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Like Mother, Like Daughter

After cheering for her daughter for decades, Janet Popelka competed in her first swim meet at Summer Nationals

[Erin Popelka](#) started swimming with her summer league at age 10 and then joined a year-round team. From there, she swam all through middle school and high school and competed for the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio.

Throughout it all, her mom, [Janet Popelka](#), was her biggest fan and supporter. She sacrificed untold hours of sleep to get up early to drive her daughter to practices and sweltered in the bleachers at every single meet. She wanted to cheer her daughter on and make sure she had the support she needed to succeed.

"She helped me write my heat and lane numbers on the back of my hand when I was a kid so I could find my lane," Erin Popelka says. "And I remember conversations in the car to and from practice and meets. She was there every step of the way."

In about 2007, Erin Popelka began coaching an age group swim team in Corvallis, Oregon, and before long, started swimming with the Masters group there. Ever the swim mom, her mother would often come cheer for her at

Masters meets, which were always happy family affairs. “When my husband and I got engaged, we let my parents know in person when they came down for a swim meet,” she says.

Erin Popelka, now 44, lives in Spokane, Washington, and when she found out that the 2025 U.S. Masters Swimming Summer National Championship would be held in her home state in Federal Way, she was eager to sign up. But then she had a stroke of brilliance: Why not see if her mom would join her as a competitor?

Her mom initially dismissed the idea. She’s a battle-hardened swim-mom but had never competed in a meet herself. The idea of doing her first meet at age 73 and it being a national championship seemed outrageous at first blush. Still, she was competent in the water and enjoyed swimming laps.

“She told me she’d definitely be there to cheer,” Erin Popelka says. Coming around to the idea of competing would take some work. Enter a monthslong soft-sell. She floated the idea of her mom participating in the meet several months before the registration deadline and just kept mentioning it.

For her part, her mom says she was “totally awed and touched that Erin asked me to join her when I never, ever thought of myself as a swimmer.” Janet Popelka joined her local Y and began swimming workouts. She eventually traded her ruffled fashion suit that added pounds of drag for a sleeker training suit. When she bought a tech suit, her daughter figured that meant she was definitely in for the meet, but she hadn’t quite committed yet. A few days before registration closed, she finally pulled the trigger.

“When Erin was younger, I was a bleacher mom, not an athlete,” Janet Popelka says. “Yet here was a chance for me to be on deck with Erin, cheering for her from the end of

her lane, not up in the bleachers. I realized that if I passed up this opportunity, I might never have another chance.”

So she dived in and signed up for two 50-meter races so she wouldn’t have to worry about flip turns, which she hasn’t learned how to do yet. She bravely overcame self-doubt and worked hard to get ready for the meet.

Her biggest concerns were whether she could dive off the block without her goggles coming off and whether she would get disqualified. But she needn’t have worried. Not only did her goggles stay put, but she also dropped oodles off of her seed times and did far better than she expected, medaling in both of her events.

“It only took about 35 years to move from the bleachers to the pool,” she says. “What a change of perspective!”

Better yet, she got to see up close the supportive environment at Masters meets and experience directly why they have always held such appeal for her beloved daughter.

“I’m grateful that my daughter held my hand, so to speak, at the meet,” she says. “She’s an incredibly positive person, and her relentless encouragement turned the experience from scary to exhilarating.”

Both of them swam well and had a terrific meet. But the best part? They got to enjoy the wonder of Masters Swimming together as teammates of the Spokane Sturgeons Swim Club. Look for this dynamic duo at future nationals and beyond. “Now I get to be one of her top fans,” Erin Popelka says.

Also in this Issue

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Like Mother, Like Daughter

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