

Letter written by Rachel Andersen

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I entered the world of water polo on a whim. It was just supposed to be something to fill up my sports slot for the fall semester at my high school as I bided my time to make my premiere on the school's soccer team come spring. I figured, "Hey, I know how to swim. That's like 90% of the sport already down, right?" Little did I know that my dipping my toe in the pool for the first time in years would result in a dive straight into the deep end of the water polo world.

Water polo in Fairfield begins and unfortunately ends with the high schools. I started my career at Armijo High School. When I walked on the pool deck the first day of classes, already turned around from a new environment, I was met with a frazzled looking coach whose first question was, "Can you swim?" As I would soon learn, lots of people join water polo with zero swim experience.

The high school season runs from August to around mid October, leaving players very little time to learn and excel at the sport and coaches very little time to teach it. Before anyone knows it, the season is over and everyone moves on with their lives. The only option to continue water polo beyond these brief weeks of practice is to join a club team outside of Fairfield. Which is exactly what I did.

I ended up playing for a team out in Walnut Creek, which allowed me to try out for the Olympic Development squads in my subsequent years. Then, when high school season would roll around again, I would be geared up to represent Armijo against our rivals. However, one question always struck me when I would witness the change in pace between high school and club: Why can't we do that HERE?

Fairfield has lots of great aquatic facilities. From the high schools to Solano Community College and the Aquatics Complex at Allan Witt Park, there are many places where water sports can flourish. However, one hurdle that seems to face the growth of the aquatic community in the area is a lack of communication.

Many kids get into swimming at a young age. And that makes sense! It's a fun, year-round sport that helps kids to be safer in and around water. However, despite this abundance of young people involved with swimming, there is virtually zero programs for young kids to get an introduction to water polo in the area. Some don't even know what water polo is! As a result, when high school programs start up, kids have to start from scratch, making it harder for them to succeed at water polo later on. Conversely, kids can become burned out from swimming by the time they reach high school, leading to them dropping the sport entirely to pursue other avenues.

However, if the two sports joined forces, this could be a wildly different cycle. Rather, kids could take time "off" of swimming to do water polo. Then, when kids got older, they could choose which to

specialize in. If they choose swimming they can put their full heart and effort into it. If they choose water polo , kids would still be incentivised to swim to stay in shape during the off season.

I was so excited when SASO offered me the opportunity to implement this change of pace for aquatics in the area. In the few weeks I spent with the kids, I could already see vast improvement. From struggling to egg beater to being able to make 30 passes in a row dry, the kids proved to me just how important in that they know how to swim before starting to play water polo.

With SASO starting this program to introduce younger players to the sport, this swim team is taking major steps to help establish not only an area of aquatic competition, but one that can compete with neighboring powerhouses David and Walnut Creek.

My biggest regrets in regard to my water polo career are not starting earlier and not being able to play for a team in my area. Hopefully, with this program, no one will ever feel that way again.