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## Swimming Up

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Providence College  
Freshman Common Reading Program Essay Contest  
Second Place

## **Swimming Up**

**By Meghan O'Connor**

As I enter my freshman year at Providence College, one of the things I am looking forward to the most is swimming for the college team. Being an athlete is one of my greatest strengths, and it is something that defines me. With that being said, while reading Gladwell's *Outliers*, the chapter that stuck out the most to me was Chapter One: "The Matthew Effect." In this chapter, Gladwell looks at the roster of one of Canada's premier junior hockey teams. The roster clearly reveals a tendency for the players' birthdays to fall at the beginning of the new year. This pattern corresponds perfectly with the cutoff date for hockey teams. As the deadline is January 1<sup>st</sup>, all players born right after January 1<sup>st</sup> are almost a year older than their peers born in December of the same year. This provides an astronomical advantage to the players when they are younger, leading them to opportunities and attention that push them even further ahead as they get older. For most December-born players, it's hard to catch up. This principle made a lot of sense to me, and I began to notice the role of deadlines and cutoff dates in my own life. Despite a few exceptions, most of the students at the top of my academic class were born between September and December or were transition students (one year older), again demonstrating how the oldest have a mental and physical advantage in education simply based on the cutoff day for each grade. However, I found the most striking similarity to "The Matthew Effect" in my own sport: swimming.

Ever since I began swimming I have excelled in the pool. Every year we had our championship meet at the end of March, right before my birthday. A few of the other swimmers

on the team had birthdays right near mine, and we would always have an end-of-season party to celebrate. Looking back, I noticed that the swimmers I celebrated alongside every year were the best swimmers on the team. We scored the most points, ranked the best, and qualified for age group and sectional meets. Huh. Even as a twelve-year-old I noticed that even though my best friend, Emily, swam the same speed as me in her events, she never ranked at Champs or made any cuts. The reason for this discrepancy lies directly in the “The Matthew Effect.” In swimming, you are not locked in an age group for the year. As soon as your birthday hits you automatically “age up” and have to compete against all older swimmers. However, most teams train swimmers together based on academic year or age at the start of the season. Thus, swimmers with birthdays between September and January tend to age up before the competitive meets and are bumped up into a more challenging age group with older swimmers. However, their peers who have birthdays in the spring compete as the oldest in their age group, and then they age up when the season is over. These swimmers qualify for more cuts, place better at championships, and, in turn, get extra attention and opportunity to become better swimmers. The swimmers with early birthdays can get left behind, just like the hockey players with birthdays between September and December.

I was born on March 27, 1996. For my state league, the championship meet always falls on the weekend of March 20<sup>th</sup>. I have the perfect birthday for competitive swimming in the state of New Hampshire. I am the absolute oldest competitor at the meet in my age group, offering me a great advantage in comparison to my friends who aged up. My friend, Emily, whom I mentioned earlier, was born on December 8<sup>th</sup>. Although she trained alongside me and on the same schedule, she was forced to compete as the younger swimmer with fiercer competition and much harder cuts. Solely because of my birthday was I able to go to more selective meets, get on

better relays, and rank higher in the state than my best friend of equal swimming ability. This effect is not limited to my own personal experience as a swimmer. In **Table 1.1** I have recorded the 2013-2014 USA Swimming Women’s Junior National Team roster, with the names and birthdays of all of the swimmers (USA Swimming). As championship season across the country ranges from February to March, the ideal birthdays for swimming occur between the months of February and June. Out of the 40 women listed on the roster, 23 are born within this range, or 58%. However, if we extend this to include July and August, nearly 75% of the birthdays fall within this range. Therefore, rather than birthdays being distributed evenly throughout the year, the split is 75% - 25% when broken into the competitive and non-competitive sides of the swimming year.

Thus, it is clear to see Gladwell’s principle in the competitive swimming world. Due to my birthdate, I have been given an advantage as a swimmer that I feel has helped me get to the place in athletics that I have reached today. As I begin my swimming career at PC, I can thank the sheer luck of cutoff dates for giving me a leg up.

**Table 1.1 USA Swimming 2013-14 Junior National Roster**

<b>Swimmer</b>	<b>Birth Date</b>
Lauren Abruzzo	March 27, 1995
Kaitlin Albertoli	August 24, 1996
Olivia Anderson	April 17, 1997
Jessica Arnold	December 22, 1996
Kathleen Baker	February 28, 1997

Olivia Barker	December 28, 1994
Cassidy Bayer	September 9, 1999
Lisa Bratton	May 5, 1996
Hannah Burns	December 8, 1996
Liliana Casso	April 20, 1995
Madison Cox	May 30, 1995
Gia Dalesandro	April 22, 1995
Katherin Drabot	September 2, 1997
Ella Eastin	March 28, 1997
Bethany Galat	August 10, 1995
Janet Hu	December 7, 1995
Courtney Harnish	April 17, 1999
Lilly King	February 10, 1997
Emily Kopas	July 30, 1996
Bethany Leap	July 13, 1996
Kennedy Lohman	March 6, 1998
Brooke Lorentzen	August 18, 1995

Nora McCullagh	May 21, 1997
Katie McLaughlin	July 9, 1997
Alexnadra Myers	March 22, 1996
Danielle Nack	April 19, 1996
Lia Neal	February 13, 1995
Cierra Runge	March 7, 1996
Mimi Schneider	June 3, 1996
Riley Scott	August 14, 1997
Meghan Small	May 25, 1998
Clara Smiddy	January 4, 1996
Leah Smith	April 19, 1995
Leah Stevens	September 11, 1996
Kylie Stewart	March 27, 1996
Alexandra Szekely	January 24, 1998
Danielle Valley	May 11, 1995
Courtney Weaver	February 29, 1996
Madison Wright	February 20, 1997

Brooke Zeiger	January 9, 1996

Works Cited

"USA Swimming - National Junior Team Rosters." *USA Swimming - National Junior Team Rosters*. USA Swimming, n.d. Web. 18 Aug. 2014.