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Lamorinda Weekly Girls Water Polo preview

By Jon Kingdon



Acalanes goalie Ava Donleavy Photos Gint Federas

By any and all standards, the 2017 girls water polo season would have to be declared a success for the Lamorinda teams, both singly and as a whole. Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte had a combined 69-11 record in the regular season and an 11-2 record in the playoffs, which included a championship. Each of the schools also had girls that have gone on to play water polo for the top schools in the nation, both athletically and academically. As the 2018 season begins, optimism continues to reign supreme in Lamorinda.

Coming off a championship, undefeated season, Miramonte's girls water polo team only lost six seniors to graduation. However, when five of those seniors have gone on to play Division 1 water polo in college, it can prove to be a shock to the system. As satisfying as winning a championship can be, Lance Morrison, in his second year as the Matadors head coach, is not resting on his laurels: "Last year is over and we're not looking

back. We look at every year as a new set of cards. We want to be in the conversation. Each year we look at what we need to change and what we want to hold on to."

Despite losing so many key players to graduation, the cupboard is far from bare for Miramonte. Returning on offense is senior attacker Katie Lyons, who led the team last year with 99 goals, was third on the team with 50 assists and also led the team in steals, and is a key component for the Matadors. Says Morrison: "Katie has a strong competitive drive and is incredibly explosive with a unique ability to score and make plays."

Complementing Lyons will be junior center Sally Fellner and senior utility Abby Fleming. Morrison appreciates what each brings to the pool: "Sally is a top center and a very strong competitor who has been dedicated to working on her weakness and improving her strengths. I have coached Abby since her freshman year. She is very skilled and is always ready to attack when teams aren't looking. She has a big heart and cares a lot about this team."

Morrison is quick to point out that it's not individuals that make a team successful and that no one does anything by themselves but in fact everyone has to work together as a unit.

On defense, senior goalie Savannah Sherwood, who only gave up an average of 3.3 goals per game last season, which included five shutouts, leads the defense. Says Morrison: "Savannah is a top goalie in our area and beyond. She has good size, stature and athleticism. She is very long and athletic along with good instincts and intelligence and a real sense of where the ball will be which allows her to make big blocks. Savannah is a very good passer as well." In front of Sherwood is junior center defender Chloe Morrison who "is hard to set against."

With a 1-0 record so far this season, Miramonte will be competing in three tournaments - the Sierra Shutout, The Woodcreek Invitational and the Nor Cal Invitational.

Morrison uses these tournaments as indicators as to how good of a team he has: "We need to play all the top teams. One win against a tough team like Monte Vista is not enough to tell us where we stand. After we've played everyone at least once, we'll have a much better idea of where we are but, at this point, we need a few more games to know."

Over the last five seasons, Miramonte has established themselves as a consistent powerhouse amassing a record of 112 and 26, demonstrating their ability to consistently play at a high level. Says Morrison: "We may have a bullseye on us as defending champions but I believe that it is because we are consistently a top program that teams want to beat every year. We will compete at the highest level of play regardless of who we play. That's the culture we want. We want to look past what we can't control and find a way to compete."

Campolindo made it to the third round of last year's playoffs, losing to the ultimate winner of the tournament, Miramonte.

Head coach Kim Everist has approached this season with a new attitude: "Our concept is aiming for more. We don't want to get too focused on the wins and losses. Our philosophy is to have a mindset on things that we can control. It's about striving for more and trusting each other."

Despite the graduation of three seniors that have gone on to play Division 1 college water polo, Everist speaks highly of her current roster: "We have a good senior group with a number that may go on to play at the next level as well. I'm really stoked. The girls are really determined to take care of the game. They are dialed in to the little details. They always show up and are ready to go."

This year's captains are seniors Christina Crum, a center defender and Zoe Crouch, a perimeter player who led off the season scoring six goals in the opening victory against Sacred Heart Prep. Everist appreciates the role and effort that they and the seniors are providing: "Our players are buying into accountability and the seniors are leading them and helping me keep the players in line."

Other key players on offense are two juniors, attacker Nina Munson and perimeter Lola Ciruli. Sophomore Tallulah Clancy has also been a force as an attacker. Everist also singled out senior Jessica Henningsen who was a substitute last year but "this year she has been playing gangbusters."

Senior Cam Sutter is returning as the team's goalie and is being backed up by another senior Katherine Hawkins. Everist has come to rely on assistant coach Joe Born to specialize on the defense. Born, who played at Miramonte and the University of California, has also coached for the Lamorinda Water Polo Club Team.

Everist appreciates the early success of the Cougars who have won four of their first five games but keeps her priorities straight: "I want them to have fun. I enjoy the kids and want them to enjoy the game."

With a 21-5 record last season and a triple overtime loss in the third round of the playoffs to tournament runner up, Monte Vista, Acalanes head coach Mischa Buchel has approached this season with great optimism despite losing Bella Wentzel and Lauren Etnyre to the college ranks.

Beginning the season with six consecutive wins has done nothing to dampen Buchel's enthusiasm: "We have a number of players that played a lot last season and returned this year."

In their six games, the Dons have only given up a little more than three goals per game which does not surprise Buchel: "Our defense is excellent. It is definitely going to be our strong suit this year and should only get better when junior Brooke Westphal, who does a little bit of everything for us, fully recovers from a concussion she suffered at the Junior Olympics this summer."

Junior Jewel Roemer, who played for the Women's Youth National Team in Serbia this summer and who is only in her second year playing for Acalanes, has proven to be a real force for the Dons, says Buchel. "Jewel has been incredible on both offense and defense. She has tons of steals and blow up plays. She has a great ability to read the play even before the offense players knows what they want to do. On offense she has a real knack to get the ball to the right players."

The goalie position is in the very capable hands of sophomore Ava Donleavy for which Buchel finds great comfort: "As a freshman Ava was spectacular and has improved from there. She is a vocal presence back there and is a natural at directing traffic which is very helpful for the defense."

Leading the offense is senior center Lexi Rowell, who is the key to the Dons' offense, says Buchel: "No one has been able to guard Lexi one-on-one. She gets a lot of space and is able to draw a lot of exclusions (when the opposing player is forced to leave the pool for 20 seconds). Our half court sets have been very good so far this season."

This year's captains are Rowell, Alex Fellner and Kylie Walker and have proven very helpful to Buchel. "They are all doing a good job being the leaders on the team. They are very encouraging to their teammates."

What is new for all of the teams is how close the referees are calling fouls this year. The powers that be feel that the game has gotten too physical so the officials will be calling more kickout fouls which is going to provide more power play opportunities for the teams, says Buchel. "Instead of 5-10 power plays, we may see 12-15 power plays in some games. In that we were only 1-9 in power plays against Carondolet earlier this season, this is an area that we will spend more time on."

With so many returning players this year, it has facilitated the process for Buchel: "Though we're not senior heavy, a lot of last year's sophomores have stepped up. We've been able to jump into things sooner. We have a clear sense of each other and where we wanted our players to line up. We feel that if we are going to do it and be successful, this is our year."



Miramonte goalie Savannah Sherwood

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