Memoir: First Draft

It was my last season as a swim coach, and I knew we had some talent on the team. The previous season, we’d won the Michigan Mega Conference Blue Division Championship with a league record 403 points. We won almost every event, and we didn’t graduate that many talented swimmers, so I knew we’d have another good team. But we were promoted to the Red Division—the toughest division in the league. Winning was out of the question—Monroe was too big, and too fast. But second place—that would be a great accomplishment, too. There were other tough teams we’d have to beat: Southgate Anderson, Allen Park, Dearborn, and defending runner-up Woodhaven.

Now I had to sell the goal to the team.

We sat down before the season even began, and talked about our potential. I had charts and graphs, mock score sheets—all kinds of evidence of what was possible. But it wasn’t a lock. We’d have to work hard, really hard, if it was going to be a reality.

As usual, we had a slow start to the year. Fifth at the Mega Conference Relay meet. We beat some weaker teams from other divisions, but we stumbled against Dearborn and Southgate. It wasn’t that we didn’t swim well—we did, and we were constantly improving. It was just that we didn’t match up well in dual meets. You see, in high school dual meets, almost every swimmer counts—everyone needs to score points to win a meet. In a championship meet, however, the rules are different. High finishes are worth a lot more than lower finishes, and relays are worth double points. Even more important, only one relay team from each school could score, so our smaller size and depth wasn’t going to work against us. Any low finishes from our less experienced kids would be a bonus. Our top kids had to perform well to give us a shot. I knew that we’d have an opportunity to do well at the League Championships, because of the strength of our best swimmers.

I didn’t mind losing those early meets, because the team was working hard and supporting each other. No one got down on anyone, and they encouraged their teammates when they were struggling. We had a great Hell Week (20 practices of 5 miles or more in the pool). And on top of that, our last dual meet of the season was against a tough Allen Park team, and we rallied to come from behind on the last race to win that meet. It was an important confidence booster for us. We were tapering well. Taper is the portion of the season where we gradually reduce the distance we do in a practice, and we increase the intensity and rest. Our last few days of practice are mostly technique work and recovery.

The Championships meet is split up into two parts: preliminary heats (prelims for short), and finals. Diving prelims are done between the swimming prelims and finals. Heading into prelims, the team was confident that we could do well. They knew we’d done all we could to prepare for the meet, and historically, teams that I’d coached had the best taper of any team in the league. If we swam well in prelims, many of our swimmers would qualify for finals, and that’s when the points are scored.

The first half of the prelims did not disappoint. We placed everyone we expected to place in finals, and even had a few surprises. In the 50 Freestyle, the last event of the first half, we had 3 of the top 6 places, and we won the first eight heats. Other teams were noticing us—we were going to be a force at this meet. The rest of the day carried on in much the same way; we qualified for finals everywhere we thought we would, and continued to get some surprises from unexpected places. At the end of the day, we had 96% of our swims improve upon their previous best times.

Diving was a real strength for our team. We had three divers that we thought could place well, and Alison Riccobono, our diving coach and my best friend, was confident that they would give us the cushion we needed to achieve our second place goal.

Things were going well. Taylor Sylvestor, our top diver, was in the top three, and Rob Jones and McKinnon Main, both freshmen, were hovering around 8th and 9th—just where we needed them to be.

That’s when disaster struck.

The diving prelims had concluded, and they announcer was reading the list of qualifiers over the PA system. When he’d concluded, Taylor was second, but our other divers were not among the qualifiers. Alison and I went to inquire.

As we walked over to the officials’ table, we noticed that other coaches wouldn’t look at us. Well, it turned out that it was for good reason. Alison had made a crucial mistake. In the diving event, dives are grouped into certain categories. At a championship meet, all categories must be represented in the prelims. Alison’s error was that she didn’t include all the categories on day one. Rob and McKinnon were disqualified.

Our cushion was gone.

I’d be lying if I said I weren’t a little nervous. We’d worked so hard, and to miss out on our goal because of a clerical error would never sit well. But we weren’t out of it yet. Finals were the next day, and so far, no points had actually been scored.

Before warm ups began for Finals, I gathered the team together and did my best Knute Rockne impersonation. I’m not much for giving inspiring speeches, but I did the best I could.

“This is what we trained for, men. This is why we sacrificed our weekends and our vacations. All for moments like today.” I took a deep breath. “Don’t save anything. There is no tomorrow. In every race, give it all you’ve got. When we leave here today, make sure it’s with no regrets.” I explained the diving situation, and then I reminded them that even without those points, we still had a shot to reach our goal.

The first event of the day was the 4x100 medley relay. Normally, this was a really strong event for us, and a few weeks later at the State Championships, we’d place 7th overall in this event. But for the Mega Red Championships, it made sense to stack our freestyle relays, and hope for the best with the medley.

Dominique Johnson and Ryan Stevens, two of the three co-captians of the team were in this relay, and if I had any doubts about whether or not we’d “show up” for the meet, they quickly erased them. Dominique is one of the most dedicated, intense, clutch performers I’ve ever coached. Ryan is slightly more reserved, but on this day, the two of them really rose to the occasion. I talked with both of them before the race about carrying their teammates, and winning the little battles. Having been on the team for several years, they understood that every point counts in a championship meet, and they knew that we needed to pull out a great swim. At that point, moments before the start of the race, I was as nervous as I’d ever been-but one look at Dominique turned that nervousness into confidence. He looked READY. He jumped in and got ready to start. When the gun sounded, he took off like a shot. Now, I wasn’t expecting a win, just a strong swim. We were seeded sixth. The boys swam great, and wound up fourth—picking up 4 crucial extra points.

And so the day went. Each event, we held our position or improved. Max Marsh dominated the 100 butterfly event, winning by almost two full seconds. Our 200 free relay took second place behind Monroe. We were clawing our way into contention. At the end of the 100 backstroke, we were finally where we needed to be-second place, with two events to go—the 100 breaststroke, and the all important 400 free relay.

Now, I’ve already mentioned Ryan Stevens. He was our best breaststroker, and he did a great job individually in the event, finishing 3rd overall. The problem was that Dearborn and Southgate Anderson both had more kids qualified in the event. Both teams leap frogged over us in the standings. Fourth place, four points behind Southgate Anderson, and 2.5 behind Dearborn.

Our 4x100 freestyle relay team was good—we were seeded second overall behind Monroe. But second place alone wouldn’t cut it. We needed Southgate to get sixth, and Dearborn fifth to pass them. Unfortunately, those teams were seeded third and fourth, less than a second behind us in the seedings. This would take a miracle.

But that’s why we swim the races.

Ryan Wojcik-Andrews had been a revelation all season long. He’d started his swimming career full of promise, only to continually disappoint. I’d nearly kicked him off of the team during his junior year because of his lack of dedication. But something happened before his senior year. The kid became as dedicated and selfless as any athlete I’d ever coached. He was our lead off swimmer on the 4x100 free relay.

Up next was senior Tim Saxton, a kid who was the definition of an over achiever. He had limited athletic ability, but he maximized every ounce of talent he possessed. He was easily the slowest member of the relay team, but I knew that when it mattered, Tim would be able to answer the bell.

Swimming the third leg of the relay was Zach Hutchison, a junior. He had really come on strong this year as a great sprinter. He preferred the 50 freestyle over the 100, and earlier in the day, he’d finished third overall in his favorite race.

Finally, Max Marsh, our only individual All-State swimmer, was swimming the anchor leg. Max had more experience and desire to win than anyone else on the team. The season had been a masterpiece for him. He’d been undefeated in the 100 butterfly, setting several pool records along the way.

As the boys stood behind the blocks waiting to be announced, the tension in the air was palpable. Alison couldn’t even watch. I felt bad for her, but I was dreading talking to the team more than anything if we couldn’t pull this off. I replayed the finish that had to happen over and over in my mind.

My attention was drawn back to the pool as the starter called the swimmers up onto the blocks. Before I knew it, the swimmers were in the water. Ryan’s arms churned through the water, but he was already losing ground. The other teams had front-loaded their relays, trusting that their weaker swimmers would be able to hold on at the end. I’d decided to finish with our two strongest athletes – guys I knew could chase.

When Ryan hit the wall, we were in fifth place. Tim began his leg, and the gap continued to grow. I was starting to really doubt that we could come back. We were almost a half a pool length behind now. I scanned the faces of the rest of the team, and they still seemed confident. When I looked back to the pool, I saw Zach on the block, and I knew we had a shot.

Zach dove in and we were in last place.