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Lamorinda Family Roots Run Deep in Local Pools

By Emily Dugdale



Tommy Fellner

Photos Gint Federas

If you went to a water polo match in Lamorinda this fall, there is a good chance one of the players in the water was a Fellner or a Murphy.

That's because the two families, united by marriage, have produced some of the best high school and collegiate water polo players in the area. The Murphys, in particular, also have a strong legacy of success at UC Berkeley's top-tier water polo program.

"We won four NCAA titles at Cal – so we were very successful," said Noel Murphy, former Cal player and current coach of the Miramonte girls' varsity water polo team.

But more than the glory of success, Murphy views the lessons instilled in water polo as building blocks for future success. As a coach and father to aspiring college players, he tries to draw the same parallels between water polo and life outside water polo.

"Great coaches are great life leaders," Murphy said. "I work for IBM now, and to win a deal is like winning a game – you can't do it by yourself. There's no lone wolf in corporate life or in water polo."

The Murphys boast a family of nine siblings with 13 children playing water polo over the years. High

school standouts include Miramonte senior Max Murphy and sophomore Kelly Murphy. Carondelet's Maddy Murphy is the California high school champion in the 50-yard butterfly as a junior, and she recently signed a letter to swim for Cal.

Noel Murphy credits his parents, who emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland in the 1950s, as the backbone of the family's water polo legacy. "There is some swimming history – I mean, Ireland's an island! If you get kicked off, you have to go and swim somewhere," he joked.

Noel Murphy's son, Max, was a dominating lefty for the Mats this season. During the Matadors Nov. 7 match against rival Campolindo, he scored two goals in a close match that saw the Cougars squeak by with a 10-9 sudden death win.

But despite his prowess at the sport, Max Murphy counts his friends as the greatest part of the game. "The forming of friendships throughout the years has been great as well as playing with the same players throughout the same time," he said.

The fact that so many Murphys are in the water is also inspiring, according to Max Murphy. "It's pretty funny to me because a lot of my uncles and cousins play, and it's cool to see – I've never gotten to play with any of them though."

On the Fellner side, in a family of 10 cousins, a whopping five Fellner kids play the sport, and they do it well. One currently plays water polo at top-ranked UCLA, and the others are key members of the teams at Acalanes High School.

Jack Fellner, a Fellner and Murphy, is a junior attacker at top-ranked UCLA. Fellner also played for Team USA this year at the World University Games in Gwangju, South Korea, a repeat of his 2013 appearance at the games in Kazan, Russia.

"Jack's success comes with no surprise," said his former Miramonte boys' head coach James Lathrop. "He is a very good passer, a capable defender, and is willing to do what he needed for the team to be successful."

His cousin Reilly Fellner, now a sophomore at UCLA, started her freshman year on the team but was

forced to sit out most of last season due to injury and recently decided to take a break from the sport.

"I think sports have a unique ability to bring people together, both as spectators and teammates," she said. "You create a special bond that goes beyond friendship – something that you create from suffering through long practices, hard sets and 5 a.m. workouts together."

Her younger brother, Tommy Fellner, a senior attacker and captain at Acalanes, first started playing water polo in seventh grade, after a somewhat involuntary start. "My dad forced me into trying water polo because he said it was like swimming and basketball mixed together," he said.

But he stuck with it, and found unprecedented success. "The sport has completely shaped the kind of person that I am today and I am very grateful for that."

Tommy Fellner is joined at Acalanes by cousin Lucy Fellner, a senior and team captain, and his younger sister Alex Fellner, a freshman; both are standouts on the Acalanes girls' teams.

While family competition could divide even the most tight-knit households, that's not the case with the Fellers. "I think it's awesome that most of our family plays water polo,"

Tommy said. "It kind of unites us because it's all something [we] share."

"It's fun having cousins as teammates," Lucy said. "It brings us closer together."

But living with these grandiose family legacies can also be taxing. Tommy Fellner highlighted the difficulty of trying to break out of the path set by his successful family members.

"It's definitely hard to live up to the extremely high expectations set by Jack," he said of his older cousin, who plays the same position as him. "Everyone expects me to be like and play like Jack but I have to create my own image and style as a player."

With kids playing at both Acalanes and Miramonte, the two families are closely entwined and supportive. "We love them, and we're excited for them and what they've done within their family – I take my hat off to them," said Noel Murphy.

Despite the inherent pressure, the two families embrace their dominance in the pool, and the names that carry respect in the sport.

"I like carrying on the legacy and having the family name to uphold. It's some added pressure, but I like being able to carry on the tradition," Tommy Fellner said.



Kelly Murphy #9



Reilly Fellner #6 in 2013

Photo Gint Federas

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