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Varellas one of two from Lamorinda inducted into USA Water Polo Hall of Fame

By Jon Kingdon



Peter Varellas Photo provided

Like so many who grew up in Lamorinda, Peter Varellas - who was inducted into the USA Water Polo Hall of Fame on June 9 along with Swimming and Water Polo Coach Ron Richison - began swimming at a young age. "I started at the age of three at Moraga Tennis and Swim Club and that was my summer programming for the next 10-12 years," Varellas said. "My dad (Larry) had been a swimmer at Cal-Berkeley, and they wanted me and my sister to get in the water early."

Water polo was not something that was readily available as it is today. "I did not start playing until high school at Campolindo," Varellas said. "There were not a lot of clubs for kid's pre-high school age, and I did not know much about it. When I was starting high school, I had no plans to play any sport in the fall and anticipated playing basketball and baseball."

Once again, it was at his father's suggestion that he give water polo a try. "I resisted it initially, but he said I should try it for a week and if I don't like it, I could quit," Varellas said. "Even though the first week of water polo was pretty hellish, I didn't quit. It was when I was a sophomore when I really started loving it. I was very fortunate to have two very good coaches - Boyd LeChance and James Lathrop - both of whom were super influential for me in teaching me the sport and allowing me to see where it could take me."

It also helped that Varellas had a natural affinity for the pool: "It was the combination of the water, and the strategic portion and team feel of a ball sport. I love swimming but you just don't get that in swimming, and it put all the pieces together and it just clicked for me."

From Campolindo it was on to Stanford where he earned both athletic and academic accolades. Varellas competed in four NCAA championships, winning his freshman year, was a two-time all-American, was named the PAC 10 male athlete of the year and earned an NCAA postgraduate scholarship.

Then it was off to Italy where Varellas played for Rari Nantes in a little town called Saona, in the northwestern part of Italy on the beach. "It was so amazing," Varellas said. "I went there right after I graduated from Stanford. I didn't know anyone there and I didn't speak the language. I had not gotten the chance to study abroad because I was always training, and this was all that and so much better. I learned the language and I really learned about water polo because there are so many different styles played in Europe and I got exposed to both. We won the LEN cup which was the secondary European league behind the champions league and two of my years we finished in second."

Varellas would go on to earn his MBA at Stanford and is the Vice President, Global Real Estate Strategy & Operations at WeWork and is living in New Jersey with his wife and two young daughters.

In Varellas' acceptance speech, he shared with the audience his perspective that stressed the process more than his personal accomplishments.

"I kept coming back to the same concept," Varellas said. "It's a bit cliché, but it's all about the journey and not at all about the destination."

It was Varellas' experience with the Olympic team that made the greatest impression: "You go away with a group of guys for some number of weeks and years, all to come to an event that's on the calendar four years later and then you go play what you hope turns out to be eight games. When you look at the balance of the time spent training and preparing versus the time spent competing, it has to be about what you take from the journey and getting up to that point."

Varellas shared the process in how the U.S. Olympic Water Polo team came together. The team finished ninth at the World Championships in 2007 making the team's motto "Back to the Podium" seem somewhat unrealistic. "It's great to set big and lofty goals and that's an important part of being an athlete but it's

really critical to pair that with a kind of step-by-step plan to get there," Varellas said. "In sports, right belief is an obviously critical element but belief in your own belief is like a secondary level of commitment, understanding confidence and again, mapping that small step plan really can elicit far more belief than just thinking for 12 months. For my team that played a huge part in our big run."

When coaches Terry Schroeder and Robert Lynn shared their plan of "incremental improvement," the success of the team seemed more realistic. "It started with Navy SEAL training, stripping us down with a hard reset and a clean slate going into the new year," Varellas said. "We were making small steps and getting closer and closer. From there we went into the Olympic Games, having a critical element which was belief in ourselves, and it was a product of that small step-by-step progression that our coaches had put into action." The team would go on to earn a silver medal losing to Hungary in the finals.

It was a journey that for Varellas began in high school, and he shared what was most important in being successful for both coaches and players starting with "The Team."

"You want a team that motivates the right daily actions," Varellas said. "The right team makes you stretch yourself and actually makes you want to stretch yourself which is an important distinction. Build yourself a team that motivates the right daily actions. When it comes to bringing people close together, there's really nothing that I found that can replace shared experience and specifically, difficult shared experiences and years of tough training. The important lesson for me and I think for others can be that doing those difficult things not only builds personal strength, but it really builds strength of interpersonal relationships with others. So, when that adversity does come your way, and it will, you expect it and you embrace it as an important, and frankly, formative part of the process."

Just as important for Varellas was "the team behind the team." Varellas refers to them as "the enablers - the vast, vast set of people that make it all possible whose names aren't on the final roster and who supported the team all along the way."

Varellas singled out his coaches from high school, college, the Olympics and professionally: James Lathrop, Randy Burgess, John Barnea, and John Vargas. His "post graduate coaches" Ricardo Acevedo Gavin Arroyo, Terry Schroeder and Robert Lynn and Claudio Mistrangelo, his coach in Italy.

The list for Varellas goes on and on. "These are the players that didn't make the roster but were alongside you in the pool, the high school teachers, college professors, financial backers of this organization are all very important. These are the groups that are easy to forget."

Still, it all began at home for Varellas. "While coaches can mold and develop, I also have come to learn with no uncertainty that it's family that sustains me," Varellas said. "My mom, dad, wife, sister along with many other members of my extended family, have done so much for me and in no particular order, convinced me to try the sport I was not at all going to play freshman year; supported me financially, sustained me emotionally, a very important part of the equation, aided in important decision making, grounded me in humility and in general taught me to be first a good person and now a patient and good parent."

Varellas then made it clear how important it can be to be a role model and hopefully the youth can learn from his experiences. "It's balancing school and sports, living abroad, learning languages, suffering injuries, and battling back to health, on and on," Varellas said. "The Olympic silver medal really just represents the journey that I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to follow. My hope for what I've been able to contribute is simply that our team's obvious, tangible, and visible accomplishment, can serve as a bit of inspiration for a few young kids, a few young adults, a few men, and women to either embark on or continue along their own journey and no matter their ultimate destination, I hope that journey for them can be just as formative, independently valuable, character defining as it's been for me. It's truly both an unexpected and overwhelming honor for me to say in this setting, to this audience and frankly in this half of the state, Thank you guys for having me."

See the story on Ron Richison, Page C1.



From left: parents Larry and Robyn, wife Amanda, Peter, sister Betsy, brother-in-law Kyle, his nieces Scotti

and Finley Photo provided

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