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Two local water polo champs head to USC and Stanford

By Jon Kingdon



Lexi Rowell Photo Gint Federas

It was Billie Jean King who said, "Champions keep playing until they get it right." Starting as freshmen for the Acalanes girls water polo team, Lexi Rowell and Alex Fellner led the Dons to an improved record each year, culminating with an undefeated senior season, winning the North Coast Section championship (over Campolindo) and each being named first team all-league. Next year, Rowell will be playing for Stanford and Fellner for USC.

To have so much success in and out of the water is a long and demanding process. Rowell, who comes from an athletic family, played various sports but said "I ended up being more of a water person. I've been swimming since I was 3. I also swam for the Acalanes team but that was more of a supplement to water polo."

When Rowell turned 12, she began playing water polo: "Without telling us, my mom signed up me and my sister (Claire - also first team all-league) for water polo because she knew the coach that was running it. I really liked it because swimming could get boring and water polo is very competitive and it is a team sport. My dad played baseball and taught me how to throw and water polo incorporated the throwing motion."

Fellner began swimming when she was 4 at Orinda Country Club. Water polo came along in the eighth grade, following in the footsteps of her older siblings: "My dad pushed me into the sport and my siblings told me to play as well and when I tried it, I loved it. It's a team sport and I liked how you could swim and add elements like basketball and soccer to the game."

Rowell and Fellner proved to be complimentary players in the pool. Rowell was an offensive force as a center with the appropriate skills: "My job was to create the offense for the team. My strongest point was being a creator on offense, making plays and scoring goals. My vision was a key factor at this position."

Fellner was a force on defense: "As the defender in the middle, my long arms enabled me to steal balls from the opposing players. I am a fast swimmer since I have been swimming for so long and I was able to get breakaways and my height allowed me to block shots and to get around the set player."

Beginning with their freshman seasons in 2015 at Acalanes, the team won 16, 17, 21 and 27 games for a composite record of 81-24. "We got better every year. Water polo has recently become more popular and everyone on the team is playing all year," said Rowell. "That has helped with our experience and knowledge of the game which is reflective of the number of girls now playing in college."

Fellner attributed the team's success to the continuity of the roster: "A lot of us were close in age and have been teammates for a long period of time at Acalanes and playing club."

After losing in the semifinals their junior season, Rowell said there was a real focus on winning this season: "We knew from the beginning that we had a good chance of winning the NCS. We went into every game expecting to win."

It was a unique year, said Fellner: "It was such a special season. We knew what we wanted to do this year and we worked hard right from the beginning through the 27 games. At the Acalanes Invitational, nobody lost focus and we kept pushing each other and swimming hard and never let up and that showed me that we were not a team to be trifled with."

There was a genuine feeling of family to the team, which contributed to the leadership by Rowell, Fellner and senior Kylie Walker, who is Rowell's cousin, and the underclassmen showed great respect to the seniors and junior Jewel Roemer.

Pulling it all together was Acalanes head coach Misha Buchel. "Misha was my first coach in the eighth grade," said Fellner. "If it wasn't for him pushing me to get better, I would not be going to where I am going because he pretty much taught me everything I know, and he's always been very supportive and helping me with any questions that I had and how to improve from the get-go."

Rowell was equally appreciative of Buchel's efforts: "I've known Misha since I was 12 and he was coaching

my club team. He's so great at bringing everyone together and making it more than just a game. He gets personal with the players and develops a family feeling within the pool. He would tell us each year that this would be the best thing that we would do in our four years of high school and everyone would agree with that."

Buchel had reciprocal feelings towards Rowell and Fellner: "Lexi was a generational talent with a great work ethic and the innate ability to score goals out of nothing. She was bull strong - no one could push her around. She always had to battle as she was often double teamed. She had a good sense of leverage to take advantage of the defenders overextension one way or the other. Alex was a scrapper from the start and carried that all the way through her career. Her nickname was Scrappy-Doo. She's the type that you need on your team. Her work ethic and determination just made herself better. She was the type that would keep running at a brick wall until she broke through or until you told her to stop trying. Her endurance was second to none. She always made the opposing player keep working and made them earn anything they got."

Though neither player was the rah-rah type, Buchel valued their leadership: "Both led by example. They always knew the pulse of the team and worked well to make sure that the team worked together. They had a good connection in handling the responsibilities of leadership. I would also include Kylie Walker who will be going to Cal next year as being a key component on the team these past four years as well."

Choosing to go to Stanford is generally an easy decision for anyone, but that was not the case for Rowell: "We're a Cal family. My grandfather and my parents went to Cal and my brother Robbie is currently a sophomore on their football team. It was a tough decision but no one put pressure on me to go to Cal and it was totally my choice to go to Stanford. I have a friend who is there now and she gave the school great reviews as to the balance it has with academics, athletics and the social life. I will have a running bet with my brother each year on The Big Game."

At USC, Fellner will be playing alongside two other Lamorindans, Grace Tehaney (Miramonte) and Kari Jensen (Campolindo): "I'm very excited to be going to USC. I plan on being a communications and psychology major and they have the top communications department in the country and I'm looking forward to joining the Trojan family."

Both leave Acalanes with great feelings: "Acalanes had high academic standards and I know that Stanford will be more difficult but everyone has told me that Acalanes prepared them very well for college and I'm very thankful to them for that."

Fellner had a similar reaction to her time at Acalanes: "I absolutely loved going there. It's such a great school and there is so much pride both for the school and the sports teams."

Buchel put it all succinctly: "Lexi and Alex have been part of a golden generation at Acalanes. They have been two big pieces in our success these past four years."



Alex Fellner Photo Gint Federas

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