

Orinda Aquatics: Year-End Letter 2019

From Donnie & Ronnie



25th
ANNIVERSARY



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“Your whole life is a message. Every act is an act of self-definition.” Neale Donald Walsch

Happy New Year

As we begin a new year, we would like to reach out and wish everyone a very Happy New Year. Time does move quickly. We are reminded of this every year at this time, as the college swimmers return, and post-grads stop by to check in. After college and life updates, the conversations frequently come back to humble beginnings on the team and the lessons learned on the journey. Even the greatest challenges and hardships are seen in hindsight as opportunities for growth. As these young men and women stand on the deck and reflect, they too appreciate, not the meets and times, but the process, the growth, and of course, their teammates and the relationships. We tend to take these visits, and these relationships for granted, but Kati McDermott, who is new to the staff, has been take aback by the humility, general life perspective, and connection to the team, of every one of them.

A few examples of alumni visits this winter:

- Mackenzie Duarte joined the team as a sophomore in high school from the Martinez summer-league and Alhambra Valley High School. She was a 1:09 100 breaststroker swimming in the OA high school preseason program. Marc asked her if she had ever considered year-round swimming and if she wanted to try it. She did, very nervously, and ultimately joined. Five years later she finds herself as a strong leader at Washington State, swimming in the Pac 12, on scholarship, and an Olympic Trials qualifier.
- Clay Sanders was a very humble swimmer who competed on Campolindo’s JV team as a sophomore, swimming the 500 free at 5:07. He joined the team after that season, forgoing his rec season and beginning as OA was transitioning to long course training. Two years later, he qualified for Junior Nationals in the 800m free. As a brilliant student, he was admitted to Duke on academics and allowed to walk on to the team. He left Duke as Conference scorer *and* team captain and is now in his final year of a Ph.D. program at Duke in engineering.
- Jill Jones, former OA swimmer, now the head coach of Westmont College, joined the team as a timid nine-year-old. She grew into the “the greatest team captain in Cal Poly history” (per her college coach) and is now making a powerful difference as a leader and role model at the collegiate level. There is an athletic video on the school’s website that is truly inspiring (our own Gaby Rego is seen in the video).
- Zack Disbrow, a very slight young swimmer whom Ronnie coached in the early years at Sleepy Hollow and then at OA when he went year-round at eleven. His mother’s greatest concern was if he would ever break one minute in the 100-yard fly with his slight frame. Zach ended his swimming career at West Point as its only two-year team captain and qualified for the Olympic Trials in the 200 Fly in his senior year. Zach went on to serve numerous tours in Iraq as a tank commander. He eventually left the military, earned an MBA from Northwestern and is now working in the private sector. He stops by every year, since graduating in 2003.

The stories go on and on, but the themes remain the same; positive relationships, life lessons learned, love of the sport and a *desire to lead*. And while they are inspiring stories, they were once where your children are today, and we are very confident that we will be having similar conversations in the years to come, with your children. From letters we receive, such as the one written Zoe Zebetian (forwarded earlier about missing the process), to graduating swimmers and alumni notes, and the one at the end of this letter, we see that sports can be embedded into the life of child and truly become a foundation of work ethic, resilience, selflessness (team commitment), leadership, and yes, a value system learned from the athletic process and team philosophy. These concepts seem to devolve more than evolve in society as time passes, especially with the advent of social media. With the right message, leadership, and of course role models, we have seen “swimming” become so much more, thanks to these young athletes - your children. This letter will touch on some key areas of the team and offer a recap and look-forward for the various groups.

Thank You

We first want to thank you again for your participation and support. We are so proud of this program, and it is the result of the dedication and contribution of our great athletes and families. We would also like to sincerely thank our Board of Directors for their selfless service and dedication to the organization. They work on behalf of every swimmer, family, and program: Vince Castillo, Jean Follmer, Trent McDonald, Jane Healy, Jennifer Flanders, Pete Appl, and Marc & Cristina Bensadoun. We would also like to thank our Team Captains who will lead in the pool and out: Ryan Lenahan, Aidan Vollmar, Zach Le-Nguyen, Vincent Castillo, Isaac Kim, Maggie Buckley, Maddie Smith, Margaux McDonald, and Tay Thomas.

We also want to thank Ryan Lenahan for updating the equipment bag area at the Soda Center and creating room for the Junior Group! Ryan is also creating two banners to hang on the fence adjacent to the equipment bags. The banners will proudly display our twenty-five **Olympic Trial Qualifiers** (and Olympians) and our forty-six **collegiate team captains**.

Twenty-Five Years (or Thirty-Five)

For a bit of history, thirty-five years ago we (yes, we are that old!) started the Fall Swimming program, Polar Bears (that’s the PB in OAPB), at Meadow. That program grew and after a decade, there were several members that were considering moving on to a USA Swimming team. We felt at that point we needed to start a year-round team. Sleepy Hollow graciously supported our early years prior to the Soda Centers’ construction.

While the team has been smaller in size at less than 150 swimmers, the results have been truly remarkable. In ways, Orinda Aquatics has redefined the impact a “small” team can make in the sport, with examples of; taking twenty swimmers to Junior Nationals in 2018, dominating the Western Zone (US) Senior Championships meet last year, or challenging the cultural status quo of performance-driven pursuit. We would never have imagined the impact this team would have on the sport, and the deep and profound relationships we would have with our amazing athletes, which have truly been priceless, if not career-defining. We don’t know what the next twenty-five years will hold, but this group is certainly paving the way for continued success and impressive leadership.

Performance

On the performance side, OA has been ranked by USA Swimming’s Virtual Club Championships as one of the top (1st or 2nd) teams in the nation for clubs under 200 swimmers, which includes approximately 2,500 teams. The team has been a multiple Silver Medal Club in the Club Excellence rankings, and has produced an exceptionally high percentage of swimmers competing at the Far Westerns, Sectional/Futures, and National levels, with an average of ten Junior National swimmers each year, and eighty percent of our graduates going on to compete in college (while virtually all want to). And in an Olympic year, we acknowledge our Olympic Trial qualifiers thus far; Harry Flanders – Indiana (100 fly), Tony Moore – UC Santa Barbara (100 breast), Spencer Daily – UC San Diego (100 fly/50 free), and Mackenzie Duarte – Washington State (200 breast). And we do hope to see even more qualified by the summer.

Academics

On the academic side, although we take no credit, these student-athletes have performed as well as any group in the nation, with an average GPA among the 80 Senior swimmers, near 4.0 (as year-round student-athletes). The vast majority of our senior swimmers are Scholar Athletes (high school), Scholastic All Americans (USA Swimming), or Academic All Americans (NISCA). They collectively create a high-level academic environment and are academic role models for our younger swimmers. And what is most impressive is the number of athletes that go on to compete in college at the intercollegiate level (or Club level), and as mentioned, nearly fifty OA swimmers have become collegiate team captains. On a team per-capita basis *or* an absolute basis, this is without question among the best anywhere.

And a sincere congratulations to our seniors on their impressive **college commitments** thus far (below). We have also attached our college history to show the incredible achievements of OA student-athletes over the past twenty years. The college culture continues to grow and impress as we had the largest Thanksgiving workout this fall due to the number of returning swimmers.

2020 College Commitments

First	Last	College	Sports	Rec Team
Margaux	McDonald	Princeton University	Swimming	Sleepy Hollow
Taylor	Thomas	Pepperdine University	Swimming	Pleasant Hill Dolphins
Ryan	Lenahan	Boston College	Swimming	Moraga Ranch
Maddie	Smith	UCLA	Swimming	OPP
Emmie	Appl	Pomona College	Swimming	Sleepy Hollow
Alex	Oh	Middlebury College	Swimming	San Ramon
Dalen	Schnayer	Whitman College	Swimming	Meadow

Culture

John Leonard, the Executive Director of the American and World Swimming Coaches Associations, has stated repeatedly that Orinda Aquatics has “changed the dialogue” in youth sports. Coaches have visited OA from across the country, we have spoken nationally and internationally on culture-building, and countless coaches have pursued this model, realizing the transformative benefits to their teams, their performance, and the lives and well-being of those they coach/serve. They see that it *is* possible to create a program based on mutual respect where everyone can and should pursue leadership, not to mention humility and service. Margaret Meade said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people (or athletes) can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” And you have.

Outreach

Through the extraordinary generosity of the Bensadoun family and those who contributed to the effort, and the leadership of Cristina Bensadoun, we continue to make inroads into areas of need in the aquatic world, with our mission of being a good, caring, and supportive “teammate” locally and globally.

We have supported the inner-city programs in Richmond and Oakland, whose teams are run by outstanding and inspiration coaches. These organizations operate in areas where most athletes are on scholarship, and the need to learn to swim is dramatic. Additionally, we recently purchased fifty suits and caps for swimmers in Swaziland, Africa, and are in dialogue with **SwimAmerica**, the nation’s largest learn-to-swim organization, to provide two swim school licenses in the most populated areas of the country. This would be truly impactful as drowning is the second highest cause of death. One note on Outreach: every dollar donated (either to Outreach or to the team, unless otherwise designated) is applied to the Outreach efforts.

Masters Swimming

We have a few impressive members (among many) in the Master's program that we would like to highlight. As many know, Karen Moe Humphreys (Karen Moe as an athlete) is a former Gold Medalist and World Record holder, at age 17. She was the first individual to be inducted into the ASCA Hall of Fame as a coach, and to the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF) as an athlete. A recent article from Swimming World on Karen is under NEWS on the website. The other is a truly remarkable swimmer/athlete in her own right. Ranie Pearce has developed in the past decade as one of the premiere open-water endurance athletes in the world today. She recently completed one of the most grueling events in the sport, the Anacapa/Santa Barbara Channel swim – 8.5 hours in 53-degree water with brutal conditions. Ranie's race summary is also on the website. It is an honor to have both in the program.

New Members

We appreciate all the new swimmers/families who joined the team in the Fall and want to acknowledge the new swimmers who joined in December (Senior Group: Charlie Algert, Tucker Peterson; Junior Group: Carla Worrell, Ariel Indrisano). From Junior to Senior, this is one of the most positive and impactful groups we have seen. The junior swimmers have integrated very well, and the Senior swimmers have proven to be extraordinary additions and contributors to the team culture. We look forward to many years of working together with all of you.

Staff

We would like to acknowledge our two new coaches, Dom Patterson and Kati McDermott (see their bios on the website). After years in the program himself, Dom has taken over the Master's morning group and program over-site, as well as the Senior 2 Group. Dom has grown immensely as a coach and is proving capable of doing great things in this profession and truly being an impact coach.

Kati will embrace and elevate critical areas in the team's administrative effort and business development, as well as support all groups on the deck. Kati has extensive experience in the sport and an unparalleled passion for all things swimming and children. Look for enhancements to registration, gear, activities, etc.

Donnie has retired from a five-year term as the ASCA Board President, serving the 10,000+ member coaching community as well as the extraordinary ASCA Board itself. In that role, he had the immense opportunity and honor to be involved in dialogue and efforts at the highest level of the sport. It was both humbling and enlightening.

In light of our 25/35 years of existence, we would be remiss to not offer a heartfelt thank you to Matt for all that he has done for Polar Bears and Orinda Aquatics. We had many lean years in terms of numbers and finances, and Matt was always by our side ready and willing to help in any way. And finally, to have an original member of the team as an athlete, still with the program as an invaluable year-round and program coach has been a great blessing with Marc. We cannot thank you both enough.

Group Review

In overall development, we continue to see the process and prospects play out as young swimmers come into the program from rec swimming and move through a methodical process of building balance in the water and distance-per-stroke (counter to much of rec swimming), and learning the race process. On the leadership side, we focus on "good swimmer/athlete/teammate/person" in weekly meetings. The senior group should be refining technique, building endurance through increased workloads, and playing a strong leadership role in the program overall. They also become adept at balancing academics and other commitments, which becomes a precursor for college.

We look at the swimming year in three phases: Fall-Winter, Spring, and Summer (long course). We are entering the Spring cycle with focus on JO's and Far Westerns for the Junior Group and Clovis/Sectionals and the high school championship meets for the Senior group.

Training intensity will increase in this phase for all groups. We ask that each swimmer review the critical aspects of development as we conclude the winter meets. These would include; attendance, effort, training focus (detail), technique focus (detail), turns/UW discipline, etc. All swimmers should have a clear awareness of stroke counts for main strokes, underwater kick counts (or black lines) and key adjustments to race strategy. 2020 goals (or New Year's Resolutions) should include working at a higher level in *each* area, and without question, to be an even better teammate. A few highlights from the winter meets:

Junior 1-2

The Junior 1 & 2 groups have maintained focus on integrating the new members and on developing stroke technique. Our younger (10&under) swimmers have done extremely well in training and on through JO's with the 10&U girls 200 free relay finishing 2nd at 2:00.2 (Yung, Calica, Birkby, McCashin), and Gabe Hoffman continuing to drop in the 500 free. At the ONDA meet, Jake Birkby and Maelyn Peters had great meets, improving in all events. The group will wear "fast suits" at the Neptune meet and look towards Spring JO's/Far Westerns or Hills.

Junior 3

The emphasis in the group is three-fold: to further develop balance in the water and distance per stroke, to introduce/increase training and underwater ability, and to develop mature race orientation/maturity. With several new swimmers, the group has come a long way. We saw a breakout meet from Maddie Blackwell (1:00.0 - 100 fly, 54.9 - 100 free) at JO's, Lily Struempf bringing great effort and leadership to the group and earning a spot on the Pacific All-Star team as well as an invitation to the Distance Camp at the Olympic Training Center, Adriana Smith breaking the 13-14 team record in the 200 back at 2:03.9, Emilia Barck (13) getting Futures time in the 400 IM at 4:32.8, Siena Santos (12) and Ben Graham (13) swimming an impressive 400 IM, Jed Johnson dominating many of the 12 year-old events at JO's, and Logan Gunn improving in all events at ONDA. This group will swim at Neptune, JO's, and Far Westerns with some swimmers traveling with the Senior Group to Sectionals in Carlsbad.

Senior 2

We saw a breakout swim from Evan Velek at JO's, swimming 1:05 in the 100 Breast and making finals, Christine Mlynek having great swims at the ONDA meet, as well impressive swimming from Tanner Skrypnyk, and inspirational effort from Libby Ward working to lifetime best times. This group will focus on qualifying for, and competing at, Clovis and then looking toward the high school championships meets.

Senior 3

The "Dream Team" continues to inspire. Thank you! We also saw great swims at JO's from 14-year-olds Zach Hoffman, Nate Levy, Harley Venable, and Maren McDonald (Sr 4), and very good swims at the WCAB meet from Tommy Roder - 200 back 1:55, and Lindsey Lew - 100 fly 1:00, Nick Chang - 200 back 1:57. This group will pursue Sectionals (for multiple event qualifiers) and Clovis as the main Spring meet, and then onto the high school season.

Senior 4

We saw very impressive swims at the PLS Senior meet from Channing Hanley (1:02.8 breast, 57.6 fly) and Maggie Buckley (1:59 - 200 back -1st) and great swims at the WCAB T/F meet from Aidan Vollmar - 100 breast 57.8, George Flanders - 100 fly 51.9, Emmie Appl - 200 breast 2:20.9, Ryan Lenahan - 100 back 51.5, Henrik Barck - 500 free 4:44, and an emerging butterfly in Isaac Kim - 200 fly 1:53.3, and on to Federal Way at Junior Nationals with two women's relays finishing in the top 8, Maggie Buckley - 400 IM 4:19 (12th), Maddie Smith 200 free split 1:50.7, 200 breast - 2:19.5, a swim-of-the-year from Amber van Meines splitting 49.9 in the 400 free relay, and Zach Le-Nguyen improving in all events with a number of final swims! This group will focus on Sectionals (and possibly Clovis), and then on to the high school season.

A Poignant Reflection

The following note is from our own Abby Buckley (mother of Maggie Buckley), offering a stark reminder of the importance of culture and balance in the athletic process.

Dear Ronnie & Donnie,

I'm not sure if you have seen the recent article(s) about Mary Cain and the Nike coaching abuse. I wanted to forward it to you and express to you how grateful we are that you and your coaches provide such a positive coaching environment for the OA kids and Maggie, and how much putting "Character First" to us.

I think you know that I also grew up a nationally ranked swimmer with dreams of competing at the highest level, but what is not commonly known is that those dreams were cut short by overtraining, constant verbal and emotional abuse, and chronic injury. I honestly never wanted my kids to ever swim in a year-round program as I had, and I had little hope that much had changed in our sport over the years. The Mary Cain coverage really hit a deep chord with me and caused me to reflect as her story was so similar to mine. But it also made me realize how grateful I am that Maggie joined Orinda Aquatics. It was with great hesitation that we finally let Maggie continue her swimming dreams with a year-round program, but we put our faith into the positive coaching framework of OA's "Character First" mission and we haven't looked back since.

Positive coaching and "Character First" have made all the difference and has restored my faith that there are people out there doing the right thing for our young athletes. We thank you and all of the coaching staff for providing a safe and healthy environment where our daughter can continue to thrive and grow. She has developed into not only an amazing athlete, but also a truly outstanding human being who cares deeply about others and doing the right thing...and best yet, she still has so much ahead of her.

When I was her age my swimming career was pretty much all but over and it took me a lifetime to put the gravity of it all behind. We are so grateful that, because of Orinda Aquatics, Maggie's journey has only just begun. Thank you for being such an important part of it and for being a shining example of what positive coaching really looks like.

I think it is very important that our community knows it can happen to anyone-even the people who are closest to you. I hope my note highlights what a supportive program Orinda Aquatics is and creates awareness that not all abuse is physical. I hope that by speaking out it will give people the courage to leave abusive training situations and seek the help and support they fully deserve. While OA is the best program around, I would love to see our kids & families graduate the OA program with the ability to recognize abuse and the power to help others who are being abused.

Best always,

Abby Buckley

*with
sympathy*

Heartfelt Condolences

This is a very difficult thing to conclude with, but Orinda Aquatics offers our heartfelt condolences to the Holtzman family (Steve – father and Theo – Junior 3 swimmer) on the sudden and tragic loss of Eva Holtzman, Steve’s wife and Theo’s mother. Eva experienced a sudden illness at the end of December and passed away soon after. Our thoughts and prayers are with the family and we are here to help in any way we can.

