*I have been meaning to send this to you for a while. This is an essay I wrote for college. Thank you for giving me the inspiration to write this article. An OA senior.*

Character First. Coming across the Orinda Aquatics Polar Bears swim team, the first thing noticedbesides the sea of bright red t-shirts, is the phrase “Character First” plastered across shirts, caps, swim bags. More importantly, it is demonstrated by all of the team members. At the end of my senior year I will have been a member of this team for eight years. These eight years have transformed me as a person in various ways. I have blossomed as a swimmer, achieving times I never thought possible, pushing my body to its limits and further. Even more than that, I have become a better person.

Every Friday afternoon, after a grueling week of swim practice, school, and more swim practice, a normal teenager would escape home to relax and recuperate. Several times, I found myself envying these teenagers, but more often than not, I actually pity them. While my friends are bombarded with useless propaganda by various media outlets, I go to an OA team meeting. Although each meeting has a slightly different focus, they all center on the same theme of “Character”.

I, along with forty other swimmers, dive into this theme, exploring all aspects of what it means for a person to put “Character First”. We often read articles about famous athletes from around the world who have overcome adversity to achieve success. This adversity ranges from a teenage boy who is the sole income-earner for his family, to a young swimmer who overcame cancer that took one of her legs. Through every article, I gain another perspective on sports and life. Never give up, persevere, no excuse is a good excuse and always be humble, are just a few of the countless lessons I have learned through these stories. Another common topic that our team often discussesand debates are articles exploring moral values that often escape teenagers, such as cheating, lying, or respecting parents.

For many years, I took these meetings for granted. I believed that the people we read about were not necessarily remarkable, but normal people who just were lucky to have an article written about them. Then I opened my eyes to the world around me. Every day, I witness not only teenagers, but adults as well, who take everything they have in their lives for granted. They neglect to realize the amazing world that we are able to partake in each day. I am not saying that I am exempt from these moments of weakness, there are times when I to find myself upset that my Iphone 5 is now an old prototype to the newer phone. When I find myself in these lapses, I recall various articles that have touched me in the past years. I have no right to feel entitled to a new phone when there is a homeless man who found over $4 million dollars on the street and immediately called the authorities to return the money because it was not his to take.

Although I know it would be difficult, I wish I wereable to promote this “Character First” view to everyone I meet. Even though the message may be simple, it has made a lasting impression on not only my life, but also on every member of my swim team. Being on Orinda Aquatics has taught me the value of trust, humility, integrity, and hard work, just to name a few lessons. Reading article after article about regular people who do extraordinary things because they are the *right thing* to do has made me reflect on my own actions. If these *ordinary* people can change the world, then there is no excuse for me not to try.

Character has shaped my life for the better. It has opened my eyes up to a better way of living. I hope that I as continue on with my life past high school, I am able to fully live a “character first” life. At college, I will continue to do my best to live this type of live by example and help and encourage my new classmates and team members to do the same.