



The lift is being performed to a cheering crowd by Kaitlyn Gelle, being lifted to "Stevie Wonder" music, in the 16-17 team routine



From left to right the 2025-2026 Blue Dolphins young team consists of Madi Emrick, Lara Khandelwal, Natalie DiSante, Adeline Nguyen, Katalin Gaugler, Rilynn Mahanta, Eliza Combs, Sophie Baako, Charlotte Combs, Ellie Mae Sullivan

Region's only artistic swimming team, Brecksville Blue Dolphins, dances through tough competition

BY ADAM COOK
Chief Writer

Grace, strength and breath control collide beneath the surface of a suburban pool, where Northeast Ohio's only competitive artistic swimming team trains to move as one — then travels hundreds of miles to compete.

Founded in 1993, the Brecksville Blue Dolphins once had local rivals. Over time, those teams disbanded. Today, every meet is a road trip.

"All our competitions require travel to places like Columbus, Buffalo, Rochester and as far away as Portland and Dallas," head coach Lauren Gaugler said. "It's dancing and gymnastics in the water, and the relationships built over the seasons are what make the sport special — we have to move as one."

The travel-heavy schedule begins at home: the Brecksville Community Center, where the Blue Dolphins have trained for more than three decades.

From that stable home base, swimmers as young as 6 learn foundational skills, practice a short routine and begin working as part of a team. Novice swimmers attend one competition each season and perform in the end-of-year water show.

As swimmers gain strength and confidence, they move into the intermediate level. Practices grow longer, routines become more complex, and competition expands to three or four meets per season.

The most competitive swimmers train up to four times per week — three water practices and one land practice — with the goal of earning a spot at the Junior Olympics.

"I don't expect everyone to be perfect all the time, but I expect them to want to improve and to show growth from practice to practice and from meet to meet," Gaugler said.

For the swimmers themselves, the challenge is part of the appeal.

Younger swimmers often arrive

surprised by the physical demands.

"It surprised me how many laps we have to swim," said Charlotte Combs, 8.

As athletes grow older, the sport becomes more technical and more consuming.

"The technical demands and rigorous practice schedule were a step up from what I was used to," said Kaitlyn Gelle, 14. "But the commitment has paid off through the opportunity to connect with people outside of school."

Parents say those challenges translate into confidence that extends beyond competition.

"My daughter has grown so much in confidence," said assistant coach Jessica Baako, whose child swims at the intermediate level. "She pushes herself to try new or hard things."

Shannon Gelle admitted she underestimated the sport before her family joined.

"I was surprised by how intense this sport is and how much it depends

on perfect team chemistry," Shannon Gelle said.

Several parents pointed to moments away from the pool as some of the most meaningful — long weekends on the road and late nights at hotels where friendships deepen, and younger swimmers learn the same lessons the sport demands: trust, timing and showing up for one another.

Gaugler has been with the Blue Dolphins from the beginning — first as a 10-and-under swimmer during the team's inaugural season, later as a coach. Now, she shares the experience with her daughter, Katalin Gaugler, 9.

When Gaugler asked her then-6-year-old daughter if she wanted to try artistic swimming, the answer was immediate.

"She said, 'I've been waiting my whole life for you to ask me that question.'"