

LAMORINDA SPORTS

Ron Richison – coach, teacher, advisor and leader inducted into Hall of Fame



Photo USWPA/Cathryn Hayne

Top row, from left: Russ Stryker, Brent Layng, Ron Richison, Andy McDonald, Brian Monte, David Curry; bottom row: Seb Englert, Zach Rogers, Jeff Bergholt

By Jon Kingdon

In only describing Ron Richison as a coach, it's damning him with faint praise. His success as a coach and in developing so many players with the Aqua Bears, The Concord Water Polo Club, Campolindo and Acalanes high schools speaks for itself, having produced 22 high school All-Americans, 24 eventual NCAA champions and nine Olympians along with his influence on the overall growth of water polo in the Bay Area cannot be underestimated. Richison was inducted into the USA Water Polo Hall of Fame on June 9.

"I consider Ron to be one of the pioneers of water polo in our area," said former Campolindo head coach Bill O'Brien. "He and Pete Cutino, as coaches of the Aqua Bears Swim Team, introduced water polo to the swimmers every couple of weeks. As a result, the schools in Lamorinda started water polo in 1957 and if it weren't for Ron, it would have been years before water polo would have come into our area."

It was the players that were most important to Richison, but he was never one to be braggadocios about his accomplishments. "He always tried to downplay what he did," his son Charles said.

Richison was a water polo player at Whittier High School and went on to study and play at the University of California at Berkeley. "Four of my teammates and I went to Cal where we all played water polo for George Schroth who was a fantastic man and had more patience than any coach I ever met."

After serving two years in the army, Richison returned to the Bay Area. "Pete Cutino offered me a job coaching a swim team in Orinda called the Aqua Bears and that was probably one of the biggest breaks of my life," Richison said. "It was a fantastic team with tremendous athletes."

Richison was not one to hold back his feelings when things were not done by his players. Was he a gruff guy? "That's one way of putting it," Cal head coach Kirk Everist said, laughing. "He was definitely tough but entertaining. He was one of my favorite and best coaches I ever had. He was great at teaching the game

and he is someone that I think of fondly often."

Richison used words that would not be acceptable today. "He was loud and tenacious and if you didn't give your best year, you were walking up off the pool deck," his son said. "Every one of his players will tell you now that anything that was said or done, they knew where it was coming from, and they knew where he was trying to get them."

Olympic swimmer Peter Rocca also played water polo for Richison and benefited in both sports. "Ron was a tactician in water polo and a technician in swimming and both were really important in my development," Rocca said. "He was tough and demanded a lot. He didn't mince any words and was incredibly direct but however it came out, we knew that he really cared, and it motivated us. After I won two gold medals at the Pan American Games, I gave one to Ron because of the impact he had on my life."

Russ Stryker, an all-American who also went on to be a head coach at Acalanes concurred that Richison was more than just a coach to him and his teammates: "Ron impacted a lot of our lives. He was a big presence and he taught us a lot, not just about water polo but about life and being good people and Ron became a second father figure to look up to, someone you knew that had your back."

Once you played for Ron Richison, he was always there to help even when you were playing for another school or team, according to Everist, who initially played for him at the Concord Water Polo Club. "At tournaments when we worked on the same side of the bracket or if Ron's team was eliminated, We would consult with him and ask how we could exploit an opponent that had defeated him earlier," Everist said. "We picked his brain as to how we could find a way to get an edge on that team. He was someone that I would always consult with and respected his opinions and tactics on the game and how the game should be played."

"That's how my dad saw his players," Charles said. "They remained colleagues and there was no favoritism. He wanted to make the players better, the coaches better and ultimately the sport better."

For All-American and Olympian Matt Biondi, the effort demanded by Richison and the results worked together. "Ron had recognized my talent and I respected him and worked hard for him," Biondi said. "We feared him, and I remember going to practice at 5:25 in the morning and dreaded seeing Ron's green Honda hatchback, knowing it was time to get into the pool. He never missed a day, and he taught us good fundamentals. Ron was a percentages guy. If you would score a goal and there was someone that had been more open than you were, you would hear about it."

Everist ascribes the success that so many of his players had to what they took away from Richison: "He was really good at teaching the technique and he was really good at motivating us and pushing us," Everist said. "He made us work really hard which prepared us for water polo after high school and a number of us went on to play at Cal and Stanford and had great careers. A lot of our development came from playing club water polo for Ron after our high school seasons and that was a big reason for our athletic development."

John Schnugg, who played water polo at Miramonte and Cal, was both a player and assistant coach for Richison. "I started at Concord Water Polo at 15 when he was coaching there with Pete Cutino," Schnugg said.

When Schnugg's son began at Acalanes, Richison was coaching the Frosh/soph/JV team of about 30 players and Schnugg offered to work as his assistant coach and Richison readily accepted, and they coached together for three years.

"I had a lot of fun," Schnugg said. "When I played for him, he was a gruff task master type coach. Some of the Acalanes players were making mistakes and I said to Ron, 'You would never let us screw up the way these kids are playing, and if we did, you would make us do butterflies.'"

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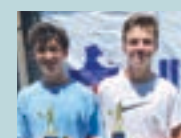
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