

Orinda Aquatics – 25th Anniversary Letter to Team

From the Founders



A Look Back

We founded Orinda Aquatics with the intent of creating something different, and something that would hopefully change the lives of young athletes. We believed unequivocally that in the process of developing young athletes, it was possible to build great leaders and cultures. As our overt focus is on swimming and the inherent pursuit of success, our deepest pride is in the backdrop and foundation of this program, and this extraordinary group. We could not be more proud of this organization and what it stands for, our commitment to the greater lessons of life through sport, our commitment to putting character first, and our commitment to the community and to helping others. Orinda Aquatics has truly blended success and culture in a powerful way, and the team's mission is now recognized by USA Swimming, ASCA, NISCA, and coaches around the world. It is our hope to show that integrity *can and must* be the most powerful force behind an athlete's and a team's success. And you have done that.

With profound gratitude and appreciation, we conclude our twenty-fifth year. Looking back, it is virtually impossible to grasp the depth of the relationships, the powerful cultural impact, and our extraordinary performance. From a very humble beginning, with a small group of rec swimmers, unsure of what was on the horizon, *and* with doubt about our very survival, Orinda Aquatics would establish itself as a model program nationally, and *the* model for cultural pursuit.

From our original mission, we (you) have demonstrated that teams should not only have a dual mandate of culture and performance, but that culture can, and will, dramatically enhance performance, not to mention adding immeasurable value to the lives of children and young adults. Although the team has remained the same size over the past two decades, our impact has grown significantly. We set very aggressive and visionary goals long ago: to be the best “small club” in USA Swimming, to have the best culture in youth sports, and to set a standard for team travel, one inspired by integrity. While we feel we have successfully moved in the direction of those aspirations, we still approach every day with the same aggressive desire to be better in every respect. And looking back, it is staggering to realize that, from a team of just over 100 swimmers, with a foundation of culture and character, this program and its remarkable athletes have produced the following:

- 27 Olympic Trial qualifiers and an Olympic Silver Medalist
- Over 200 national-level swimmers with another 100 plus high school All Americans (an average of 8-12 national-level swimmers a year)
- Over 40 Sectional qualifiers each year
- Winning prestigious meets such Junior Nationals, Sectionals, Far Westerns, and the Western Zone Senior Championships, all meets with hundreds of competitive teams attending
- One the highest scoring teams in the nation, under 200 swimmers (over 2,500 clubs), in USA Swimming's Virtual Club Championships
- Recognized by USA Swimming for “best practices” in age-group swimming
- Recognized by the Positive Coaching Alliance (for impact), Swimming World Magazine (for long-term production), and ASCA for culture and leadership
- Campolindo winning the National Public High School Team Championship (driven by OA/Ronnie)

- Miramonte (Donnie) and Campolindo have been the top two high school programs in North Coast history with Campolindo dominating the section
- 40-50 Orinda Aquatics graduates competing in college *annually* – at *many* of the top schools in the country
- An incredible 46 collegiate team captains
- A senior group GPA near 4.0 (among seventy-five athletes)
- Hosting arguably the best Far Western Championship meets in 2018 and 2019
- Traveling with 95 teenagers and impeccable behavior
- Donnie serving as a two-term President of the American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA), which includes 11,000 coaches worldwide
- An Outreach effort that touches the greatest aquatic needs from our own community to the corners of Africa
- “Writing the book” on culture in youth sports: **Developing High-Character Athletes And High-Character Teams**
- Creating a culture that has positively impacted countless athletes and coaches around the world

With (historic) Gratitude

But behind the many team successes, the greatest representation of this program has been the humble, servant-leaders that have come to embody our team and so many throughout our history; young adults who chose role model over social model, compassion over self-interest, humility over ego, and effort over apathy, every day. We saw this clearly from recent alumni Zoom meetings; extreme humility from a national record holder, character lines that would *never* be crossed (as a teenager), a life committed to serve others (even as a child), and a novice swimmer inspiring a national team. This has been the cultural foundation of our program, and the *real* driver of our success. You created “a new dialogue” in youth sports, challenged the status quo, and truly embodied Margaret Meade’s profound quote.

This milestone creates an opportunity to collectively address and thank our inspiring alumni. Words cannot convey the respect and admiration we have for you. We are profoundly appreciative of the role you played in creating this team, its culture, and our incredible results. We want you to know that you are a very real part of the mosaic of Orinda Aquatics, and that you did not leave the program and become a statistic, but more a brick in an irrefutable foundation that has influenced so many. From Inspirational Award Winners (and inspirational people) like Jason Mueller, to those who never yielded in the face of unending challenges and physical pain, like Cassidy Fuller, to Megan Liang, who lost a leg to cancer at age seven, and proved daily that the only real disability in life is a “negative attitude”, to those who walked the deck every day with sole purpose of helping and making a difference, seemingly desperate to be a leader and role model, to athletes like Steven Stumph, who embodied the highest level of professionalism with every stroke he took, and our very first Junior National Qualifier in a 14-year-old Taylor Dahl, and, an upstart group winning Junior Nationals, you *all* defined this program. And in each of these areas we could name *so* many and tell *their* inspiring stories. Through our alumni, we have seen leadership beget leadership and humility beget humility. You have all created the perpetual leadership model that exists today. Year after year, graduating seniors wrote about being inspired by your actions, choices, and examples. Please know that we not only remember you but treasure our relationship with you and are immeasurably appreciative of the role you played in the history of Orinda Aquatics.

Of course, we would be remiss in not acknowledging the parents' support over these many years. Unlike many sports teams, we have enjoyed the added blessing of incredible support and extraordinary friendships with so many parents. While the role of parents in youth sports may have a negative connotation, our relationships have been beyond rewarding, in organizational support and lifelong relationships. From all board members and committee chairs, to parents like Bev Lathrope, Barb Weikert and Jeff Jacobs, who took on disproportionate roles to help the organization, staff, and the swimmer experience, to our selfless officials, to the unparalleled work of our host-meet leaders and volunteers (through JO’s and Far Westerns), and to each and every parent who supported their child to be a student-athlete with Orinda Aquatics, we offer our most sincere gratitude.

We also want to look back and acknowledge our first Board of Directors. This group wrote the original by-laws for the team, supported our early mission, created a Capital Fund to ensure our long-term financial security, and helped navigate a fledgling program to national awareness in a short period: Mike Lai, Steve Nordin, Rick Vandenberg, Dean Andropoulos, Lyndel Melton, Mike Metcalf, and Cyndi Chiles. And prior to the teams’ inception, while in our coaching infancy, we were blessed to know true (parent) friendship and unconditional support from the late Virginia Hall and

Reagan Perry. As our most ardent supporters, they will forever be a part of Orinda Aquatics with our Hall & Perry Inspirational Awards. We remain very close to both families to this day. And finally, a heartfelt thank you to Sleepy Hollow Swim & Tennis club for providing us a home in our formative years. Orinda Aquatics might not exist today were it not for the club's and the Board's support.

(From Donnie) A look back at twenty-five years would be impossible without recognizing the true backbone and inspiration of this program, the coach whose vision and relentless dedication created a year-round program against many headwinds, molded a group of rec swimmers into national dominance to win Junior Nationals within five years, and to cement a culture of iron-clad integrity as its foundation. Like many start-up leaders, Ronnie worked tirelessly, wearing many hats and feeling ownership, and pressure, of everything. And he did what he has done at Pinole and Campolindo, profoundly impact the lives of all he coached, and dominate swimming like no other.

And if you were going to build a program, there would not be a finer person or coach to have by your side than Matt Ehrenberger (whom we have known for 50 years). Far beyond being one of the best rec/age-group coaches in the country, and acting as the initial coach for most of our national swimmers, he is an incredible human being. His driving motivation from the beginning has always been the good of the program. He never sought money or recognition, only to support in any way possible. Words cannot describe our gratitude.

As the program grew in the early years, we were blessed to have the coaching support of our closest and dearest friends, Kevin Honey, an invaluable coach who seemed to be there at the beginning of everything, whom we let slip out the back door of "the firm", Christina Risso, the kindest person you will ever meet, and Dave Schurhoff who came to anchor so many programs (the Senior 3 Group, Masters, High School Pre-Season, Fall, and Campolindo High School). We will be eternally grateful to all of you. And of course, Marc Cavallero, who uniquely was one of the original team members, and as you know, is deeply connected to virtually every group and aspect of the organization. Marc has offered stability, coaching expertise, and professionalism that few can.

We also want to express sincere gratitude to the organizations that have supported not only Orinda Aquatics, but the environment in which we operate; United States Swimming and The American Swimming Coaches Association. USA Swimming, as our National Governing Body, and Tom Avischious, who oversaw Club Development for twenty years, were as great a resource as a developing club could hope for. John Leonard, the Executive Director of ASCA, has not only been the greatest advocate for the sport of swimming worldwide, he has been an ardent and vocal supporter of Orinda Aquatics. While we live our mission at home, it was John who spread our message and philosophy to countless clubs both nationally and internationally. There has been no more influential person to the sport of swimming and no greater ally to Orinda Aquatics, than John Leonard.

And finally, to the most important people, and truly the ones who allow us to commit the time we do to the organization, to the kids, and to the sport, our spouses – Jan (Donnie), Alma (Ronnie), Tisha (Matt), Kelly (Marc). They know first and foremost that coaching for us has never been a "job", but a passion and a much grander pursuit.

Outreach

(From Donnie) With respect to the elevated awareness today regarding inclusion, kindness, and human respect, Orinda Aquatics has been a compassionate supporter of the children and coaches in Swaziland, Africa, inner-city programs in Richmond and Oakland, as well as serving children at Harbor House Ministries, for many years. We have simply done this to "reach out" to support those in need, and not out of political or social pressure. We hope it is innate in our culture and believe it should be incumbent upon *every* citizen and organization to support where they can, and unquestionably to respect every human life as a gift.

Coronavirus

We would undoubtedly prefer to be with you all in person celebrating this milestone, with kids whom we have spent the past twelve months watching develop, reminiscing with alumni, and of course, acknowledging and embracing our extraordinary graduating class. As we have faced this challenge for the past four months, we are continuously brought back to two themes, that while they do not bring back a season lost, they do resonate at a much higher level, and they are truly foundational to the very essence of *being an athlete*.

The first, and that which may be the most significant and enduring for athletes, is **resilience**, or dealing with adversity and setback. In many ways it is the baseline for athletes, to be willing to take the path of most resistance and truly embrace that which challenges us. While sports metaphors are abundant, the irrefutable reality is that only through challenge do we grow and learn who we really are and what we are truly capable of. And for athletes, this is the greatest challenge, losing the opportunity to train and compete, especially as a fully invested athlete. It therefore creates the greatest opportunity to remain positive and forward-looking, and possibly to be more reflective of the great opportunity to be an athlete, and to be a part of an extraordinary team.

The second concept that we cannot avoid being consumed by at this time is **“team”**. And this challenge facing us all has created a greater definition of teamwork, and the need to demonstrate unmitigated commitment to the team “goal”, i.e., the health and well-being of our family, friends, and community. As with any (great) team, we only move forward with everyone in concert, focusing not on what we have individually lost but on what need to collectively achieve. We truly believe that each one of us should seek to be a great “teammate” regardless of the team or the situation, and there has been no time more important than now.

For those graduating, you have your entire career to take with you, from learn-to swim (see cute photos), through rec swimming, high school, your time at Orinda Aquatics, and the deep connections you have made. For those returning, we plan on continuing to build training and take this momentum into the coming year.

This Evening

For this evening, we sincerely thank our swimmers and parents for their dedication and support of the team, the organization, and our message. As we close out our 2019-20 season, we will review the year, albeit abbreviated, and the careers of our extraordinary graduating class.

For their invaluable leadership, we also sincerely thank our Board of Directors (Vince Castillo, Jean Follmer, Trent McDonald, Jennifer Flanders, Jane Healy, Pete Appl, Cristina & Marc Bensadoun), our Team Captains (Maddie Smith, Margaux McDonald, Tay Thomas, Maggie Buckley, Ryan Lenahan, Aidan Vollmar, Vincent Castillo, Isaac Kim, and Zach Le-Nguyen), and our new coaches (Dom Patterson and Kati McDermott).

As the length of this letter suggests, due to the historic nature of this banquet, we are providing far more information than usual in the memory book, as we wanted to do our best to acknowledge the history of the program and many of those who contributed to the organization that we know today. And, in the vein of parents selflessly taking on monumental workloads, we sincerely thank Catja McDonald for assembling this historic look back. We also want to thank Wendy Smith and all those who supported this (virtual) event. And, as always, we want to thank our mother for creating the athlete certificates and for her never-ending love and support.

With our deepest gratitude and heartfelt appreciation,

Donnie and Ronnie

3-29-00

Thurman, Vandenberg lead Orinda Aquatics

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Those who saw what happened for the Orinda Aquatics this week say it was a coach's "dream meet."

Records were broken, medals won by the finalists, swimmers qualified for the Olympics tryouts, the team placed higher in a national meet than it ever has before and a 15-year-old from the team was the women's high-point champion.

"I will remember this meet for the rest of my life," Orinda Aquatics head coach Kim Heasley said in a written statement. He and his twin brother, Don, started the team with only 20 swimmers five years ago.

The brothers flew with 15 swimmers to Anchorage for the Spoco Junior West Championships. It was worth the trip. They flew home early Sunday morning with a national reputation.

"Three years ago at this meet, nobody knew who we were," said Kim Heasley. "After things started really happening this week, I must have had 20 coaches come up to me and talk about stroke instruction, training methods, our team spirit and our kids' endurance. Because on the girls' side, we totally dominated this meet."

More than 600 swimmers from 170 teams from all states west of Illinois participated in the Western Division championships. Orinda Aquatics took second place overall and won the women's division. Most of the points were scored by two girls.

Amy Thurman, a 15-year-old Miramonte High School freshman, earned the meet's high-point award for women by winning three races and placing second in another. Along the way she set a new Junior West record, qualified for one more event in next week's National championships, and swam two races fast enough to qualify for Olympic trials in August.

Thurman had already captured one Olympic time earlier this month in the 100-meter butterfly.

Kim Vandenberg of the Aquatics was the second-place scorer in the

Orinda Aquatics swimmers and coaches celebrate their high finish.

Orinda Aquatics swimmers and coaches celebrate their high finish. Each win was an Olympic trials qualifying time for Vandenberg. She took five seconds off her 200 butterfly time to set a new Junior National record. The next day of competition she made the risky choice to swim two tough events back-to-back. She won both with Olympic Trial times.

