

Painfully Positive

Dean McCain and two of his teammates bounce up and down and wave their arms in the air behind lane 5 of the swimming pool at the UNCW natatorium. Every time teammate, Laura Chinni, takes a stroke of freestyle and lifts her head to the side to breathe, they all scream "Go" at the same time. Chinni is in first place, swimming the 400 Individual Medley at a swim meet against William & Mary University. Before Chinni even finishes, her teammates go back to the bleachers where the rest of the team is to prepare for their own races. McCain is the only one who remains.

"Dean is the most supportive teammate I could ask for. He cheers for all of my races and is the first to congratulate me after them," said UNCW swimmer, Laura Chinni. She has been a part of the UNCW swim team with McCain for three years and is also his roommate.

McCain, a member of the University of North Carolina Wilmington swim team, is naturally upbeat. When you run into him on campus, he will always greet you with a smile and ask how your day is going. At practice, McCain encourages the swimmers who are struggling to not give up, and he congratulates the swimmers who are working hard. At swim meets, when McCain is not concentrating on his own race, he cheers for every single teammate, no matter who they are.

Over the past three years, McCain has taken the role of the team cheerleader. His first year at UNCW, he tore his labrum due to the overuse of his shoulder. The labrum is the piece of cartilage in the shoulder that keeps the ball-and-socket joint moving smoothly. McCain ended up having surgery which kept him out of the water for 5 months.

"It was the longest time I've ever been out of the water since I began my swimming career and I HATED it," said McCain.

Before the surgery, McCain's life revolved around school and swimming. He began his typical weekday at 6 a.m. when he jumped into the pool at the natatorium. Every morning he woke up to the shock of the cold water. Until 7:15 a.m., he and the his male teammates would swim roughly 5000 yards, which is equivalent to 200 lengths of the pool or just a little over 3 miles. McCain attended class until it was time for round two at 2 p.m. Again, he pulled on his swimsuit, still wet from the morning's practice and headed out of the locker room with his male teammates to the pool.

For two hours, the men would swim about 8000 yards, which is 320 lengths or nearly 5 miles. Their eyes would ache from wearing tight goggles lap after lap with no

time to adjust or take them off. The only breaks they had were when their coach would stop them individually or as a team to tell them the next set or yell at them to work harder.

After, the men quickly changed into a t-shirt and gym shorts without the chance to rinse the chlorine off their bodies. They would meet in the weight room or the gym to do an hour's worth of dryland. During dryland, the men, depending on the day, either lift weights or do aerobics and core workouts, along with 600 sit-ups. Even if the men were so sore it hurt to sit down, every exercise had to be completed. McCain ended each day doing homework or relaxing with his teammates.

Though McCain had swum year-round for 10 years prior to swimming at UNCW, his freshman year was hardest work thus far. There were times when McCain couldn't lift his arms high enough to wash his hair, nor lift his legs high enough to walk up the stairs. Still, McCain swam as fast as he could to make every time cycle, no matter how bad it hurt. He did whatever his coach, Todd Desboro, told him to do. When his coach said to kick harder, McCain would. When his coach said to reach further, he would.

"Dean always does exactly what you ask of him, and he always gives 100%. You can't ask for much more," said assistant men's coach, Todd Desorbo.

From his very first day at UNCW, McCain bonded with the rest of the men's swim team. The team spends most of their days together, working for the same goal: to become better swimmers. Most importantly, each year, the team works towards winning the CAA Championship Title. The men's team has won this title the past seven consecutive years.

"The boys give each other words of encouragement pretty often, even during the most difficult practices," said Desorbo.

McCain is one of the team's leaders when it comes to staying motivated and lending a helping hand. Because swimming is so demanding, a lot of swimmers have a hard time staying positive. Often, a swimmer will go through a slump. This usually happens when the swimmer is exhausted, when his/her body is in so much pain it hurts even when he/ she doesn't move. The swimmer may become distraught and start to give up. They may have a series of practices in which they cannot keep up with the other swimmers or they may fail to come close to their best time during a race. When this happens, McCain is usually the person the swimmer goes to for advice and a motivational boost.

"On the team, I'm considered someone that's easy to talk to. I'm not one of the captains, so I'm seen as someone on their level. I'm also nonjudgmental, which is why a

lot of people come to me for advice. I'm there to help anyone with any problem they may have," said McCain.

Because McCain is a well-rounded swimmer, partaking in both sprint and mid-distance events, McCain is able to relate to a majority of the team. Most swimmers are involved in only one specific group: spring, mid-distance, or distance. Sprinters mainly do 50 and 100 yard races; Mid-distance swimmers do 200, 400 and 500 yard races; and Distance swimmers mainly do 1000 and 1650 yard races. To be a part of more than one of those groups gives McCain the ability to help and talk to other swimmers on their own level.

"Dean makes an effort to get to know everyone and relate to them on their own level," said Chinni.

For every day a swimmer is out of the water, it takes two days to get back to where he/she was training-wise. This means that once McCain was able to start practicing again, it took him 10 months to fully recover and return to the shape he was in before the surgery. During his sophomore year, while he was in shoulder-rehab, he was unable to finish full practices. McCain admits to feeling left out during this time.

"At times, I definitely felt excluded from the rest of the team. Because I would get out early, I would miss Coach Allen's meetings which were held after everyone was done practicing," said McCain.

However, McCain never lost his motivation. Because McCain was so quick to help his teammates during their times of needs, his teammates were willing to return the favor. Not only that, but shoulder injuries are very common among swimmers, which meant McCain was not alone. He was now able to relate to his teammates on an even higher level. His best friend and fellow teammate, Brian Matsushima, also suffered a shoulder injury due to its overuse and the hyper elasticity in his joints.

"Dean was there for me when I was suffering the most. He inspired me to keep going. Dean is great at keeping an upbeat persona," said Matsushima.

McCain's constant positive attitude throughout his recovery inspired the entire team. Though he was not able to practice as hard, nor was he able to accomplish what he did before the surgery, McCain never stopped enjoying himself. McCain always had a smile on his face. To lighten the mood at practices or relieve stress before swim meets, McCain would offer jokes to his teammates.

“Dean has a positive influence on the other swimmers just by having a positive attitude. He does a good job at keeping everybody else positive. They feed off of it and step it up a little,” said Desorbo.

However, McCain’s optimism could not fix his shoulder. Just because he was able to recover and practice as much as he did freshman year does not mean that his shoulders are free from problems. In fact, this year, his junior year, McCain maxed out his shoulders completely. As a result, he had to discontinue the season and will not be able to continue his senior year. He is forced into early retirement from the sport.

The end of the swim season is approaching. The CAA Championship meet is at the end of February. Instead of competing with his fellow male teammates for their 8th CAA Championship Title, which would break the CAA record for the most consecutive titles, McCain will be standing on the side of the pool, wearing his team warm-up outfit, cheering his teammates to victory.

“Dean is a wonderful guy. I am so lucky to have met him,” said Chinni.