

Published September 18th, 2019

Continued success expected for Lamorinda Girls Water Polo

By Jon Kingdon



Claire Rowell, Acalanes

If there is one group of teams that can claim to be the most successful in Lamorinda, it would have to be the girls water polo teams. In the past two seasons, there have been two undefeated teams: in 2017, Miramonte won the North Coast Section with a 30-0 record and in 2018, Acalanes won the NCS with a 27-0 record, while Campolindo made it to the NCS semifinals in 2017 and to the finals in 2018. During this period, the schools had a composite won-lost record of 131-26 for a winning percentage of 83%. Against non-Lamorinda schools, the teams combined record is 117-12 for a 90% winning percentage.

Acalanes

Despite losing three first team all-league players in Lexi Rowell, Alex Fellner and Kylie Walker, Acalanes head coach Misha Buchel still has an impressive group of returning players and appreciates the quality of his

players: "I imagine we have the bullseye on our back this year. When we bring back a team like we have, that's the way we go and we'll take it. We're in the midst of a talent glut and I'm fortunate to be a part of it."

First team All-American and League MVP Jewel Roemer is a once-in-a-generation type of player, according to Buchel: "Jewel is a complete player. She processes the game several steps ahead of everyone else in the pool. She is a superstar in every respect. She is an incredible team player, always setting up her teammates at every opportunity. On defense we can use her to match up against our opponent's best player or she can play as a roving defender to disrupt the offense."

Claire Rowell, who was named third team All-American and first team all-league as a sophomore, compares favorably to her older sister: "They are both similar. Claire is probably faster and gets more counterattack opportunities," says Buchel. "She is also a good interior player."

Junior Ava Dunleavy, who will be starting at goalie for the third straight year, was named second team all-league last season and continues to improve, says Buchel: "Ava is older and more confident. She is quarterbacking the defense with her voice a lot more now rather than worrying about where the ball is. She is seeing the whole pool and is directing the traffic."

Leading the defense will be juniors Alex Mould who was second team all-league and Carolina Schurmer. Seniors Zoe Benizek (second team all-league) and Mary Beth Heffelfinger (honorable mention all-league) are also being counted on as leaders in the pool. Senior Brooke Westphall who missed time last season is still on the medical list but should be back soon. "There's a lot of versatility in this group," says Buchel.

With all of the returning players, the Dons have two talented players that have moved to the area this year: Angie Shaw (Hawaii) and Alana Mc Cartney (San Diego). "Both of these girls should contribute this year. Alana is an all-around player who does a little bit of everything. She has a good perimeter shot and can go inside."

No one is sitting on their laurels, says Buchel: "Everyone is hungry and looking for playing time. I don't see any complacency and overconfidence. We're working just as hard this year. We've scheduled very aggressively so that when we get to the playoffs, we'll be ready."

Campolindo

Having lost three first team all-league players and two second teamers, including goalie Camryn Scott, from last year's 19-7 team, Campolindo head coach Kim Everist needs to find the right combination of players to match last year's team: "We have to make progress right from the start and grow right from the very beginning. Instilling confidence in these young players is important and I have to temper myself, making sure that I'm being very supportive and encouraging so the players can be comfortable in making mistakes and taking risks which I think that is important."

Seniors Lola Ciruli and Nina Munson both were second team all-league last year are being counted on both in and out of the pool as players and leaders: "We graduated 12 seniors last season," said Everist. "Lola and

Nina are our co-captains and Marissa Ennis and Haley Hunter are the seniors that have to take on the leadership role along with the younger players feeling comfortable to stepping up into leadership roles as well."

The Cougars are going to be throwing a number of underclassmen into the deep end of the proverbial pool and counting on them to swim. Sophomores Maggie Hawkins and Paige Chivers are coming off good freshman years, says Everist: "Maggie is going to be a key offensive player for us. She just got back from Barcelona playing with the USA National futures team. Paige is a great counterattack player and is very offensive minded. She is going to be creating a lot of scoring opportunities. Junior attackers Emerson Hogan and Elizabeth McGrath are new to the varsity and should also do a lot of good things."

Everist is going to be counting on three freshmen, Ava Jacuzzi, Kaia Levenfeld and Jane Clancy, to make the big jump to the varsity: "All these girls are tough and are going to play. I think we'll see a tremendous amount of growth for them. They played for the 680 club this summer and played well."

After serving as a backup goalie, Haley Hunter is the starter this year and Everist is confident in Hunter's ability to control the net: "Haley is hard working, very coachable and competitive. She has the skills to do some really great things. She was outstanding in the summer high school championships. Our job is to keep her confident in herself. She knows she has to play bigger than she is and I'm sure she will do that."

Mark Ennis is the team's assistant coach and his main responsibility is working with the team's goalies: "We're doing lots and lots of training, working on strength, quickness and vision," said Ennis.

The key players that will be protecting Hunter will be Hawkins, Cirulli, Jacuzzi and junior Maddie Summer who is being counted on by Everist to "play a ton this year."

It's going to take a total team effort for the Cougars to be successful, says Everist: "People are saying that we lost a lot of players and are inexperienced. I think we're being overlooked. Some years you can rely on a core group of players. This year everybody is going to have to do their part. We need to be mentally tough and stay the course for four quarters every game. That requires maturity and we should acquire that through the course of the season."

Miramonte

If you're going to imitate a team, it might as well be a top organization. That is Miramonte head coach Lance Morrison's attitude coming into the season: "The key to our season is going to be strength in numbers. We're copycatting the Warriors. We have a lot of talent across all grade levels."

Savannah Sherwood, who was the Outstanding Goalie in the Diablo Athletic League, has graduated and there are two girls competing for the starting position: senior Anna Hillen and sophomore Lindsay Lucas. Both should see a lot of playing time, says Morrison: "Anna and Lindsay are both phenomenal athletes and great players. They will spend a good part of the season sharing the gate."

The key returning players are Sally Fellner, who was first team all league, and Chloe Morrison and Fiona Young, both of whom were second team all-league: "Sally is going to be our go-to player on offense at center and Chloe is rock solid in front of the cage and does a good job preventing the ball from coming in and is as good as Fiona was last year on defense; she has only improved. They can thrive wherever they are playing. They are going to be our backbones on both side of the ball." Courtney Coleman who was honorable mention all-league should be a force as well as a right-handed attacker.

There is a lot of competition for playing time on the Matador's offense and defense, says Morrison: "We'll see who our attackers will be on the perimeter. We have a lot of girls that can eventually do a lot of great things. We're looking to have all of our players playing both sides of the ball."

Fellner, Morrison and Jane Oliver, all four-year players are the team captains and have been a great help to Morrison: "They know how I operate and they have incredible spirit. They have done a phenomenal job in leading the team so far. They are an extension of the coaches."

Morrison is optimistic about the team's fortunes and is relying on the team's depth: "Our success is to be able to have consistency and fluidity from top to bottom, no matter who we put in the pool. Everybody knows what to do and they know our system. It's a simple game. Just know your role and stick to it and when we put the pieces together, we're going to be a hard team to beat."



Lola Ciruli, Campolindo



Chloe Morrison, Miramonte Photos Gint Federas

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