

# THE SMILE THAT LEADS

Written by Juliette Lilla

It's impossible to miss the smile of senior **Owen Dziurawiec**. It's bright, constant and contagious. Despite his special needs, that same smile led the Gretna High Swim team as one of their captains.

"(It's) scary a little bit," Dziurawiec said about being named captain, "because it's going to be a different routine."

For Dziurawiec, swimming has always been about more than just practices and swim meets. It's about cheering for others, helping his teammates and being a consistent presence in the pool.

Dziurawiec, a student with autism, found that the honor of being named captain wasn't just a new role, it was a milestone that reflected years of work, dedication and the optimism that has defined his time on the team.

"I love cheering people on and making sure I'm responsible," Dziurawiec said. "Being around friends and helping my teammates is the best part."

From his first day in the pool as a freshman, Dziurawiec stood out. Not because he was the loudest or the fastest, but because of the energy he brought with him. Whether he's in the water or cheering from the side, Dziurawiec has a way of lifting people. He is the first to celebrate a teammate's success and the first to smile after any race.

"Owen brings such positivity to the team and is a great example of how to work hard and always try your best," said **Kari Meister**, head swim coach. "After every swim, Owen comes and talks to his coach and listens to what he did great on and what he has to keep working on. For every race, he is cheering on his fellow teammates and giving them words of encouragement."

Dziurawiec's actions are not performative; they are genuine, which makes his influence even more powerful.

"We have watched Owen become more confident as a student," Meister said. "It has been a blast seeing him improve throughout the years and grow into the amazing student he is today. We are truly lucky to not only have him on the team but to be a captain this year."

Dziurawiec's teammates agree. Junior swim team member **August Hardies** said the team was thrilled when they heard Dziurawiec was named captain.

"Everyone was really happy about it," Hardies said. "Owen's a very fun person to be around. He's always happy, always smiling and he makes other people smile too. He never says anything negative—he just uplifts everyone."

That positivity carries into practices where Dziurawiec's humor and lightheartedness balance out practice intensity.

"Sometimes things can get a little awkward or stressful," Hardies said, "but Owen just finds a way to make people happy. He'll crack a joke and the whole team's laughing again."

For teammate and senior co-captain **Emma Brophy**, Dziurawiec's leadership brought something deeper to the team culture.

"He's inspiring," Brophy said. "He's consistently uplifting and nice to everyone. I think he'll brighten the atmosphere and make everyone feel included—he just does that naturally."

In addition to his leadership, Dziurawiec has proved himself as a competitor. He swims the 50 freestyle, an all-out fifty-yard swim. He also has competed in the Special Olympics State Meet, where he's medaled multiple times, including a top-three finish.

"He's fast," Hardies said. "Like, really fast. He's even beaten swimmers who aren't in Special Olympics events. He can move."

That balance between speed and spirit, along with athlete and leader, has made Dziurawiec an inspiring example for his teammates as well as the up-and-coming classes. Still, Dziurawiec admits the captain's role comes with challenges.

"It's scary because I might not get as much help this time," he said. "But I want to help my teammates get where they need to be."

That sense of responsibility is something Dziurawiec takes seriously. He's aware that being captain means setting the tone for the team, and not just through words, but through the way he carries himself every day. Dziurawiec leads primarily through his actions: showing up, working hard, smiling through challenges and reminding everyone what it means to love the sport.

"When you see Owen show up every day and give everything he's got, it makes you want to do the same," Hardies said.

Dziurawiec goals for the swim season were simple: swim fast, be there for his teammates and keep spreading the positivity that got him there. At practices and meets he smiled, swam hard and cheered for everyone else on his team. Because for Owen Dziurawiec, leadership wasn't just about being the best. It's about helping everyone around him become their best.

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—OWEN DZIURAWIEC



Photo courtesy of Oliver Schrock

# Overachiever

"Getting better at football,"  
said Zechariah Aristy, 28 **057**

Story by Julliette Lilla