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Local water polo player takes the Olympic world stage

By Jon Kingdon



Goalie Drew Holland Photo provided

When Drew Holland made this year's United States Olympic Water Polo team as their goalie, he continued a much venerated tradition for Miramonte High School. Following in the footsteps of Drew McDonald, Rick McNair, Kirk Everest (Cal's Water Polo coach), John Stenson, Heather Petri and Peter Schnugg, Holland became the seventh Miramonte graduate to be a member of the United States water polo team at the Olympics.

"I got a nice congratulatory text from Kirk Everest that was along those lines of carrying on the tradition and I'm happy to be able to do so," Holland said. "When I was young, I remember former players coming back to Miramonte and helping Coach James Lathrop with the team and I'm looking forward to helping with the next wave of Miramonte players, so it all comes full circle."

When the Olympics were suspended, Holland was flying back to the United States after playing professionally for Chios in Greece. "By the time we landed, they had canceled our training and things were locking down," Holland said. "We had to be separated from each other and were reduced to doing Zoom calls."

When the quarantines lifted in late June, the U.S. team made it to the finals of the FINA World League championships, though coming up short against Montenegro. Still, Holland was named the top goalkeeper at the tournament. "That was a special award and I'm feeling confident about the Olympics coming off that tournament," Holland said.

Prior to departing for Japan on July 18, the water polo team was staying in Honolulu in a rented house, up in the hills, to avoid any chance of catching a COVID-19 infection. "It's been an interesting team bonding experience with a little work thrown in to keep the house clean with 13 guys," Holland said.

The team has been training twice a day on their own and then having practice scrimmage games in the evening with the Australian team.

Hanging over everyone's head like the sword of Damocles, has been the constant threat of a positive test. "After coming so far, we have continuous COVID testing," Holland said. "On arrival in Tokyo, we'll be sectioned off from the other teams and will have to pass two COVID tests at the airport before we are allowed to go to the Olympic village. The entire process could take up to five hours. Not passing any of the tests would be a nightmare and we're all crossing our fingers. It's four total tests and you need to be negative on all of them to be let in. It's a high stress situation."

For Holland, even with all of his professional and international experience, it all pales before the stature of the Olympics. "There is a lot more pressure involved," Holland said. "You can feel it but I'm trying to treat it as normal practices and normal games. That's almost impossible to do, but I'm doing the best I can. Everyone is really fired up, but at the same time it's a different vibe and it gets real."

When Japan banned all spectators from the Olympic venues, it struck home for Holland.

"My family was planning on going but now they'll have to meet up in Orinda and watch the games from there. Honestly, it is as much a success for my parents and brothers as it is for me because of all they have done for me in so many ways. Also, as a goalie, I get pumped up by the fans cheering, but that's the cards we've been dealt."

Still, Holland is looking on the bright side with the United States' first game being against Japan: "Playing without spectators may help us without the home Japanese fans. Winning that Japan game is huge, and then we have a few days to prepare for those other games. First and foremost, however, we're all just happy that the Olympics is happening."

You might call the Hollands the ultimate water polo family. Drew was attracted to water polo with his two older brothers having led the way. "I started water polo because of my brothers: Kent, who was a goalie, and John, who was an attacker. When I was 7, I would sit right behind the goal watching Kent and without realizing it, I learned a lot from him. At my first ever water polo practice, I jumped in at the goal because of observing Kent's play in goal."

Kent went on to play at Brown University and he still holds the school's career saves record (946) and Drew is also the career saves leader at Stanford (925). John played on the state championship team at Miramonte as a junior and went on to play at Claremont-McKenna where they won the Division III championship.

It was at the age of 11 when Drew came to believe that playing for the U.S. National team was an attainable goal. "Watching them compete in the Soda Aquatic Center at Campolindo, I remember that being the first time I considered the possibility of playing for Team USA," Drew said. "I was in awe watching players from our hometown in the pool and I believed then that it was a doable and attainable goal. That was a fire starter for me in wanting to work towards making that team."

There is no question that Holland brings a "goalie mentality" to the game, but it's far more than that. "I absolutely love water polo. I may even be addicted to the sport. As for the mentality, to me there's something special about stopping someone from scoring that is as good if not better than scoring a goal. I don't know why it is so attractive to me, but it is. You also need to be a little bit crazy to enjoy having balls thrown at you all day."

After the Olympics, Holland will be returning to Greece and looks to continue his playing career for many years to come, but is considering coaching as his post-athletic career, having already helped out at Stanford and Miramonte. "During the pandemic, Drew came back and was coaching with us," Lathrop said. "We created a little camp with the goalies which he coached which was a very cool thing for the local kids to be able to work out with Drew Holland."

"With the COVID protocols, there was no sharing equipment, so it was trying to find a way to have productive practices," said Holland. "After I finish playing, coaching would be kind of a dream, whether in college or for Lamorinda."



The Hollands - Jeff, Kent, Alison, Drew and John Photo provided



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Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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