

I Believe in Setting Goals

I grew up in an Olympic-sized pool. Once, in the middle of a tedious practice, I crunched the numbers and discovered that by age 16 I had spent more than 4,000 hours in that sparkling, aqueous environment. I perfected stroke technique, studied test notes hastily plastered to the pool wall, and determined which bathroom was close enough to sprint to between sets. Of all the lessons I learned in that big blue basin, the most important is the value of actively seeking self-improvement. I believe in goals: setting them, reaching them, not being afraid of them.

There comes a point in every swimmer's career when he or she reaches a plateau. For me, it was during eleventh grade. After several frustrating months, a part of me gave up. It wasn't a conscious decision, but more a defense mechanism. Deep inside I figured if I didn't try quite as much, then I wouldn't be disappointed if I didn't perform well. I still worked hard, but without the spark of incentive, I lost the drive the sport demands. On several occasions I set goals for myself, but they were simply formalities imposed by my coach. I didn't let myself want them because I was afraid of letting myself down. So instead of getting faster, I got slower ... and slower ... and slower.

It took 18 months, but after dozens of awful races I finally realized that by avoiding goal-setting, I didn't avoid feeling unsuccessful. Looking back at all those meets and practices, all those lost hours spent trying to protect myself from failure, I realized that I never found out what I was capable of. The sum of those missed opportunities was far more disappointing than a race or two or three or fifty that

didn't go my way. So I sat down with my coach. Together we set new goals and discussed what I could do to achieve them. I knew there was a big chance that I would fall short, but that was a good thing. In order to improve, I had to want something beyond my reach.

A few months later I competed again. I didn't quite reach the goals I had set, but I did improve, and after a year of swimming letdowns, I could imagine no greater success. The moment I looked at my time on the clock, I ducked under the water and squealed.

Now when I'm in a rut, I think about what I most want to achieve, and I set a goal. After writing it down, I don't just toss it into a pile of papers on my desk. I internalize it. I work for it. In the metaphorical swimming pool of life, I won't always get what I want out of my body on a race day, but I refuse to be afraid of letting myself down. If I don't admit that I want something, if I don't try for it, I'll never achieve it. This I believe.

Kelsey Bradbury is a freshman at Penn State University majoring in Advertising and Psychology, with a minor in creative writing. She is a native of Western New York, where she attended Williamsville East High School. Kelsey began swimming competitively at age 8; her skin has smelled like chlorine ever since.