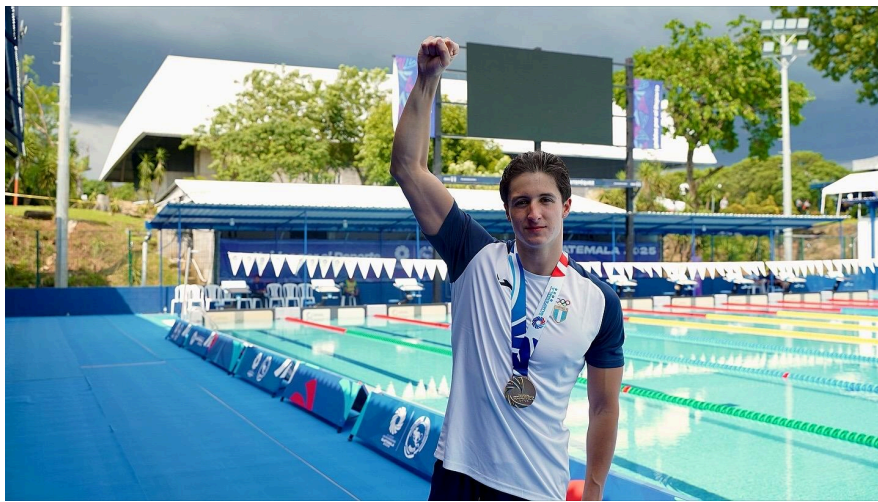




The Best Thing I Saw at State: A Warrior in the Pool and a Leader Who Inspires - The Story of Coach Miguel Vasquez

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



Hours before the first finals session of the Olympic trials in Guatemala, Miguel Vasquez's kidneys began to fail. Unknowingly, he somehow finished his race, but that effort sent him downhill fast. He was rushed to the hospital in severe condition, white blood cell counts three times over the limit, and creatinine levels double the normal, Miguel's body began a multi-system shutdown. Doctors told him that if treatment had been delayed until morning, he would have died.

"I took a nap before finals, woke up, and immediately felt horrible... I vomited multiple times before the race... but I didn't want them to pull me from the lineup. The competition meant everything to me," Miguel said.

Vasquez had arrived in Guatemala City a week early to prepare. He acclimated to the altitude and familiarized himself with the environment before one of the biggest meets of his life. Heading into prelims, he felt invincible.

"So, race day comes, and I'm feeling ready," said Vasquez. "I really didn't have nerves, I felt that I had prepped my body to its capacity. I never felt more in shape and mentally primed to do what I knew I could do."



After his first race, the 100-meter freestyle, something felt off. He didn't perform badly but didn't feel normal. "I swam, and it just didn't feel great. I didn't think I necessarily did anything wrong," Miguel said.

After prelims, the team went back to rest. On the bus ride back after a midday nap, Miguel could not keep anything down and grew increasingly sick. He had a limited warm-up with medical staff watching his every move.

Vasquez fought through the pain and swam in the finals of the 100-meter freestyle, or at least that's what he was told. He has no memory of it. Things worsened immediately after his performance, which still earned him seventh place.

"Everything was blurry. Things were black. And I couldn't really walk."

Medical professionals soon took Miguel to the hospital, where he spent three days recovering from a far more serious condition than he realized. His kidneys had started to fail as far as nine hours before his arrival. His body went into shutdown mode as white blood cell counts tripled and creatinine doubled. It took a full 24 hours for doctors to restore his kidney function.

"Lying in that hospital bed, it felt like all of that work disappeared. All I wanted was to swim," Miguel recalled. A few days later, he was stable enough to be released under extreme monitoring.



Even from a hospital bed, swimming was all he could think about, both for his team in Guatemala and the swimmers he coached back home at ESA.

"My one request, as crazy as it sounds, was to swim the last relay I was entered in... It represented putting my body on the line for something bigger than me," he said.

Miguel was cleared to return to the pool under close supervision. His request to swim in the final team relay was granted, and he led his team to gold, but at a cost.



“It was the most painful race of my life, without a doubt,” he added. “Every amount of pain you can prepare for as a swimmer just went through my body at once, but it was the most special moment of my swimming career. It was so much more than material things.”

The relay was a symbol of his duty to his country and how nothing would stop him from honoring the flag on the side of his cap that he worked so hard to earn.

A month later, Coach Miguel was back on the pool deck preparing for the LHSA State Swim Meet. One look at him, and you would never guess he had been so sick. Within 24 hours of returning to the U.S., he was back coaching the ESA Falcons.

Under his leadership, ESA's girls team won the 2025 Division IV State Swim Championship, and the boys team finished as Division IV runner-ups. Both teams improved from last year, and the Falcons earned 27 podium finishes over two days.

“Both sides crushed it,” he said, giving credit to the athletes' effort and determination. Vasquez praised the ESA administration and community for stepping in during his unique situation. Miguel has loved every second of being the boys and girls head coach since September of last year.

“Coaching wasn't on my radar.” Vasquez hadn't planned to coach swimming. In his first year, he led the girls to a runner-up finish and the boys to sixth place. “They helped keep me become grounded... I've always told them not to fear success, to grab it when the moment comes,” he said. They did just that in Sulphur.

Reflecting on the State meet, Miguel was most pleased with the mental toughness his swimmers displayed. The small victories, the grit, and the focus throughout the meet were what made him happiest.

Vasquez holds a unique perspective as both a professional swimmer and a high school coach. “I see it from both sides of the water,” he said. He emphasizes readiness: everyone wants the moment, but few are prepared to seize it. He often tells his swimmers, “It's better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.” When his own health crisis came, he followed the very same advice he gave his swimmers.





Miguel swims for Guatemala's national team, representing his father's homeland. With dual citizenship in Guatemala and the U.S., he balances his Louisiana roots with immense pride for his heritage. He coaches at ESA alongside his father, Axel Vasquez, who has been poolside at Miguel's races since he was young.

Even after his ordeal, Miguel could have focused solely on his health. Instead, he thought about his swimmers. "When I first came to coach ESA, I was in a weird place... I needed to be rooted in something. They helped me rediscover my spark," he said.

Vasquez describes high school sports as a time when everyone feels "suspended in time." It's a unique part of an athlete's life where they are able to live in the moment. Which is something people constantly attempt after leaving high school but is never the same.

When asked what he wants people to learn from his story, he said, "Whenever things don't go the way we planned, we have to revert to what we know and what we know comes from what we feed our minds and feed our body day in and day out. You can't second guess that in the moment when it matters."

Coach Vasquez could have put himself first but chose the harder path, showing unwavering commitment to his swimmers. "Then after Guatemala, even though my body wanted rest, the kids deserved my best. So I came back," he said. That dedication helped ESA bring home two trophies from Sulphur.

Thank you to Coach Vasquez for allowing me to tell this story, and congratulations to the ESA Falcons on their girls' championship and boys' runner-up finishes.





Author's Note: *In my role as the Director of Communications, I have the unique privilege of attending nearly all sanctioned LHSAA State Championship events. Although the schedule is demanding, I have the privilege of seeing student-athletes from all walks of life, united by two things: their participation in Louisiana high school sports and their pursuit of a state championship. In my first year in this role, I've gained a deeper appreciation for high school athletics and for all the dedication that goes into making each season and event possible. Although my current role involves less writing than my previous positions, it has given me the opportunity to return to something I've always loved. While much of my work now focuses on press releases and public statements, I also have the chance to reconnect with my passion for feature writing, this time highlighting what I consider the purest form of sport: high school athletics. The goal is to highlight the best thing I saw at each state championship and share the unknown stories behind these events, capturing memorable moments for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, and fans.*