

Published August 18th, 2021

OMPA Championship returns after 700-day hiatus

By Jon Kingdon



Orinda Country Club team members, from left: Kyra Ruegg, Ryleigh Weight, head coach Steve Haufler, and Kameron Isaacs Photo provided

Two weeks ago, there was a widely anticipated event in Tokyo that was the focus of fans all over the world. However, in Orinda and Moraga, TV ratings must have been below the rest of the country as the local community seemed far more intent on the 64th Orinda Moraga Pools Association (OMPA) championship, which was last held in August 2019.

Rischelle Serrano, the 2021 OMPA president, was tasked with the responsibility of pulling things together after the two-year hiatus. "What was different was that there was not a model for putting on the meet this year after all that had occurred with the virus," Serrano said. "We had to meet Orinda's guidelines and requirements reducing the capacity to 650, down from 1,100," Serrano said. "We required masks when inside and eating on the deck was eliminated and kept the food trucks in the outside areas so there was more space and breathing room."

With 1,640 swimmers from the age of 4 to 19 participating, the original plan was to have far more limited seating, requiring everyone to wear masks and spreading out the age groups to have a minimal number of people on the deck of the pool, but as things loosened up, adjustments were made to allow more swimmers, coaches, and spectators around the pool.

The motto for the meet was "Together in These Lanes" which the committee felt was particularly appropriate. "We came up with this line last year in thinking about the Olympics and being together and it

still worked for this year," Serrano said. "It represents all of our teams, not as competitors but as an organization. The design for the meet used the icon for Saint Mary's College and the Orinda Theatre to represent the two towns of Moraga and Orinda."

The club teams were cautiously optimistic that the meet would be held but it did not become official until last May. When Moraga Ranch's head coach Marc Cavallero let his team know that the meet was a go, the reaction was unanimous: "Since we didn't have anything last year, our swimmers were excited right off the bat. When all the teams came through on Thursday for a warm-up and everyone saw the tents, it began to feel pretty close to normal."

Matt Armanini, the Meadow head coach, spoke of the effort put forth by the staff and volunteers in getting things done and how much the return of the OMPA meant to him. "The people that put on the meet did an exceptional job in setting everything up," Armanini said. "To have the meet taken away last year was eye opening but to be able to come back and be in this environment with the community as the foundation, there's just nothing better. I didn't even care about the points total. I am as competitive as it comes but I was just glad to be able to bring my team to the best meet there is."

Hector Chao, a senior coach for Orinda Park told his swimmers that the OMPA was going to be held prior to the official announcement. "It was wishful thinking at the time," Chao said. "The kids were thrilled because it's such a big deal for the teams and the community. I started swimming at an early age group and continued swimming through college. Coaching these kids has come full circle for me, trying to do for them what my coaches did for me."

Cathy Durden, the Moraga Country Club's head coach, could be excused if her focus was split between the meet and the Olympics since her husband, David, is the head coach for the U.S. men's swimming team. "With the time change, I only get to talk to him a few minutes a day because he's been working 18 hours a day, but there has been a lot of texting back and forth," Durden said.

A three-time All-American swimmer at Auburn University, Durden appreciated how important the meet was for the teams and the populace: "It's like a symbol of the community, coming together where we all share the same goal to swim well and represent our teams and do the best we can. The swim team is the ultimate sport where you have 4-year-olds swimming on the same team with 18-year-olds and that doesn't happen with any other sport."

With all the protocols making the training and competitions that much more difficult, the coaches were forced to lean upon the leaders on their team to help them keep things together. Eddie Lee, the head coach of the Miramonte Swim Club, saw this throughout his team. "We've got a great training group of older swimmers which goes down to the 11- and 12-year-olds and they showed a good presence in the pool and it's been fun for them to push each other," Lee said.

The veterans at Sleepy Hollow helped head coach Matt Ehrenberger in much the same way: "Our seniors did what they always did. They're great kids that have always worked hard and been committed to the team and they wanted to make things as close to normal as possible for themselves and the team

because this was to be their last year. Last year's seniors lost their last year and these kids wanted one last summer to be as close to reality and they did a good job with that."

As things evolved with protocols constantly changing, Ehrenberger and his staff changed with it. "The big word has been pivot and we're still pivoting and trying to work things out. It's still a little different but many people worked to put on this great race opportunity for the kids and that's why we're here, while doing it in the safest way possible."

At the end of the day, for Trevor Rose, the head coach of Moraga Valley, it was a success for the kids and for the community at large: "It's been two years and it was definitely worth it. When you watch the kids and see their faces, it was worth it. The kids missed so much in the last two years and to have it back was tremendous. We have a superb swimming community in the OMPA. This was my 33rd year with the OMPA and it was a great capstone to the summer, and I was really pleased with everything."

Tattiana Gessling of the Campolindo Cabana Club was able to both empathize and celebrate with the swimmers with the return of the OMPA: "A lot of the coaches on the other teams actually coached me when I swam for Orinda Country Club and in the OMPA. The meet definitely lived up to expectations after what was, in fact, a two-year layoff. There's nothing like this championship with the energy and the support of everyone's teammates that's just so special for the community."

Along with the return of normalcy, for the 20th straight year, the overall winner of the meet was the Orinda Country Club. Head coach Steve Haufler spoke of the importance of OMPA, for everyone from the swimmers, coaches, parents and fans. "This is a swim program that is strong and well coached," Haufler said. "These coaches really develop good swimmers and it's a foundation for our high school swimming and water polo programs. It's a feeder program all the way through college and it all starts right here at the OMPA."

Bruce Jamgotchian, the OMPA meet director, watched it all come together with a front row seat. "As we got closer to the championship meet, you could see the buildup of excitement with the kids, the coaches and the parents and it all came together this weekend. Even though we didn't have a championship last year, they still pushed themselves and stayed strong and their coaches motivated them and kept them pointed in a positive direction. The energy was unique to this meet, and it was great to see the joy on the kids' faces. It was just an incredible event."

TEAM RESULTS

Orinda Country Club - 4462 (244 swimmers)
Meadow Swim - 3018.5 (225 swimmers)
Moraga Valley - 3000 (284 swimmers)
Sleepy Hollow - 2962 (226 swimmers)
Moraga Ranch - 2151 (165 swimmers)
Orinda Park - 2090.5 (219 swimmers)
Moraga Country Club 2046 (143 swimmers)
Miramonte Swim Team - 1129 (74 swimmers)
Campolindo Cabana Club - 758 (111 swimmers)

INDIVIDUAL MEET RECORDS BROKEN

GIRLS

Evelyn Gaffney (Miramonte) - 6& Under breast stroke (20.38)
Lily Holloway (Meadow) - 9-10 50 yard back stroke (31.01)
Grace Clark (Meadow) - 13-14 50 yard back stroke (26.71)

BOYS

Grant Kurtz (Moraga Valley) - 11-12 50 yard fly (26.54)

HIGH POINT WINNERS

6 & Under Girls 6 & Under Boys

Evelyn Gaffney - Miramonte Henry Shamia - Orinda C.C.

7-8 Girls 7-8 Boys

Hayden Holloway - Meadow Jack Deal - Orinda Park

9-10 Girls 9-10 Boys

Lily Holloway - Meadow Ellis Culleton - Miramonte C.C.

11-12 Girls 11-12 Boys

Elisabeth Butler - Orinda C.C. Grant Kurtz - Moraga Valley

13-14 Girls 13-14 Boys

Grace Clark - Meadow Matteo Petty - Moraga Valley

15-18 Girls (Tie) 15-18 Boys

Mackenzie Murphy - Orinda C.C. Narayan Sharma - Sleepy Hollow

Katie Lyons - Orinda C.C.

FINAL TEAM RESULTS

TEAM GIRLS BOYS SUM TOTAL

ORINDA C.C. 1935 2,303.50 4,238.50

MEADOW 1959 3,345 3,291

MORAGA VALLEY 1504 1,543.50 3,047.50

SLEEPY HOLLOW 1389.5 1,106.50 2,496

ORINDA PARK 1197 1,132 2,329

MORAGA RANCH 976 1,031.67 2007.67

MIRAMONTE SWIM 584 518 1,102

CAMPOLINDO CANBANJA 562.5 536.54 1,099

MORAGA C.C. 759.5 1,205.83 1065.33

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