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Mid-Season Pool Talk

By Lou Fancher



Becca Buck's County start Photo Peter Buck

Pool together three talented Lamorinda swimmers and the result might surprise you: three full, vibrant lives on land.

Contrary to the notion that great athletes must be hyper-focused on sport alone, Becca Buck, Alex Toohey and Charlie Wiser are more than just bodies in water. While surging towards August's heated finale, the young athletes took a mid-season time-out to talk about their lives in and out of the pool.

Becca Buck, 11, swims for the Lafayette Moraga Youth Association (LMYA). With a 40.34 in the 50 yard Breast and a 36.06 in the 50 Fly, she's already achieved most of her goal: qualifying for County. She's two-tenths of a second away from the County mark for the 100 IM and with just under a month to go, she's confident.

This season, she's most excited about the relay team. "We all know who's good at which stroke," she says, "and I like how we all cheer each other on." Breaststroke is most natural for Buck, something she attributes to genetics, saying, "I think it's from in the family." Even so, she works with her coaches on timing: "especially when to pull my head up, when to shoot it down, and how long to glide."

To counter the jitters on race days, Buck and her relay team play hand games. "Lemonade" soothes the nerves and teaches self-control. "When you finish the game, you freeze, and whoever freezes best, wins," she explains. It might be the only moment Buck can be seen keeping still, because when she's not in the pool, she's on a horse. "Riding works my core muscles, which is good for swimming," she says. "And swimming stretches you out, which helps with riding."

Although athletics are her primary interest, Buck eagerly shares her opinions on other subjects too: "Schools should always have art because it lets us do what we want to do. It's fun, even though I'm not that good at it. And some kids don't do outdoor activities: if they don't have art, they don't have stuff they love to do."

Alex Toohey, 17, has been a member of the Moraga Country Club team since the age of six. This year, her last with the club, she knows her best times (1.05 in the IM, 29.05 Backstroke, and 24.09 Freestyle) and what matters most. "The other swimmers," she says, with immediate emphasis, "they're my best friends and we'll probably be best friends forever."

Toohey's swim goals for the summer center around the relay team and her preparations for the fall. In September, she will head to Claremont McKenna College in Southern California to play water polo. Leaving behind a team she has been a part of for 11 seasons causes her to reflect. On coach Dave Schurhoff: "He made me see the competitor I could be." On swimming in general: "It taught me how to compete. It made me realize I have to work hard every time I get into the pool."

After each comment, Toohey's thoughts return to her fellow swimmers. It's not just the medals, ribbons, or the records she will take away from MCC, it's the friendships. "There's a closer bond with people you swim with," she says, "you're able to be yourself more."

Charlie Wiser, 15, is hard to recognize out of the pool. Between swimming for the Orinda Country Club and playing water polo with LMYA, he spends most of his waking hours in the water, which suits him just fine. "I feel more comfortable there," he says. "It's like I'm not made of bone-I'm more...liquidy."

Relaxing, even on the hard bleachers aside the Soda Center pool, might be the key to Wiser's underwater intensity. "I usually just swim in the summer," he says casually, "but this year, because I swam at Miramonte [High School], I'm going forward-I'm going faster already." His times, 54.14 in the 100 I.M., 1:00.95 in the 100 Breast, add serious zip to the meaning of "faster." His schedule, with swim team and water polo fitting together like a daily biathlon, require adequate rest and the considerable support of his parents.

His mother, Jane, sitting nearby, mentions her son's adult mentors, helping Wiser to jump from swimming to other topics. "I'm refurbishing a senior area near the Orinda Community Church," he says, about an Eagle Scout project he hopes to complete soon.

"I'm clearing poison oak, trimming trees, building a bench." The conversation moves on to school: "I like history, especially the Revolutionary War and learning about our roots," he says.

His enthusiasm is palpable, not scattered, and when the discussion turns back to swimming, there's a renewed energy. "I've realized the more you work, the more you'll achieve," he says. The connection between work and results, taught by countless laps up and down the pool, is Wiser's golden rule for success.

Buck, Toohey, and Wiser leave an indelible impression, not just of athletic prowess, but of the richness of Lamorinda's youth. Wiser, speaking about history, but voicing the mindset of his fellow swimmers, says, "The meaning of being free-I've thought about it a lot. Here, in the U.S., we can become what we want to be. We can follow our bliss."



Alex Toohey Photo Submitted by: Chris Toohey



Charlie Wiser Photo Lisa Dirito

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