

## **Pride in Being Public**

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**“WE ARE.. PUBLIC!” “WE ARE.. PUBLIC!!**

Each February, in Canton Ohio, Canton McKinley High School Natatorium hosts the annual Ohio State Boys and Girls High School Swimming Championships. All Ohio high schools participate in this two day event—large schools, small schools, public schools, private schools—all compete together. Teams, parents, and fans of 1150 public high schools and 208 Private high schools fill the natatorium to slightly beyond capacity, making the Fire Marshalls extremely nervous. The cheering is deafening during every event, especially during the relays.

There is always only one state champion boys team and one state champion girls team—there are no Division 1, 2, 3, or 4 champions (based on school size), nor a Catholic/Private school champion and a Public School champion. Each year it is just one big competition, with one team for each gender being crowned State Champion.

Each year only a few schools have a legitimate shot at winning the high school state championship, and usually it is the same group of high schools that contend—several large public high schools that have developed strong swim programs, and several Catholic high schools that have developed even stronger programs that have enticed strong swimmers to move to those Catholic schools, specifically because of the success of their swim programs. The boys’ team from St. John’s Catholic high school in Toledo, for example, is a perennial contender and often wins the boys state championship. Likewise, St. Ursula Academy (Cincinnati) often wins the girls state championship.

One year Toledo St. John’s had a particularly strong team and was dominating the competition, as it typically did during previous years. Likewise, St. Ursula’s girls’ team was well on their way to winning a third straight girls state championship. This success was a source of great pride among the private Catholic schools and their fans. That pride bordered on arrogance and a sense of superiority, privilege, and entitlement.

Towards the end of the second day of competition the entire St. John’s boys’ team, enjoying their comfortable lead, started loudly, proudly, repeatedly, and rather annoyingly chanting, “We are, St. John’s! We are, St. John’s! We are, St. John’s!”

Then, a fascinating thing happened. In one corner of the natatorium two swimmers from a tiny rural public high school team started softly chanting, “We are, Public. We are, Public. They were probably just having fun cleverly mocking the swimmers from St. John’s Their chant was nearly drowned out by the St. John’s chanting.

However, like a wave moving from the corner through the crowd, more and more swimmers from the public schools joined in the chant. Soon, all of the public school swimmers, their parents, and their fans were loudly and proudly chanting, “We are, Public;” “We are, Public” The loudness of the chant was deafening, louder than during any of the most decisive relays. As the chant continued and increased in volume, the natatorium swelled with Public pride. It did not matter that none of the public schools was even close to winning a championship. Certainly, the two swimmers who started the chant had no shot at winning anything. But, every soul in the natatorium that day understood and deeply felt the joy, the pride, and the meaningfulness of being “Public.” Even the boys from St. John’s seemed to wish, at that moment, that they were part of the Public. They stopped their chant, and I would like to think that one of them, with tears of appreciation in his eyes, started wistfully chanting to himself, “They are, Public! They are Public!

It was a magical moment, started by two humble, creative swimmers from a small farm town in central Ohio. They intuitively knew what was important, what nourishes the human soul, and what warms the human heart. St. John’s and St. Ursula’s each won another state championship, but the Public Kids enjoyed a lasting and inspiring moment of Selfless Freedom and Social Beauty.

**RMR**