

I was nervous. There was no doubt about that. My limbs were tense, as they usually are right before a race, so I tried to calm myself, but failed miserably. Only frantic thoughts agreed to run through my head. Thoughts like, "You've swam 50 free millions of times before-it's your best event. But this is your last chance to get the Junior Olympic cut! Oh man, I should have peed! Idiot! No don't think negative thoughts-stretch!" Robotically, I obeyed the command and jumped around, touched my toes, and shook my arms and legs. The natatorium was packed full with people, and the noise was deafening, making it hard to concentrate. Parents, family members, and teammates cheering their swimmer on. Even though the pool deck was hot because of all the people, I still had goose bumps in my nervousness. I watched the race in front of me splash to the finish, and the shrill noise of the official's whistle blasted in my ear. It was my turn.

Adjusting my cap and goggles one last time, I ominously stepped up onto the block. It was wet and rough, and it felt like sandpaper beneath my feet.

"Girls, 11-12, 50 yard freestyle," the starter called. "Take your mark," I crouched down and grabbed the block.

BEEP! The starting sound blared through the air, sending a rush of adrenaline through my body. I pushed with my legs off the block and formed my arms into a tight streamline as I cut through the water like a hot knife through butter. I can't really say if the water was warm or cool, because my mind was only focused on getting a twenty-six. My arms neared the surface, so I took my first stroke breaking my tight torpedo shape. I kicked my legs as hard as I could, trying to do an eight-beat kick. I took a breath a little inside of the turning end- my dive had taken me about half way across the pool. Gliding, smoothly into the wall I flipped, blowing air out of my nose as I did so. I felt the water ripple around me as I turned. Once more, I formed a streamline and pushed off the wall, my blood pumping like a water pump.

"Don't breathe until you take two strokes!" I thought hurriedly. I was running out of air, and still

deep under water. Without looking up, I instinctively knew when I had reached the surface and somehow managed to take two strokes. Quickly I gulped down a breath of air. As I was turning my head, I realized that if I kicked it in, I could beat the girls in the lanes next to me.

“Race her!” The voice inside my head screamed at me. I kicked harder, and pulled longer. “Kick! Pull! Don't breathe inside the flags!” it continued. “Almost there!”

Then I realized that my last few strokes would decide my final time. This thought seemed to trigger some sleeping bear inside of me. My mind went blank, but my speed doubled and I splashed into the finish. I could only estimate where I was until my hand hit the wall—hard.

My head came above the water; I was dizzy and panting like a dog. I felt exhausted and relieved; it was over. I ripped off my cap and goggles and dunked my head under the water smoothing my hair back at the same time. Methodically, I tried to take deep breaths to calm myself. Suddenly, I heard a voice that sounded like my favorite person in the whole world.

“You did it, Maddy!” Jenny yelled. I squinted at the clocks trying to find lane five. It read twenty-six seconds. Relief washed over me and I laughed with joy.

“Oh, my God,” I thought. “I did it!” And I had. I had achieved my season-long goal that had seemed impossible at the beginning of the winter, only then going a twenty-eight. Then, a thought struck me like a bolt of lightning. I had always scoffed at the people who talked about dreams being achieved by believing, but that moment made realize that even if your goals seem outwardly impossible, truly they can still be achieved with a little determination and a lot of faith in yourself.