



Character First: Interview with Don Heidary

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Interview by Dean Ottati for SwimSwam

Twenty years ago, twin brothers, Don and Ron Heidary, co-founded Orinda Aquatics. Today they're both still coaching at Orinda Aquatics, but they also coach competing High School teams, Don at Miramonte High School, and Ron at nearby rival and high school swimming power Campolindo. Last month, the two brothers coached their respective athletes (Steven Stumph of Camplindo and Charlie Wiser of Miramonte) to the two fastest 100 breaststroke swims in high school history. It has probably never happened before, and will likely never happen again, that twin brothers would coach the two fastest swims in history in the same race. SwimSwam sat down with Don Heidary to talk about "the race," and more importantly their core philosophy of "Character First."

SWIMSWAM: It's Sunday, June 2nd. We are at the Pleasanton Seahawk's Pool for a Senior 2 meet. I'm talking to Coach Don Heidary of Orinda Aquatics. Don and his brother Ron have been a fixture in Contra Costa County Swimming for 35 years, coaching summer-league teams, high school teams, and as founders and Head Coaches of Orinda Aquatics. For a smaller club of 150 swimmers, the team has done well. I think, Don, you guys (OA) were the third place at Junior Nationals last year. Is that right?

DON: Yes that's right. Summer long course junior nationals.

SWIMSWAM: You've coached over 100 All-Americans, and I think three Olympians have come through your program - Kim Vandenberg, Peter Varellas, and Heather Petri. But the thing that really jumps out at me, Don, is a couple things, actually, and I think they're related. First, such a high percentage of your kids are going on to swim in college. I think you told me it's something like 90 percent?

DON: Yes. And the other 10 percent would like to but are in a situation where they can't. I think our culture supports positive, healthy, and elongated swimming careers. It is implied in our program from the beginning. The kids love the sport and want to continue. They also see they value and importance it plays in their lives.

SWIMSWAM: The second thing I was hoping we could talk about, before we talk about "the race" is your Character First philosophy. It's so near and dear to you. I was hoping we could start there.

DON: Sure. Character was part of our life philosophy and then became embedded in our coaching philosophy a long time ago. We believe unequivocally that you should live your life, in all facets, with integrity. And I think beyond just a general life of integrity, it will help you in athletics and whatever you pursue. We talk to the kids about athletics being the best learning ground in which to grow as a person because of the challenges, the team

interaction, and the sacrifices made. They not only can grow as an athlete through those challenges, but they grow as a person. So we emphasize character and we make demands of them which emphasize character. And we've seen the results manifest tremendously in kids of all ages and all abilities. And so character is the foundation of our program. And one point I'd like to make is that there is some thought that you can't have both, that if you want to create a positive environment, or an integrity-driven culture, that you're going to sacrifice some level of intensity and therefore competitiveness and ultimately success with kids, and it's absolutely not true. We would argue the opposite, that the better the culture and the more positive and more integrity-based the environment is, the better training you will have and the better they will perform. That's at an individual level *and* a team level. And it's played out in front of us at all levels, summer-league programs, high school swimming and United States swimming. I think the success speaks for itself, the testimonials do, and it's something that we not only believe in our program, it's something we will support in any way we can with swimming and children in general.

SWIMSWAM: One of the things I wanted to ask about was about how sports builds character, because that's not always the case. What are you guys doing to help ensure that swimming really does build character?

DON: Sports is merely an activity and you can do it the *right way* or you can do it the *wrong way*. I'm sure every coach sees the spectrum of commitment and integrity in athletes. The best of sports can make you an extraordinary human being, and the worst of it can result in a cancer to the program. So sports in and of itself does not build character, but doing it the right way can be a life-changing process. So we just try to focus on a few fundamental things and demand those things of the kids, and character comes out. We make it clear to the kids that, that they need to make a commitment to the core principals of sports, which are work ethic, integrity, and team commitment. It is how they show up and how they participate that matters. And if they will commit 100 percent to those things, they will do better, and the team can become an extraordinary environment. We sell it. We present it to the kids, and then we demand it. And it's 100 percent. We also tell them that we will do virtually anything for them, as long as they are unduly committed to act with integrity and to the team. We let the kids know there is no middle ground with integrity and respect and some of those core values. There's just not a middle ground. You have to be respectful of everybody at all times, and be mature and positive always.

SWIMSWAM: I'd like to pay a compliment to your kids. I happened to be on a flight to winter sectionals, and probably about 2/3 of your team was on the same flight. These kids were polite, they were helping people with their luggage. They represented your team very well.

DON: Thank you very much. Even though they're little things, I think it supports the bigger picture. It's in bigger things like respect, support, mature language, appearance, and on down to smaller things like picking up after yourself. When we go out to eat, when we're in a hotel, kids have to bus their tables and always clean up after themselves. It's those little things about living with integrity that we're very strict about. We would get just as upset at an athlete who didn't pick up their tray at dinner as we would for somebody doing something disrespectful. It just doesn't matter. It's not the way you want to live your life and it's not the way we want this team represented, and it won't be tolerated. I think the kids understand that, and they can see character woven into a lifestyle and then into the team culture.

SWIMSWAM: I'd like to talk about "the race," the NCS 100 breaststroke championship final. You're in the unique position of being one of Steven Stumph's year round coaches at Orinda Aquatics (with Ron as Steven's primary coach), and you were also Charlie Wiser's coach at Miramonte high school. Both those guys, along with Nick Silverthorn, swam maybe the greatest high school race ever. It was incredible. Can you talk about your dual roles?

DON: The Orinda Aquatics situation is a little unique because we (my brother and I) coach "rival" schools but support all athletes as if they were a family. Our roots in the community run very deep (thirty years) and so we

have a history of watching kids grow up in the sport and hope to help them succeed regardless of their level (or school).

I would also add that my brother and I do a very good job at compartmentalizing our roles, and that we have the utmost respect for the programs and the dividing lines between them, it would be easy to blur those lines, and ~~and~~ we just don't do it. I would mention that if I'm at Miramonte, I'm 100 percent there, and I don't wear Orinda Aquatics attire. I don't talk about Orinda Aquatics. I want the kids to see me solely as the Miramonte coach and vice versa with Orinda Aquatics. I don't wear high school attire on deck at Orinda. I want the kids at Orinda Aquatics to see me as the Orinda Aquatics coach, and my brother does the same thing. We also don't cross over athlete situations or anything that would compromise a race, regardless of who we coach. We want to see kids succeed and do well and we respect them immensely. At Orinda Aquatics, we have kids in twelve different high schools. They're all going to be at North Coast competing and at some point, they may be competing next to a (club) teammate who is also a friend of theirs, and we coach both. Our objective is that we help these kids swim at the highest level possible in the best race possible, and it really doesn't break down to who's competing against who, or which hat we wear.

SWIMSWAM: And can you talk a little about the two swimmers, Steven and Charlie?

Of course. Steven is without question a unique and remarkable athlete and person. As a tremendously successful athlete, he is the most humble, caring, supportive, and compassion person you will find. Steven is the kind of athlete that performs at the highest level and then will stay two hours (alone) to help clean up the storage room. He combines that with a drive and dedication that is unparalleled. He focus, attention to detail, and work ethic is at a level we have never seen. Steven has overcome challenges and continues to elevate his performance. He a very mature athlete and *racer* who prepares with meticulous detail. He shows this time and time again, from Junior Nationals (record 1:55.88 in the 200 Breast) to NCS (national record).

Charlie, for the great success that he has had in swimming and water polo, is as humble as one could be. He has an innocence about him that makes his ability that much more impressive. He is a high-character young man who has balanced the two sports of swimming and water polo, maybe better than any aquatic athlete in the country (1st team All American Water Polo and 2nd all-time in the 100 Breast). Growing up in the very competitive summer-league community (the Orinda Moraga Pool Association and Contra Costa County), he has a long history of sprinting and racing. He has not only flourished in this environment but I am sure it has honed his racing skills. As Steven does, he has an innate ability to rise to occasions at the highest levels (1:49 in the 200 IM is just another example).

SWIMSWAM: Now did you have any idea what was coming, going into that race?

DON: Well I did. And I told a few people that you could see three 53's in the final heat at North Coast well before the race. We knew very well the history of Steven and Charlie. Nick Silverthorn (a junior) went 54 in the winter at Nationals, and he has really emerged as a top national breaststroker. He's a phenomenal athlete who has trained very hard for ten years and he's coached by one of the best coaches in the country in one of the best programs in the country, with Steve Morsilli at Pleasanton. So clearly, he had the potential to go under 54. And in a race with the elevated intensity that North Coast has, which is probably a little more intense than even nationals to some of these kids, there's an added advantage.

SWIMSWAM: All three of those boys elevated to something really special.

DON: Yes, there's pride for themselves as athletes, but there's also pride for the (North Coast) Section, and there's pride for this community. I don't know if that's ever been done before, three swimmers under the national record in the same high school race, and the top two from the same neighborhood.

SWIMSWAM: Well, you're (OA) graduating some strong swimmers, but it looks like you've got some coming up as well.

DON: We (OA) do have a strong group graduating, led by Steven (Stumph) and Sven (Campbell). They are two irreplaceable athletes and team members. They've done very well, but they've also been the two hardest working swimmers on our team. So when you talk about a culture where the fastest kids are the hardest working and the most dedicated, you're going to have a special environment, and they've created that. So yes, we do have great young kids coming up, but it may be a while before we see athletes like that come through the program again.

SWIMSWAM: I know Sven Campbell was sick going into NCS, and that last 100 free on the 400 freestyle relay, he just really showed the heart of a champion. Can you talk about that?

DON: Without question, and he has competed that way his entire career. He can set the tone to an entire meet the way he closes races and anchors (or leads off) relays. When you talk about the best swimmers in the country, Sven Campbell is definitely one of them, and as I said, his work ethic is unparalleled, as is his attention to detail, and he has a race toughness about him that you rarely see. This was evident in that relay. He was not feeling well, was anchoring a relay from a body length and a half behind, in an attempt to win and set the NCS record. He was patient to make his strongest push on the last lap and touched first by .03 and split 43.6. There were a number of things critical to that swim – mentally, physically, and tactically. Sven's got a lot of growth ahead of him, and he's been a blessing to our program.

SWIMSWAM: Yeah. We're looking forward to good things from him at Cal, as well as Steven at USC and Charlie at Sanford. That's quite a set of resumes.

DON: It is.

SWIMSWAM: Don, I thank you for your time. Is there anything you would like to add?

DON: Thank *you* very much for what you're doing and the quality of writing that you're bringing to the swimming community.

SWIMSWAM: Thanks for taking care of these kids.

DON: It's a privilege.

(Interviewer's Note: Don is one of these guys whose presence fills up the space around him. He's a lot of fun to talk to. We exchanged a couple of e-mails after the interview, and in one of them he shared a list of 19 graduating seniors on Orinda Aquatics this year that will be swimming in college next year. 19 out of 20!)