

Published February 6th, 2019

Lamorinda freshmen make their mark on varsity teams

By Jon Kingdon



Michelle Goll Photos Gint Federas

It was in 1954 that freshmen were ruled ineligible to play varsity sports in college. It was not until 1973 when freshmen became eligible to play all sports on the varsity level again. Still more the exception than the rule for freshmen to be competitive on that level, it's no longer something that gives one pause to see a freshman competing against upperclassmen on both the high school and collegiate level.

In his fourth year at Campolindo, head coach Steven Dyer has had five freshmen that played for the varsity: "You will see more basketball players than football players because skill becomes more important than size. The rise of AAU basketball has brought about more freshmen able to play for a varsity team." There are two freshmen that are on the Campolindo roster this year, Aiden Mahaney (15.2 ppg) and Matt Radell (7.9 ppg).

Mahaney, who played with the Flight OE team until eighth grade and for the West Coast Elite team last year, attributes that experience to facilitating his transition to varsity basketball: "I played for the high school division last year and traveled all over the country. I played against so many top players in intense games, it really prepared me for high school."

Still there was an adjustment to a high school team as opposed to a club team, says Mahaney: "AAU can be more like pickup games. At Campolindo, there is more structure and designed plays with more emphasis on defense and taking charges. Everything matters."

Radell saw a real difference between playing for Campolindo and in the AAU: "The skill levels were similar

but at Campolindo the players want it more. Our team plays harder and the games are more physical in general."

It takes more than just ability for a freshman to be effective on the varsity, says Dyer: "It's important for the freshmen to realize that they are not going to be the top dog when they show up. They're playing in more advanced situations and the talent level is much higher. As for maturity, it's my job to teach it to them."

Radell brings good height to the game but concedes that there is a lot for him to work on: "I play center so I have to deal with the bigger guys and often I've not been evenly matched weight wise. My goal is to continue to bulk up and get a stronger so I can bang around a little more."

Mahaney's transition was eased by his brother, Carter, who is a junior and played on the varsity as a freshman as well, says Aiden: "It's nice to play with Carter. His advice to me was to keep working. There was a lot of hype around me and I just had to prove myself and that I was going to play against more physical players so I had to get my body ready for that."

Radell welcomed the support he got from the upperclassmen: "They did not care about my being a freshman. It was a matter of playing hard and earning their trust. They just want to play basketball and have fun. They have made me look good on the court."

Mahaney and Radell made the transition well, says Dyer: "They came in and worked hard and they deserve the credit. They had the right mindset and did a good job in fitting in with the team. They both put in a lot of time working in the weight room and on their game."

Mahaney is not resting on his laurels: "I have to keep improving my body strength and there is room to improve in everything. I am always working on my skills. I wanted to show the upperclassmen how much I cared and how hard a worker I was and that all I wanted to do was to win."

Michelle Sasaki, the head coach of the girls basketball team at Acalanes, sees similar issues for freshmen girls to play on the varsity team: "It's not common for a freshman to make the varsity. It's hard to do. A lot of the girls are playing basketball early but there are not enough girls playing the game."

The freshmen have to be complete players for them to make the team, says Sasaki: "They have to be good athletically but if they're only an offensive threat and can't rebound and play defense, we won't move them up. The stakes are higher moving up from the eighth grade to play on the varsity."

Last year there were two freshmen on the Acalanes varsity, Grace Gebhardt and Gabby Schneider. Having another freshman on the team eased the transition to the varsity for Gebhardt: "It was great having Gabby on the team. I didn't know Gabby at the start of the season but we developed a friendship and helped each other."

It's the club experience that facilitates the transition to the varsity for the freshmen, says Sasaki: "They get to play more and work on their overall game. They compete against the better and more serious players. Gabby and Grace did a tremendous job of coming in and playing solid basketball but they are still the exception to the rule. With freshmen, you have to be patient with the process. It's a huge learning curve and it takes time. You can't push the river - it flows by itself."

Gebhardt, who has been playing basketball since kindergarten and also plays for the Acalanes lacrosse team, welcomed the challenge of club basketball, playing for St. Perpetua in CYO and the Cal Stars club team: "I've always wanted to play at the highest level. It was fun to play against stiffer competition. Still, I had to prove myself to the upperclassman at Acalanes as everyone was fighting for a spot on the team."

This year there is only one freshman playing for the Dons: Michelle Goll. She has received great support from the team, says Sasaki: "It can be harder for a single freshman but we have had great leadership from our captains and that has made it a seamless transition for Michelle."

As sophomores, Gebhardt and Schneider can appreciate how difficult it is for a freshman: "We can empathize with Michelle and we do all we can to try and help her out."

Winning the NCS boys water polo championship is one thing. Winning it with a freshman in goalie is quite another. That is what happened this past fall for the Cougars when West Temkin stepped in for an injured Logan Estes early in the season, holding the starting position for the rest of the season and being named "Outstanding Goalie" in the Foothill Division.

Campolindo head coach Miles Price appreciates how fortunate he was to have someone like West to step in so effectively when Estes went out with a concussion: "It was unusual for a freshman to be so impactful. West is very mature for his age. As a goalie, he is playing an individual position. It didn't come easy but he did a great job in understanding what his teammates expected of him. He understood the position and it gave him more confidence with the players around him. West was not afraid to voice what he wanted from the defensive players and what his expectations were. Initially, I had to push him towards that and once he knew it was his position, he started to mold the defense the way he wanted it to play."

Temkin has played club water polo with the 680 Drivers and CC United and for the Cadet National team in eighth grade, traveling and competing in Serbia and Montenegro. Despite so much early success in his career, Temkin did not have great expectations entering his freshman year: "I anticipated playing on the JV team and I was surprised when I made the varsity. I expected to be a substitute and then stepped in as the starter after Logan's injury. I was fortunate that the team had a number of very talented players that are going to go on and play Division I water polo in college and they really took me in and treated me like family. They were super nice to me from the beginning."

As in basketball, club participation provided a springboard for Temkin to the varsity, says Price: "Players learn quickly on the club teams how easy it is to fail. It's the same at Campolindo. Playing on the youth teams and playing abroad with and against a lot of high-level players made West more comfortable and prepared to step in as a freshman. West had a great maturation process and I don't see him slowing down at all."

Temkin took nothing for granted: "I just worked super hard to prove myself to them and to earn their trust and once I did that, it was all good from there."

It always helps to have the physical tools to step into a starting position so early, says Miles: "What makes West so special is his size (6'2"), his maturity, his length and his overall movement. He can cover most of the net so he doesn't have to move laterally to get a hand on the ball. It also helped that Logan was a great supporter of West even when he got injured. We had great leadership from the top down and they supported whoever was the starter."

Having the confidence to develop his own style also contributed to Temkin's success: "There are a lot of key factors. Much of it is the mindset, stuff that can't be taught. You have to get over being scared of the ball and learn to anticipate where the ball is going, even knowing where the ball is going before they throw the ball. If you know where your shot blockers are lining up, the ball is generally going to come where the blockers are not." Simple? Hardly.

Like all of the other aforementioned freshmen, Temkin is not one to be satisfied with what he has already accomplished: "I realized that I needed to take this super seriously. In the water, I will hold a chair above my head for 30 minutes straight. This also improves my mental strength. I work on improving my reaction time by taking shot after shot in practice. I've taken a mix of the basic and developed my own style that somehow works."

A philosophy that can work, not just in sports but in all facets of life.



Matt Radell Photos Gint Federas



Aidan Mahaney Photos Gint Federas



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