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Lamorinda girls water polo teams rank in top 20, Miramonte at No. 1

By Jon Kingdon



Acalanes Campolindo game late April Photo Gint Federas

The Lamorinda girls water polo teams have not missed a beat, once again establishing themselves among the elite teams. Despite a short off-season and the loss of several talented seniors, all rank in the top 20 on Max Preps National Girls Water Polo Rankings: Miramonte (1, 5-0), Campolindo (4, 6-2, with a loss to Miramonte) and Acalanes (16, 9-2, with a loss to Campolindo).

Miramonte

First year head coach John Roemer took over the team only one month before the season began and found the program and culture surrounding the team to be a revelation. "It goes beyond the players. It goes into the community and the families which are a huge support group," Roemer said. "For example, at every morning practice, we have parents show up with a full table of food so the players can eat and then go right to school."

Roemer, who has coached the 680 Drivers Water Polo 18U team the last four years, had not previously coached any of the Miramonte players but did coach against most of them and was aware of the talent on the team. After winning the Acalanes Invitational and remaining undefeated, Miramonte has outscored their opponents by a combined 75-24. "We have great depth, and the girls are extremely talented," Roemer said. "They've been well coached by their former coaches and all of the girls are top students. I'm testing them physically and mentally with new stuff that they haven't seen before, and they've picked it up very quickly."

Roemer has brought his own coaching philosophy to the team: "It's leg based. We work on leg balance and position in the water. My goal is to have the girls move as fast as they're thinking. It's all speed work, and it has always worked well for my teams. We run a 3-3 offense like most teams and a triangle offense - 4-2 with one side always going. The more motion we run, the more successful we'll be earning five meters and kickouts with most goals coming from counterattacks, and in man-up situations."

The offense is led by Dania Innis and Allie Lurie, who are the key players in the post, supported by Anna Painter, Meghan McAninch, Callie Stryer and sophomore Rosalee Haskett. "They're all very aggressive and athletic," Roemer said. "Their talent is off the hook."

Senior Lindsey Lucas, who will be playing for Princeton, has been dominant in the net. "Lindsey has good size and moves very well in the water. She is very quick and is a very good swimmer which helps in sprinting out and getting to the ball."

Roemer will be relying on Innis and Lurie in the defense but also has a great deal of depth there as well. Shannon Murphy, Grace Clark, and Lucy Berkman have all shown well and Ally Smith in particular, has shown the ability to control the center.

As a new coach, Roemer has received a lot of help from the team's three co-captains, Murphy, Lucas, and Hoskins. "They've done a good job in setting the tone for the team," Roemer said. "I see the team getting a lot better in terms of all the little things that we do, like being in position to score before they catch the ball and not after they receive it. We know how we're supposed to move and counter. It's just a matter of getting them to always do it and maintain it - that's how we're going to get better."

Campolindo

Despite losing some key players to graduation and several new players, the Cougars have shown a lot of confidence, said the Cougars' head coach Kim Everest: "They are gritty and really want to do well. It's a fun group to coach because they really want to get better. I have an older and younger group and our focus has been on bringing these groups together."

Winning 2 of 3 games (losing to Miramonte) at the Acalanes Invitational, Everest was particularly pleased with the victory over Acalanes, breaking a nine-games losing streak that went back to 2017. "It was nice to squash the Dons," Everest said.

Junior Shayne Clancy who moved from being a field player to goalie last year comes into this season with a lot more confidence. "This year, Shayne has expectations being in the goal. She has a better understanding

as to what is happening around her. With the added experience, there is more pressure on her, and she knows how important it is. She's doing great and has been very consistent and positive. She has been a big part of our success so far. Shayne is still learning how to communicate, and I have given her free reign to get on our teammates to be where they're supposed to be."

The offense is led by Maggie Hawkins, Kaia Levenfeld and Ana Pieper. "Maggie (who will be going to Stanford next season) may be the best player in the section," Everest said. "Kaia Levenfeld and Ana Pieper were on my Under 16 team that finished third at the Junior Olympics this summer. Kaia is a great center-defender and Ana is a great attacker."

There is very good depth on offense with Paige Chivers, Ava Jacuzzi, Lauren LaCour, and Sophia Charlton. "Paige is a great counterattack player, Ava is just coming off an illness and it will be good to see what she will bring, Lauren was on our Junior Olympic team as well and Sophia Charlton has been a key factor as a senior attacker," Everest said. "I've got a pretty dynamic group in terms of speed. We have some key players, experience-wise, so it's going to be just a matter of the team coming together and the younger players getting more experience. The younger kids swim really well and they're eager to learn."

Besides standing out on offense, Hawkins and Levenfeld are the center defenders and will go up against the opponent's top center players. Sophomores Grace Gafni and London Menard, who both played J.V. last year, have shown the ability to be solid center players.

There are three freshman that have already contributed to the Cougars - Nikki and Sammy Frazier and Ainsley Hogan. Nikki and Sammy are attackers and Ainsley is a center defender," Everest said. "They came up from our 14U water polo team. Even though they have been competing against the older and bigger girls, by week two, they have completely adjusted their games and all three of them have found significant playing time. As they have adjusted to competing against the older and bigger girls, by week two, they have completely adjusted their games and all three of them have found a lot of playing time."

Hawkins, the team's captain, has been the leader among leaders on the team. "Maggie has big expectations, and all of her teammates look up to her. She leads by example and has a core group of teammates that do a good job of circling around her, helping to lead the team. I'm happy with how the team is gelling and talking with each other but we still have more work to do."

For Everest, the key is for the team to keep looking forward: "If we keep improving our team chemistry and the pace in which we play the game, we're going to find ourselves having more success offensively and controlling our opponents defensively. I'm really excited to see the team's growth from start to finish and I think it's going to be a great year."

Acalanes

After losing 6 of 7 starters through graduation, with only two seniors on the roster, head coach Misha Buchel is starting fresh: "It's essentially a completely new squad with a little experience. We have a lot of players that are new to the varsity game and some players that were on the bench that are now in the rotation. At the Acalanes Invitational, it showed that we were not prepared for the level of intensity and physicality and aggression that a game like that requires. The biggest thing right now is trying to sort out the roles and responsibilities for the players."

The unquestioned leader on the team is Heidi Heffelfinger, who will be attending Harvard next year. "I would argue that we have the best player in the section in Heidi," Buchel said. "She could be our primary center but that would guarantee that there would be two or three people sitting on her so she will start on the perimeter and have her attack from there. She's mature enough to know that the attention she draws to herself is creating opportunities for her teammates."

Mazie O'Hare and Sara Archer have been consistent scorers. With Archer and Heffelfinger both lefthanders, attacking from the right side, it changes the way that teams will be defending Acalanes. Olivia Williams has stepped into the facilitator role on offense. "Olivia is not that big, but she has amazingly strong legs (also running for the cross-country team)," Buchel said. "We like to use Olivia as the initiator of our offense in a passing role, quarterbacking our power plays. She can handle the pressure out on the perimeter and is a good shooter."

Junior Audrey Cox has replaced perennial all-league goalie Ava Donleavy without missing a beat. "Audrey is tall and is able to cover a lot of ground. She has a good leg base and coupled with her long arms, she can stay up and sustain. Passing wise, she can cover the entire pool so when it comes to fast breaks, we're not inhibited. She is a lot more vocal this year and by the end of the year she will be quarterbacking the defense."

Lining up in front of Cox is sophomore Wendy Heffelfinger and senior Frannie Daughters. "Wendy is being use as a primary defender," Buchel said. "Frannie is also doing a great job as a defender, all the more impressive in that she has done it without the club experience."

Buchel was aware that it was going to take time for the team to develop, leaving the schedule open at the beginning of the season: "I knew that we would be breaking in this team, and I wanted to give us a lot of practice time. Though we've been making a lot more mistakes than we have in the past few years, we're getting better. As the season goes on, we will get better on both offense and defense. We're going to see a

lot of growth from where we started to where we finish."

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