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Madi Risch spikes her way to the University of Pennsylvania



Madi Risch

Photo Gint Federas

By Jon Kingdon

With so many different sports available in Lamorinda, it was volleyball that captured Madi Risch's interest, first as a 10-year-old beginning at LMYA and then playing for four different clubs, beginning with Vibe at the age of 12, NorCal Volleyball Club, Absolute and at 16 joining the Xcelleration Volleyball Club. With two older brothers who played football and rugby through high school and her father who also played rugby at UC Davis, Risch found her aggressive outlet through Tae Kwon Do where she earned a black belt.

Blessed with above average height from the beginning, "I've always been taller until my sophomore year," volleyball was a natural avenue for Risch to pursue. Yet it was more the overall aspects of the sport that drew her in. "It's such a team sport and it really depends upon the dynamic of the team," Risch said. "You really have to trust your teammates and bond with them to have a successful team. You play so many different positions in volleyball

and I just love the competitive nature of the sport."

As a four year starter at Acalanes, Risch was a two-time team captain and MVP, three-time first team all-Diablo Valley League, 2018 AAU Academic All-American Award winner, Scholar-Athlete Award winner all four years at Acalanes, CIF President's List all four years of high school and a member of the 2016 state championship team.

Risch is quick to share the credit for her accomplishments with many people, particularly her family: "My parents (Bill and Melody) and my brothers (Steven and Connor) were my number one fans which allowed me to go to late night practices, go to tournaments and discover my passion for the sport."

Next year at the University of Pennsylvania, Risch will be playing for a different coach for the third straight year. As a junior at Acalanes, she was coached by Ernie Rodriguez who she looks back on with great respect: "He taught me the power of believing in myself and he always had my back regardless of what the score was and it

led me to pursue the sport so intensely."

Risch also singled out Ian Schroder, the former club director at Xcelleration where she has played since she was 16: "He took me under his wing and allowed me to practice with the 18-year-olds after my team's practice. He was always my number one believer and he really inspired me to go full force with the sport."

As a senior at Acalanes, Risch had a unique relationship with the head coach, Haley Glass (now Walsh). Risch competed against Glass in open gyms as a player at Xcelleration. Knowing that Risch had already committed to attend Penn, Glass took a long-term approach to her coaching Risch: "Knowing that she was going to be playing at a Division I school, I tried to push her very hard. Madi was great at taking everything I had to offer. She did a great job in fighting through the adversity with that goal in mind. Even with her height (5'11"), Madi is very fluid with her motion and is a great back row player. She also brings a high volleyball IQ to the game, being able to anticipate what

her opponent was going to do."

The practices led by Glass left little behind for the players. "Haley brought in a new coaching style, incorporating a lot of competition within practice to keep everyone motivated," said Risch. "Every practice felt like a healthy competition, but you knew you needed to perform if you wanted to play in the games. She was honest with us and gave a lot of feedback and we would leave the gym feeling we had a big workout and accomplished a lot."

Starting as a freshman on a state championship team was a great stepping-stone to the rest of her high school career for Risch: "It was such a tremendous opportunity to join such a competitive team both athletically and academically."

One of the seniors on that team, Parker Jones, will be renewing her relationship with Risch as she will be a senior this year on the Penn volleyball team: "In high school, Parker was a big inspiration to me. I saw her on my visit to Penn. Though there was no connection between me and her going there, I'm excited to play on the same team with her again."

The University of Pennsylvania was always Risch's first choice and she is looking forward to studying at a school on the East Coast.

Penn's head coach Meredith Schuman was only hired three months ago but has studied Risch's play on video tape and has met with her and her teammates on Zoom on a weekly basis: "Madi has things that she can do in the front and back row and has a good arm. She is a solid stabilizing player that does not have highs and lows. She is highly organized, put together and poised which translates into her game because she is good in her areas of the court and all-round as well. Madi will fit in as a good outsider that can swing on both pins for us. She is a natural leader in her class because she is very mature, and I think that she is one who will come in and push the upperclassmen hard from day

one."

Risch has already become a fan of Schuman through Zoom: "You can tell she is so passionate about the sport. She has been amazing and proactive in communicating with the team, giving us fun little tasks so that the team can bond and get to know each other. I will be starting as an outside hitter with an open mind that wherever she puts me on the court, I'm going to do my best."

It's more than athletics that enabled Risch to be accepted to an Ivy League college. It's the intangibles as highlighted by Schuman and the academics which required a great effort and more than a little sacrifice, according to Risch: "It took a lot to keep up my grades, missing time hanging out with my friends, missing birthday parties or just a lot of milestones that teenagers have. I made a lot of sacrifices but as an athlete you learn to time manage and to have a schedule and, I would not procrastinate and I would do a lot of communicating with my teachers if I needed help to get something done on time. I really tried to make use of each minute that I had every single day to ensure that I would not be overwhelmed and bombarded with too much work."

With all this, Risch was still involved in many areas of high school: "I was in leadership all four years led by Katherine Walton which had a tremendous impact on me as a leader in the community. I was also in the environmental club and was a care leader, helping to lead workshops on equity and racial inequality at school."

Risch's final advice to all the underclassmen: "Time flies by and if you don't embrace each and every moment that you have, you will look back with regret, so take advantage of every opportunity and connect with the people around you. Pursue what you want wholeheartedly and with a passion. Believe in your hustle and not your luck. Hard work will never fail you at the end of the day."

Filling the sports void for Lamorinda athletes



Nick Marnell at bat.

Photo provided

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"We have been having virtual workouts and lessons for our players which began in May. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, we lead them through a workout for 30 minutes and then we have a skills workout for 30 minutes. Mastering these skills now, our players will already be familiar with our strategy and technique so we can save 10-20 minutes at practice. At that

point, with we can just play and focus on implementing those skills."

The coronavirus has made things particularly difficult for Adam Cooper, the head coach for the Saint Mary's Men's soccer team. With many of his players who come from overseas, it's not just a matter for them showing up on campus: "We felt the best things was for all of our players was to go home and be with their families. However, getting

them back from overseas may be a little tricky. We don't know what that will look like this fall regarding U.S. travel rules and quarantining but it may take as long as a month in some cases."

Cooper is doing whatever he can to maintain contact with his players: "We have Zoom meetings each week with our team. They cannot consist of actual training, according to the NCAA. It's been more of welfare checks on the guys, making sure their academics are in order, they're healthy and just keeping in contact with everyone. We've been able to get all the guys joking and laughing and having some fun. It just our way of staying connected."

It's more than the high school and college athletes that feel the loss of sports activity due to the virus. Longtime Moraga resident and Lamorinda Weekly reporter, Nick Marnell, has been playing in the Redwood Empire Baseball League in Sonoma County since the 1980s. "I just love to play baseball," said Marnell. "There nothing like getting out on the field and I will do it as long as I can." Except this summer with the

leagues, at best, on hold.

Still Marnell remains cautiously optimistic: "We're at the mercy of the Sonoma county public fields. Until they reopen, there's nothing we can do. When the games do start up, there will be changes to the game due to the virus: umpires may not be standing behind the catcher, you may only have the next four batters in the dugout, no stealing so the first baseman does not have to hold the runner on, the batters and the catcher may have to wear masks and hand sanitizer will be omnipresent. However, as with everything else at this point, it's all up in the air."

Most overlooked in the sports world during this hiatus, have to be the umpires and officials who have been out of work since spring. There were over 80 umpires that were expecting to work the baseball and softball games in Contra Costa County this spring and summer. Dave Cutaia, a longtime official and supervisor speaks to the loss felt by the officials: "We started the season early in March and then the games and revenue went away. For some officials, the revenue is

critical, for others it's supplemental and there is a third group that does it as an avocation. With all three groups, it's a huge hit because you've gone from regular sports officiating to nothing."

It's also the intangibles that are felt by the officials, says Cutaia: "It's a huge loss. There is a lot of camaraderie among the officials - not just among themselves but with the coaches, staff and even with the players. We are making occasional Zoom calls for training and other things but there is a big void in the officials' lives because these people are very good friends and that interaction is not there. Things have stopped and all you can say is 'Now what?'"

Will all of the disappointment at what has happened in the world of sports, Max Luckhurst sees the need to put it all in perspective: "There's a lot more suffering going on outside of the world of sports. All the cancellations are disappointing, but we all need to take a step back. We can feel bad, but we have to see the big picture with how many people are struggling and losing their lives."