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Growing up Swimmingly in Lamorinda

By Cathy Dausman



Recreational swimmers hoped to take a bite out of the competition at the recent Orinda Moraga Pool Association championships.

Photo Gint Federas

the opening of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, and while few recreational swimmers make it to that national stage, Katie Ledecky and Michael Phelps are sure to be inspirations.

Ryan Sitar became a "Mini Marlin" when he began swimming recreationally at Moraga Valley Pool at the age of five; he will soon enter his sophomore year in college. "I am back this (summer) as a coach just because swimming has always been such a big part of my life that it is a little difficult and saddening to move on," he admits.

Sitar estimates he spent 20 or more hours on the pool deck each week during high school. "During swim season I pretty much lived and breathed swimming," he said. His typical rec swimming day was morning practice starting at 8 a.m.; coaching from 10 to 1 p.m. and afternoon swim lessons or life guard duty later in the day.

Sitar says the most memorable swim event came not from his teammates but from the swim club dads and their cannonball contest. "Most dads have a couple special dives up their sleeves," Sitar said. "I've seen cannon balls and can openers that have sprayed the entire pool deck in addition to painful belly flops, two-point-five revolution flips and soaring flying squirrel dives (a head first dive holding both ankles)," he said.

Julie Oliver is a second-generation Lamorinda swimmer now working with gen three - her children. Oliver's parents were active at Moraga Ranch pool. Her mother was swim team president, her father served on the renovation committee that expanded the Moraga Ranch pool from 17 yards to 25 yards. Oliver's family now swims at Moraga Valley Pool; she is completing her tenure as swim team president.

"My parents inspired me to continually give back and make the (recreational swim) experience the best for all members," she said. From the age of eight, Oliver and her older brother Erik, whom she calls a much more accomplished swimmer, rode their bikes downhill to swim practice every day,

Imagine a giant block party, only instead of residential lawns, participants lounge in tents pitched poolside. Many parents and swimmers alike plunge wholeheartedly into Lamorinda's recreational swim culture when their children reach preschool and leave only reluctantly when their teens age out at 18.

Lamorindans take their swimming seriously, even at the recreational level: There are two swim conferences and 15 teams, most with decades-old histories of membership, comradery and competition.

Recreational swimming leagues meet only in the summer, but make no mistake about it; the swimmers, their families and friends are fully immersed.

This year is especially significant: the nine-member Orinda Moraga Pool Association meet coincided with

putting off going home "for as long as possible to avoid that giant hill on the way back."

Oliver's current mid-summer swim schedule is little changed - she's still in the pool before breakfast, but she now also oversees her children's breakfast and sends them off to practice.

Sitar and Oliver both credit team swimming with playing a part in their personal development. Sitar says he learned perseverance and leadership, Oliver emphasizes teamwork and commitment. Oliver says the team sizes have grown enormous since her time as a rec swimmer in the mid-1970s, and current technology has facilitated the logistics of record keeping and award distribution. "The level of coaching is really off the charts now," she added.

Swimming and Lamorinda are so enmeshed "because of the sheer number of pools here, and the long history of participation in swimming and water polo," says Jack Kelly, communications director for Orinda Park Pool. OPP is one of Lamorinda's oldest pools; it was established by the de Lavega family in 1921. Many of OPP's deeply committed volunteers themselves swam at OPP as children including current head coach Brad Allen, who still holds some pool records.

"For most of the kids it's much more than just a swim team, it's a community," Kelly says. He cites the OPP participation in the Orinda Fourth of July parade and the very friendly car decorating competition which precedes the OMPA meet. The pool's end-of-season awards ceremony for graduating high school seniors "is absolutely heartbreaking (to watch)," Kelly says. And no, you're not imagining it - there really is an end-of-summer exodus which begins immediately after the OMPA conference meet ends.

"I've known families who brought their bags to OMPA and left for their vacations the moment they were done swimming," Kelly said.

Lamorinda area recreational swimming is something to experience, says Rancho Colorados Swim and Tennis Club president Sean McLellan. He calls it a community sport with deep involvement and truly friendly rivalries.

McLellan is relatively new to the recreational swim culture in Lamorinda, having moved his family to the Bay Area from Canada six years ago. He says his children were not asked whether they would join rec swimming, but what pool they would join. Even at the recreational level, McLellan says the sport is "super fun, super exciting, and fabulous to watch.

"The kids get into it; they take it seriously," he says, even at the six-and-under level. He says the swimmers support both friends and siblings during meets while learning how to set goals and manage time - both important life lessons.

McLellan says although there are "last chance" qualification meets very few get the opportunity to swim at the County meet, so the Lafayette Swim Conference meet signals the winding down of the season. McLellan's family enjoys the camaraderie and healthy fun of rec swimming within the Lafayette Swim Conference.

"There's no downside," he said.

Lamorinda Recreational Pools

Lafayette Swim Conference

www.lafayetteswim.org/

1. Lafayette Moraga Youth Association (Dolphins)
2. Oakwood Athletic (Makos) mackerel shark
3. Rancho Colorados (Wahoo) aka ono (sports fish)

4. Springbrook (Hogs)
5. Sun Valley (Rays)
6. Pleasant Hill Aquatics

Orinda Moraga Pool Association

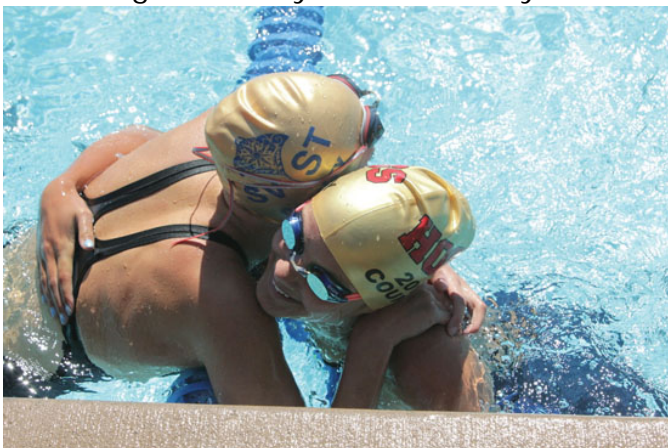
www.ompaswim.com

1. Moraga Valley Pool (Marlins)
2. Orinda Country Club (Sharks)
3. Meadow Swim (Dolphins)
4. Moraga Country Club (Waves)
5. Sleepy Hollow (Legends)
6. Orinda Park Pool (Stingrays)
7. Moraga Ranch (Piranha)
8. Miramonte (Gators)
9. Campolindo Cabana (Marlins)

The Contra Costa County Championship meet is Aug 13-14 at Acalanes High School.



Longtime swimmers, from left, Sleepy Hollow's Ellie Reed Abby McFessel and Jesse Wilson, and Moraga Country Club's Haley Charlesworth, compete at their last OMPA meet. The four started rec swimming when they were 4 and 5 years old. Photos Gint Federas



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