

# Swimming Lessons

At first the pool was her refuge from problems at home and an outlet for her competitive drive.

Eventually it would become something deeper, thanks to the right coach

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**M**y eyes took in the length of the indoor pool. Twenty-five yards that looked like 25 miles.

“You *can* do this,” John, my coach, said. “The 200 fly. Don’t overthink it.”

I’d swum competitively until quitting before my junior year in college, burned out and discouraged. Now, two decades later, I’d decided to get back into it. But this event, swimming butterfly a total of eight exhausting lengths of the pool, had been my undoing. *I can’t go there again.* The butterfly was my nemesis. Hadn’t it undone my confidence?

But John just stood there quietly,

patiently. “Okay,” I finally said and stepped up on the block.

“Take your mark,” John said. “Go!”

I dove in, the cold water shocking my body. I felt like I was dragging a shipwreck behind me. Over and over, I threw my arms forward, kicking hard. Eight lengths. When I finally gripped the edge of the pool, I hurled myself onto the deck, panting.

“John, why *am* I doing this? I’m 41!”

“Stacey, you did great!” John said. “There’s no pressure. Just let yourself feel the moment.”

I swallowed hard and said, “I want to swim this. But how will I know when I’m ready? I want to feel elation, not pressure.”

“You’ll know,” John said. “The thing to focus on is this: God gave you this ability, this talent, this gift. There’s no way you can fail.”

I nodded. John was the eighth coach

**SIDE BY SIDE** Unlike most coaches, John swims with Stacey during practice.

PHOTOS BY NIK LINDE



who'd tried to get me past this obstacle. But John was different, as much a friend as a coach. I felt he was my last hope.

Swimming had been my safe place from the stress I felt growing up in a family that faced numerous emotional challenges. In the pool, I could let myself go. I was naturally fast. At the age of nine, I began swimming competitively. Soon I felt intense pressure to succeed in the pool—the key, I thought, to fixing my family members' problems.

At 14, I was slated to swim the 200 butterfly at a Junior National meet. Leading up to the meet, my body began aching from stress. I was so upset at practice, a coach handed me a small toy train engine, the Little Engine That Could. "You just have to believe in yourself," he said.

I placed that toy train at the end of my lane before I swam the 200. I repeated the words: *I think I can. I think I can.* It made no difference. I didn't even place.

A year later, I was disqualified at a meet during the 200 butterfly. Swimming with a bad cold, I swallowed a huge gulp of water and, gagging, stopped during the race. But I refused to make excuses. With my team counting on me, I'd literally choked.

I managed to win a small scholarship to swim for the University of Iowa. The pressure I felt before every meet was nearly debilitating.

One day, a teammate stopped me. "I just wanted to tell you I'm praying for you," she said.

Her sincerity touched me. In the

days that followed, she talked to me about God's love. I received a Bible and began reading it here and there. But I just couldn't find the answer for my anxiety. I quit swimming. I didn't care if I ever dipped my toe in a pool again.

I finished my degree, then married a warm and supportive man, Kyle, I'd met in college. Together we started going to church, studying scripture, praying. Still, I had questions. Was God's love just a concept or something you actually felt?

I poured myself into mothering our three children. I saw a therapist and began to untangle the gnarly roots of my fears and anxieties. Answers eluded me.

When the kids were a little older, we joined the YMCA, and at 34 I found myself swimming again. A lifeguard stopped me one day. "A group of swimmers here trains together," he said. "For triathlons and local meets. Have you ever thought about swimming on the Masters level? You're definitely good enough."

Their schedule didn't fit with mine so I trained on my own, spending hours each week at the Y. One day, I crossed paths with a guy older than me. John Jacobson. He coached the high school swim team. I watched him swim—smooth strokes that seemed to match his personality, quiet, not drawing attention to himself. I thought about asking him to coach me, then decided against it. I wasn't ready. I prayed about it with my husband. I also meditated on Philippians 1:6.



**SHARED FAITH** John's encouragement for Stacey to trust in God empowered her as much as his swimming instruction.

Covid hit, and I learned John had retired from coaching. I saw him more at the pool. I felt a nudge each time.

One day, seeing him swimming, I stopped. "John, John!" I yelled to him as he was in mid-stroke. He bobbed up, took off his goggles and looked at me. "I need a coach," I said.

His eyes seemed to peer right through me. "I won't coach you from the deck," he said. "I'll do it only if I can swim with you."

From that minute on, he was unlike any coach I'd ever had. There was a lightness to him, a warmth, that made every workout fun. He pushed me hard, but I hardly noticed. And always he was right by my side, wearing flip-flops so he could keep up. He told me he'd had back surgery months earlier and training me was a kind of physical therapy for him.

He infused his coaching with stories. He told me he was a missionary kid, that he had learned to swim in a lake in Ethiopia. That he'd only started swimming competitively after he was injured playing football in high school. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me," he

said. "Through swimming, I've been able to touch the lives of so many. It truly feels like a calling to me."

I shared with him how the 200 butterfly had come to represent a mountain inside me I needed to conquer. It felt completely natural to be vulnerable with him. "I understand," John would say, and it was clear he did. "You are a child of God. In everything, strive to glorify him. Put your trust in him. Believe it!"

That summer, after five months of training, we both swam in a 5K open water event and did well. I felt my confidence awakening. I decided to enter the U.S. Masters Swimming Middle-Distance Open Water Nationals.

The night before the event, John texted me. "I've felt all along that God has been the head coach in this, not me. Believe!"

I won my race, but most of all it was fun. I was on top of the world until my next practice, when John said, "I think you're ready for the 200 butterfly."

I could feel the confidence John had in me. I had to try. But at every practice, my fear grew stronger until it felt overwhelming. Why did this one basic stroke have such power over me?

One day, John reached into his pocket and pulled out a wooden alphabet block. It was weathered, cracked, with holes where nails had been driven in and removed, so worn that only two of the letters were still visible: T and H.

“I’ve had this for years. The T is for Trust. And the H is for Him. As you pray and prepare to swim the 200 butterfly, this is all you need to do. Trust him, Stacey. God has given you the ability and the talent to do it, even as a married, middle-aged mom of three. If

## Stroke after stroke carried me through the pool. I wasn’t thinking at all, just letting the body God gave me take over.

you swim this, I’ve decided I will swim this meet too. It’ll be fun!”

John placed the old wooden block in my hand, and I felt tears welling up in my eyes. This wasn’t the Little Engine That Could. John wasn’t telling me that perseverance was all I needed. I had put in the necessary work. The rest was up to God. I could let go.

I set the block on my dresser so I saw it every day. First thing in the morning and before I fell asleep. I was reminded of the words: “Trust him.”

At my last practice before the meet, I told John, “When I finish, I won’t look

at my time. I’m just going to swim this event with no worry about how I do. When I touch the wall, I will feel the joy of swimming again.”

Standing behind the block before the 200 butterfly, I felt nervous. *Stay in the moment, I told myself. Just swim down the black line. Trust him.*

I dove in. A peace swept over me. Stroke after stroke, the wavelike momentum carried me through the pool, the motion, the rhythm actually relaxing. I wasn’t thinking at all, just letting the body God gave me take over. Before I knew it, I had only 75 meters left.

Then I touched the wall. It felt like the rock of Gibraltar, a place safe and solid. I rested my head on the edge of the pool, my heart pounding. I didn’t look to the scoreboard. I had swum the entire distance of the 200 butterfly purely for the joy of swimming, the joy I’d first felt as a kid. This event that had become insurmountable to

me was nothing to God. I felt his arms holding me now, and it felt wondrous.

Only later did I learn that my time ranked eighth in the country among Masters swimmers. But the time no longer seemed so important, the incremental measures of accomplishment. Victory came to me differently. It came through the love and patience of an extraordinary coach who believed in me more than I did, who led me to a God who never leaves my side and who loves me just as he made me. ❧

For more on this story, see FAMILY ROOM