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The secrets to success of Lamorinda water polo

By Jon Kingdon



Grace Tehaney (2017) Photo Gint Federas

On Saturday, April 6, the No. 1 ranked USC women's water polo team came to Berkeley and defeated the No. 5 ranked California Golden Bears by a score of 8-3. Each team had three Lamorinda players on their roster: USC - Grace Tehaney (Miramonte), Kari Jensen (Campolindo) and Brook Preston (Campolindo); California - Madison Tagg (Campolindo), Rachel Lewin (Campolindo) and Carson Broad (Miramonte).

Over the past two seasons, the Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte boys and girls water polo teams have had a combined won-lost record of 227-82. With such consistent success, it should not be surprising to learn that there are currently 48 men and women players from Lamorinda playing on 21 different college water polo teams, from the Pac 12 to the Ivy League, from the Big 10 to the Big West Coast Conference. UC Santa Barbara (6), California (5) and Santa Clara (5) have the highest representation from the area.

USC head coach Casey Moon explains the large number of players simply: "Aquatics in Lamorinda is incredible. Everyone up here plays water polo and the pool of players is so immense and we're glad that we can steal some of those players to come to USC."

California head coach Coralie Simmons appreciates the talent in the area, having coached players going back to when she was the head coach at Sonoma State: "Part of it is the history and the culture of the sport in the area along with the access that the kids have is exponential in the pools and rec leagues that is unmatched in the nation."

Misha Buchel, the head coach of the Acalanes girls water polo team that was undefeated last season, sees two key factors for the number of talented players in the area: "First, the region has an incredible rec swim culture which provides a base of very talented swimmers. Kids then come out for water polo already knowing how to swim really well. As a result, they enjoy it a lot more because it's not as hard when they first start. Second, a lot of folks who played at Cal have never left the area so there is a lot of second-generation water polo families which means a lot of former players and now parents (mostly fathers because women's water polo is still relatively young) were available to coach. In the late '80s and early '90s, very few water polo players started before high school. Now kids can come out as early as 6-7 years old."

A freshman, Grace Tehaney, followed in her families' footsteps into water polo: "My stepfather, John Felix (who is in the U.S. Water Polo Hall of Fame) said I should try it and I loved it more than anything. My stepbrother played at Cal and my twin brother Sean plays at Santa Clara."

Carson Broad, also a freshman, was a product of the swimming program: "I started swimming at the Meadow Swim Club at 2 years old. When I was 8, I discovered water polo. It was something new and exciting."

Rachel Lewin, a senior and aspiring sports psychologist, learned her water polo skills in a unique way: "I was originally a synchronized swimmer so I had the background in the techniques you use to stay afloat. My father played and coached water polo so I was on the pool deck all the time and I fell in love with the sport. There are so many different elements that make the game exciting."

Brian Snyder, the 18 and under boys water polo coach for the 680 Club, gets his players from the youth swimming programs: "The swimmers see water polo as a combination of sports infused with swimming. Some fall in love with the sport and some don't."

Learning the basics and fundamentals are crucial to understand at the start, says Snyder: "From 10 to 14, we want the players to develop good habits. It's crucial to learn and understand balance in the water and the fundamental skills of the sport prior to high school as the more tactical aspects of the game become more important there."

It's not just the physical tools that are critical to the game, says Snyder: "To become a top water polo player, it takes a high water polo IQ, knowing what is going on in the game at all times, knowing where the ball is, your defender, your area and two meters (the center position). This can be more important than the talent that the player possesses."

Adjusting to college academics is hard enough. When you compete on a Division I team, it's that much harder, says Coach Simmons: "You have to multiply everything by 10. The game is a lot more aggressive than in high school. The speed of the game and the shots coming at you is much faster. The players soon realize that everyone's a hot shot on the team. The student-athletes have to find that balance, studying and getting the job done in the pool and in the classroom."

Broad felt well prepared for college: "Miramonte was a tough school but that is what helped me to transition to Cal. Balancing athletics and academics is what I've grown up doing. I learned how to balance my time, staying ahead of my classes and it has never been an issue for me."

The competition was a revelation for the players: "It was a huge adjustment just going to college, living in a new area and being out of the house," says Tehaney. "It's way more intense than high school. It's super competitive and fun at the same time."

Broad saw the competition as a positive: "The players are faster, stronger, more dynamic and pool smart and playing against higher competition is making me better."

Simmons spoke very highly about her Lamorindans: "Madison Tagg, our goalie, really wanted to take the next stride this year and has been a powerhouse in the back. She controls things, making big saves and makes our defense operate at a high level. Rachel Lewin has been our workhorse. She took on a new role every year and has filled in at all positions. She has flourished in her ability as a chameleon. Carson has progressed well and has been getting more minutes. She works hard and loves the game and should become a big part of the next culture shift with our team."

Moon was equally complimentary about his players: "Grace is a water polo junkie who has contributing immediately for us. She comes from good water polo pedigree. Her ceiling is incredible. She had a great foundation coming in playing for Miramonte. Kari is a great teammate and works incredibly hard to be the best player she can be. Though Brooke has been injured, she's been a very fine player; she is still a great part of our team."

Moon is already anticipating the arrival next year of Acalanes senior Alex Fellner: "Alex is a tough as nails player with a very high ceiling. Her make up is as a hard-working player which is the kind of player that we look for."

Tehaney had many coaches that were responsible for her development, but she singled out Miramonte coach Lance Morrison "who really helped me by being very encouraging and wanting what was the best for the team, encouraging all the players to be better and getting everyone into a mindset to win."

Lewin spoke highly of her coach at Campolindo, Kim Everist: "Kim was great. She pushed us to levels we didn't think we could achieve, building our confidence in and out of the pool. It was not a rigid structure. It made me a better player and gave me the ability to have free range to put my own twist on things to learn how to defend things my way."

Simmons appreciates the area as more than just a source of water polo athletes: "The area produces athletes every year across the board. It's not exclusive to water polo. It's an area that takes a lot of pride and joy in staying active and competing."

It's the quality of the individuals that come to his club teams which stands out to Snyder: "We find that for the most part, our players are the nicer and more hard-working kids. They want to be the best version of themselves and will sacrifice for the team and that seems to carry over with the kids from Lamorinda."



Kari Jensen (2016) Photo Gint Federas



Brook Preston (2013) Photo Gint Federas

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