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Orinda Aquatics' Swimmers' Path to College

By Jon Kingdon



If there is a single activity that one is exposed to while growing up in Lamorinda, it would have to be swimming, with some starting in a pool as young as 3 years old. There are many directions that one can take once the basic skills are mastered. There is competitive swimming, synchronized swimming, water polo, diving and just swimming in general.

Don and Ron Heidary started Orinda Aquatics 25 years ago with a specific goal in mind: "Our environment is for kids that love the sport and want to keep doing it after high school," says Don. "We have a culture of collegiate pursuit where all of our swimmers, if they want to, will swim in college. There are enough collegiate programs at all levels for anybody that can swim."

The time demands on a swimmer can be exhaustive. Competitive swimmers will get up at 4:45 in the morning, three or four times a week, go to school and then train two hours in the afternoon, doing their homework in the evening. It's when they become high school freshmen that they realize how difficult it can be, says Don: "Most of the kids work through it and find the right balance where they can do it and maintain and not break down. They push the limit every day, physically, emotionally and academically. It's important that we create an environment with passion that supports kids that want to be better and want to go on and compete in college." Burnout among swimmers can be a real concern. Often times swimmers come to the conclusion that they are swimming for other people but not themselves, as Dr. Robyn Odegaard, sports psychologist and owner of Champion Performance Development, defines it: "Burnout is anytime someone is held accountable for things that are not within their control, either by themselves, coaches or parents."

For these swimmers it's more peer support than peer pressure, says Jean Follmer, whose daughter will be swimming at Northwestern and whose son will be a junior next season: "They show up at the pool and all their friends are there. Without that, the kids can get burned out and end up quitting. When you show up and you see 40 friends in the pool going through the same program and putting in the same effort, it's encouraging, and it really builds a team atmosphere. It carries over to group outings away from the pool as well where they all hang out together. They support each other learning how to handle success and disappointment, which translates into other areas in school and life."

Don makes it clear the type of swimmers they want to join Orinda Aquatics: "It has been our ultimate goal that our graduating swimmers not only continue to be athletes at the collegiate level, but that they love the sport of swimming, continue to improve, become leaders on their collegiate teams and are ultimately better people." From Division I American University (Washington D.C.) to Division III Warren Wilson College (Swannanoa, South Carolina), there are 560

swim teams all over the United States. Not to be overlooked are the over 150 club swimming teams available at the collegiate level.

The Heidary's take pride in the number of swimmers that have gone through their program and continued swimming competitively in college. This past year, Orinda Aquatics graduated 30 swimmers, 25 of which will be swimming for their college or club teams. Of the five not swimming, Daniela Moroz will be on the sailing team at the University of Hawaii and Andy Kang is going to the U.S. Naval Academy. The other three are going to their chosen school, but the level of competition is above their skill level.

The Heidary's also point to the academic success of their swimmers. Having had swimmers from over 20 different high schools, the overall GPA of the students has always been near 4.0. In an article in Swimming World Magazine, Lindsay Hass looked at the Academic Progress Rate Score used by the NCAA and it showed that "swimmers are among the top performing students when it comes to academic eligibility, retention and graduation."

Don supports those conclusions: "It dispels the myth that you can't train year-round and be a good student. Choosing to make the commitment to be a competitive swimmer is not a casual decision and it tends to deter those without a real commitment in and out of the water," says Don: "We don't get kids that come onto our team that are not academic. We have never had to deal with that. Mature, disciplined and academic kids seem to gravitate to swimming. Between their parents, their personal drive and peer pressure, we just don't have to check their grades. They want to be good student-athletes and go to a good school. They know they can't screw around."

It's the focus and commitment to swimming that carries over to the swimmers' academic work, says Don: "We see kids' grades decline when they're out of the water if they get injured for a few months. Their discipline is not the same as when they're swimming and they have said that school got away from them. They can't do that when they're swimming."

It's Don's belief that there is a college for every swimmer at every level: "It's a support for all of the swimmers - novice, mid-level and elite swimmers - to be collegiate student-athletes and to be leaders in their programs and that is what is unique about our team. As a rule, our graduates don't finish and say that I'm done. They want to swim. The kids that go on to swim either collegiately or at a club level is a very high percentage. It's our culture that supports it."

Kassy Gregory, a recent graduate of Campolindo and Orinda Aquatics, will be swimming for Soka University in Aliso Viejo, California and attributes much of her success to swimming for the Heidary's: "As a student-athlete, I had to learn to develop self-discipline and time management. That discipline has helped me to become a better student. At Orinda Aquatics, we recognize our responsibilities for behaving as high-character athletes. Everyone is treated with the deepest respect, whether they are swimmers, officials or coaches. While our passion for the sport propels us to put in our best effort, we understand how our actions relate to others."

There have been three Olympians that have come out of Orinda Aquatics - Kim Vandenberg (UCLA and Campolindo), Peter Varellas (Stanford and Campolindo) and Heather Petri (California and Miramonte) along with 23 other Olympic qualifiers. As gratifying as that is to the club, "What we're most proud of is how many of our kids have gone on to be leaders of their collegiate swim team," says Don. "Forty-one of our swimmers have been named captains of their teams in college. We'll put that number up against any club in the country."

The large number of leaders that have come out of Orinda Aquatics can be attributed to their 'Positive Training Environment.' It's a matter of taking the path of most resistance, says Don: "When our swimmers enter a culture of commitment and effort, they either adapt or they are excused as our swimmers and coaches do not want the team's standards jeopardized. They not only grow as athletes through the challenges, but they grow as people. We emphasize character, which is the foundation of our program. If the environment is not positive and conducive to long-term training and development, you will see much more attrition and kids looking to move out of the sport, not continue to a higher, more demanding level. That's what we try to do every day, create that environment that supports kids that want to continue on and they do and we've seen that play out for over two decades.