

Published February 17th, 2010

Natural Instinct and Hard Work Pay Off

By Lou Fancher



Jon Sibley Photo provided

A great goalie has a presence about him. Intellect says the sloping shoulders, cobra-length arms and fluid physicality are perfect equipment for water polo. However, it's instinct that makes a person certain that Jon Sibley, all-star leader of Miramonte High School's water polo team, is meant to be in the water.

Head Coach James Lathrop has been watching Sibley play for years. "He's willing to throw himself in front of a ball," he says, singing praise for the valued player. Lathrop notes Sibley's studious approach, his ability to encourage and understand his teammates, his fearlessness. "He's going to find a way to get better, no matter what, no matter where," he predicts.

Swimming for Sleepy Hollow Swim Club as a young boy, Sibley admits he didn't like water polo when he started learning the game. It wasn't until he was positioned as goalie that he developed a feel for the sport. "Back then, all you needed to be was big," he says, downplaying his ability.

Now, six years later, Sibley is using that reach to place his team at the top of its league and to earn honors: #1 Team All-American, member of 2009's USA Junior National Team, and a Golden Bear. Sibley has signed a letter of intent to attend Cal Berkeley on scholarship. With offers from Pepperdine, UCLA and USC lobbed in his direction, Cal's program blocked the competition. In the end, it was a gut feeling that made the choice obvious for Sibley. "I've been a Bear all my life," he says simply.

While Sibley relied on instinct for making his college choice, his operating system for playing water polo springs from the opposite direction. "I keep a notebook on different players," he says. Last year, he won a spot on the Junior National Team and traveled to Croatia to compete in the world championships. "He came back from Croatia with a list of drills he saw other teams doing," Coach Lathrop says. And Sibley puts in overtime, studying with Jack Bowen, a well-

know Bay area guru to goalies; even going to his kid sister, Kirsten, for her "custom" approach to practice drills. She and their mother work on his hand-eye coordination and rapid response reflexes by shooting bullets-of the Nerf variety-at him.

This season, the Miramonte team could have been lightweights. The entire starting line-up, other than Sibley, graduated in 2009, leaving the team in need of a leader. Like any talented coach, Lathrop developed a strategy to not only win games, but to establish Sibley in that role. "We played our defense to maximize our strengths," Lathrop says. Although disinclined to tell others what to do, Sibley became the team's leader and is grateful. With dreams of winning a national championship at Cal, perhaps earning a degree in environmental policy and economics, and playing professionally in Europe after college, Sibley knows that getting the team together is the most important element of winning.

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