

The fear to freestyle

Chandler's first-time swimmers are turning courage into confidence, one stroke at a time

By Hope Frost



CHANDLER — Everyone talks about jumping into the deep end. But what about jumping in at all?

At Chandler, a few students did just that—joining the swim team this year without knowing how to swim.

“Some of these kids didn’t even know how to float,” coach Shannon Moxley said. “We literally started with the basics: learning to breathe, to trust the water.”

One of those brave beginners was freshman Meralyn Gutierrez, who transferred to Chandler this fall and had never been in deep water.

“I was scared at first,” she said. “I didn’t like the ocean or anything that felt too deep.”

But after a classmate introduced her to Moxley, she decided to give it a shot. “The coaches and captains were so nice,” she said. “And I just thought, maybe I can do this.”

She wasn't alone. Freshman Maria Bartolome joined after spotting the pool her first week on campus.

"I didn't know how to swim," she said. "I never went to the pool. So when I entered high school and saw the pool, I said, 'I want to swim.' So that's what I did."

And then there was Celedonio "Junior" Flores, a junior at Chandler who didn't know how to swim but figured it might be the best way to stay cool in the Arizona heat.

"Honestly, I thought it would be hot outside, so I wanted to join the swim team," he said, laughing.

Their stories began for different reasons, but they all shared one thing: the bravery to try.

The coaches opened doors to allow that bravery to flourish. Chandler swim is a no-cut program, a place where anyone willing to try belonged.

"We felt like so many of our teams weren't very open," coach Brenda Wilson said. "You either had to have prior experience or meet a certain time, and we wanted to open it up to everyone. There's so much value in just showing up and trying."

"We want kids to be part of something," Moxley said. "If they're willing to work hard, learn to love the water and make friendships, then they belong here."

Before the season officially began, the coaching staff hosted a two-week pre-camp just for beginners; a crash course in floating, kicking and breathing.

"They literally hold you to move your arms right and make sure you don't sink," Gutierrez said. "After that, you start to get the hang of it. You feel sore, but that means you tried your best and you're going to get better. That's what shows how fast you're improving."

Little by little, their bravery gave way to something new—determination. The same students who once clung to the wall now showed up each day chasing seconds, chasing confidence, chasing the feeling of getting better.

Flores said it's why he shows up every day.

"It's pretty amazing," he said. "As much as it's step by step, sometimes focusing really helps me learn faster. And I just really enjoy the whole concept of swimming. I have this urge to get better. I'm more determined now, just focused on what I'm learning."

For Bartolome, that determination bred confidence—a quiet belief in the strong swimmer she hoped to become, and a realization that this possibility was now a reality.

“If I can get a chance, I make it happen every time,” she said.

And for Gutierrez, her determination extended beyond the pool.

“I joined swim, and it gave me motivation to keep going,” she said. “It helped me get my grades up, focus on school and focus on myself, instead of everything else.”

The shift was noticeable. The coaches watched as those who had only recently learned how to float developed into swimmers with a passion to grow and a commitment to the team.

“They’re just really dedicated,” Wilson said. “Even the newbies—they come every day, and they want to be there every day. They even elect to do optional practices. The dedication is really awesome.”

Teaching kids how to swim has lifelong effects. It’s about safety, yes. But also discipline, persistence and belief. It’s about learning that you can do hard things, and how to keep doing them.

This is what makes what’s happening at Chandler so special. It’s a program built on courage, shaped by determination and strengthened by growing confidence. The same swimmers who once gripped the edge of the pool are now diving in without hesitation, and moving forward with purpose.

Gutierrez’s fear became her motivation. Bartolome’s curiosity became her confidence. And for Flores, what started as a way to beat the heat became his daily drive to improve.

Everyone talks about jumping into the deep end. Now these swimmers have, and that’s where they belong.