I was strong and a hard worker. At every practice, I pushed myself and led the lanes. Standing there in my team suit that night, with my first meet coming the next day, I was ready to make my mark on Wilson High, just like Kristy Kowal did when she swam on the team. Plus my sister, a senior that year, was on the team too. Knowing she would be there helped me relax and made me even more confident. And I was so excited about having my own Wilson team suit that I ran downstairs to show my parents.

With the swimming season underway, I could race and compete the way I always dreamed of. My passion for the sport was evident. Every time I went to the pool for practice or hung out with my teammates and friends, I felt such joy and excitement. When I swam for Lancaster and I made my Junior National cut, even though everyone on the team congratulated me, it was an individual accomplishment that didn't affect anyone on the team but me. Swimming with the high school team was much different. I can remember before one meet, everyone on the team was in the locker room changing and getting ready to go warm up. When everyone headed out to swim, my sister and a few of the other senior girls sat me down on a bench and gave me a pep talk. I was racing against a senior girl with a very good reputation in

my county. She wasn't Kristy Kowal, but she usually won her races, and I had to compete against her in the 200 IM. At that time, I was one of the strongest IM swimmers on the team, and I was in a good position to win. The senior girls told me they knew I could beat this girl, even though she was a senior. They said, "Kristen, we know you can do this. Don't be intimidated because she's a senior—you're just as fast as her."

Honestly, before they sat me down, I didn't think I'd beat her. She was four years older than me and much more experienced. I just wanted to try my best and improve my time. Even though I knew I was pretty good, I didn't give myself enough credit to beat her. But once they pumped me up, I started thinking more about the race. Her best strokes were butterfly and backstroke—the first two legs of the race. The breaststroke was the third leg, and the final one was freestyle. I knew that she'd probably be in front of me for the first few laps, and my chance to pull ahead would be during the breaststroke.

When we lined up to race, she was in lane three and I was right next to her in four. The pressure I felt at that moment was incredible. But I kept thinking about what my teammates said, and when I dove in the water, she and I were right next to each other the whole time. We were stroke for stroke—she wasn't ahead like I thought she'd be. We touched the wall at the same time and turned at the same time, even during her strongest strokes. I knew then that I could win. Then during the breaststroke, just like I thought, I started swimming faster than her. My breaststroke was stronger and I pulled ahead by a whole body length. The last stretch of the race was freestyle—not my best stroke, but good enough for me to hold on.

I touched the wall and finished the race just before her. We both looked up at our times and immediately she turned around to congratulate me. I'd swam against girls who got a little mean if they didn't win and didn't bother shaking your hand after a race. But this girl shook my

hand, hugged me over the lane, and said, “Great race, Kristen.” She must have been a little shocked because compared to her I was just a little freshman—she was my sister’s age. But she was very gracious about it.

Before I even climbed out of the pool, all the girls on my team rushed over, pulled me out, and hugged me. My sister gave me a big hug and said, “Good job.” The crowd behind us was clapping and everyone congratulated me. I was the little freshman who beat the big senior. Not only had I won my race, but my team won the meet as well.

My sister was always supportive of me, but she never pushed me. I probably pushed her more than she pushed me. I always worked really hard to lead the lanes at practice, which sometimes meant beating her. But we never experienced any sibling rivalry because she was truly a great supporter. And swimming was never her life, not the way it was mine.

Swimming, especially my freshman year at Wilson, continued to be a positive experience for me. I never let myself down—I never strived for something and didn’t achieve it. And during this time I developed an intense relationship with the sport. I knew that when I was in the water I could do anything I wanted to do. And people beyond my coaches and team started noticing, too. Almost every weekend our town’s newspaper mentioned my swimming accomplishments from that week’s meet and even as a freshman I was starting to make a name for myself in our area’s swimming community.

The last meet of my freshman year was the state championships in March. All the best swimmers in Pennsylvania were competing at the event and my parents and I traveled down to Penn State with several other swimmers from my school. I wasn’t favored to win going into my race, the 100 breaststroke, and I didn’t really expect to win. At that point in my career, I was still building my confidence. Then I placed second in my preliminary heat that Saturday morning and

realized winning was in my reach. Going into the finals I was seeded third overall behind another freshman and a senior who had taken third in the previous year's state championship. After swimming that morning, my parents and I went out to lunch and then came back to the hotel. Although most of the girls on my team who were there with me hung out together all afternoon, my parents made me take a nap in our room so I'd be ready to race in the finals that evening. I hadn't felt my best in the water that morning and my strokes were short. Although resting all afternoon meant I'd miss out on the fun the rest of my teammates were having, I knew rest would give me the edge I needed to do better. It must have helped because I won the gold in the 100 breaststroke that evening. I was behind the other freshman for the first half of the race, but on the third lap I caught up to her and then pulled ahead for the win on the final stretch. I was the Pennsylvania state champion breaststroker—the first from my high school since Kristy Kowal!

My hometown paper ran an article about my victory and the whole team's successes at the meet. But no one was prouder of me than my dad. He wrote a letter to my school's athletic director shortly afterwards and asked if any other freshman from Wilson had ever brought home the state championship in an individual event. My parents framed the athletic director's response letter and it hung in their house for years. It read: "In response to your question regarding any ninth graders to win PIAA individual gold medals at Wilson—according to my knowledge, Kristen is the first! We hope she can keep improving and win more in the next three years."

With the high school swimming season over, I went back to my regular schedule at Lancaster. And my improvements didn't stop. That spring, I reached another big milestone in my career—I made the Senior National cut while competing at one of the Junior National meets. This was a huge accomplishment in itself, because the next step is the Olympic trials, but for me

it was also significant in that I'd only made the Junior National cut six months or so beforehand. Most swimmers take a year or two to drop that much time.

Kyle, the other strong breaststroker on my Lancaster team, had also made the Senior National cut. John really wanted to see the two of us maximize our potential, and to improve your stroke, swimming lap after lap only takes you so far. After that, you have to work on other factors, like nutrition, strength, and flexibility. So John developed exercises and build contraptions for Kyle and me to use to build strength. One I remember in particular was a belt with bungee cords that attached to a board on the ground. John would have us swim a few laps, then get out of the pool and jump off the ground with this belt on. Because of the bungee cords' resistance, I could only jump up a few inches. We'd each do a set of ten jumps or so, then dive back in the water and swim a few more laps. It didn't bulk up my muscles, but I improved so much from that one simple exercise. And my legs were so sore after practices that I couldn't even sit down to go to the bathroom.

Because we were the only two on the team swimming at the Senior National level, John focused a lot of his attention on helping me and Kyle improve. Our practices were energetic and challenging, and Kyle and I always worked as hard as we could. The two of us—especially Kyle—emerged as team leaders among the other swimmers, pushing everyone at practice to accomplish their best.