

Kelly McNichols

Honolulu, HI



I woke up one Sunday morning to an unusual text from my older brother [Matt McNichols](#): “Do you want to swim across Lake Huron with me?” ... “Sure!” was my immediate reply. I never would have imagined in my entire life that I would eventually memorize the lyrics to an obscure shipwreck song by some Canadian guy, much less swim across one of the Great Lakes.

I am swimming because I am my older brother’s ride-or-die. Especially when it comes to aquatic related adventures. He was my training partner, mentor, confidant, and best friend throughout my entire swimming career. Our sibling bond still thrives to this day, especially when we recall funny jokes and one-liners from our many hours of swimming side-by-side, and our many hours of sitting in the car driving to and from a million swim practices.

Every morning, he’d make a monstrous pink protein shake for *his* breakfast (emphasis on “monstrous” because he’d always let me have half.) This liquified (albeit hearty) pink goo was called “The Shake”. It had enough protein powder in it to fuel an entire NFL team. Then we’d go swim, always in the same lane because I never paid attention to what the next set was, thereby making me completely reliant on him to tell me what was going on and what we were supposed to do next. Without him by my side, I would be lost. He has the patience of a saint, just like our dad—who happily filled the role of breakfast-giver after Matt went away to college.

Dad would wake up with me every morning at 4:45am to cook me scrambled eggs (and sausage and toast! We both jokingly would always refer to this as “Breakfast of Champions”). He would even make my lunch—always taking the time to carefully cut off the crust of his gourmet-style sandwiches once he noticed the insulated lunch bag I’d bring back at the end of the day was filled with just crusts. Dad and I always enjoyed those quick, morning breakfasts together. We always shared a laugh even though we were tired and bleary, and the sun was nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t have asked for a better start to my day than a full belly, a warm heart and a kiss goodbye from him, before I ran out the door to go swim. These daddy/daughter super early morning breakfasts were always the highlight of my day—how could it not be when your dad is the most wonderful dad in the whole universe?!

When I began college (I swam for The University of Georgia), my breakfasts quickly devolved to a couple slices of ham and a granola bar, which I forlornly ate while shuffling amongst the zombie army of my fellow college teammates, as we walked in silence to the pool together. Yet every morning, during those quiet zombie shuffles, I would always reflect on how much I missed Matt’s pink protein shakes and blasting his 80’s rock tunes as hard as our little ‘97 Ford Escort could muster every morning on our way to practice. I would also simultaneously miss eating dad’s wonderful “Breakfast of Champions” while sipping from his coffee mug and reveling in our usual comedic morning banter, as I watched him make me amazing, love-filled lunches to fuel my day.

My brother and my dad are not the only role models I had to look up to, my older sister Lauren (Matt’s twin! She’s older than him by one minute!) is also my other ride-or-die. She also is a great swimmer and she and I have been on many aquatic adventures, most notably a 5k swim throughout Crystal River, Florida and a long, beautiful river swim up and down Rainbow River.

Lauren’s athletic dreams led her to the Track and Field arena where she became a D1 pole-vaulter, high jumper, long jumper and heptathlete. She will be supporting us on our swim, cheering us on, just as she always has for Matt and I no matter what goal we are pursuing—Lauren is always in our corner (*and vice-versa*)!

And speaking of always being in our corner... our powerful and loving mother, Marcia! Matt, Lauren and I know that her greatest joy in life has always been loving her three babies. We know this to be true because of her constant devotion to our well-being, her joyful celebrations of our successes, and her endless, endearing comfort whenever we feel down—no matter what stage of life we are at. Her love and passion for our family could easily match the power generated by a nuclear power plant!

I hope the picture I've just painted for you about my family does them justice—for all the love and joy they give me—it's a painting that lives permanently in my mind's eye and gives me great comfort. Especially since I live far away from all of them on a small, tropical island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (hey, someone has to live in Hawaii... we can't all be in the Midwest.)

...And speaking of crossing great bodies of water—I followed Matt quite a bit throughout my life: I followed him to summer league swim team, age group swim team, high school swim team, and then on to the Division One NCAA arena, and now I will gladly follow him across the great Lake Huron! Which reminds me—hey Matt?! What are we having for breakfast before this swim??? The Shake? Breakfast of Champions? I'm thinking we're gonna need both!

"The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down, of the big lake they called Gitche Gumee..."