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Lamorinda girls water polo teams showing early success

By Jon Kingdon



Miramonte shooter Tali Stryker. Campolindo goalie Sydney Kring. #11 London Menard Photo Ann Murphy

Lamorinda girls water polo has established itself as an area of top talent with winning records so far.

Miramonte

Coming into the season with three consecutive undefeated seasons, two NCS and CIF NorCal championships and an 11-0 COVID shortened year in 2020, Miramonte has won their first eight games this season, extending their undefeated streak to 75 games. Or to put it another way, it's been 1,046 days since they've last lost a game.

Head coach John Roemer does not rule out the possibility of another undefeated season, but with the graduation of nine players that are now playing college water polo, with eight new players on the varsity roster, he sees another undefeated season as not such a sure thing.

Roemer has his players keeping the streak in perspective. "I told them, 'If we lose a game, don't get discouraged because going undefeated the last three years is an anomaly. If we lose a game, it's not the end of the world and in a way, it might be better for us in that we can just move on and learn from it.' It's really good for water polo in our area that winning does not come automatically. It's possible but not likely that we will go undefeated this season. The key is to keep getting better with so many new starters and bringing them up to speed and be the best that we can be by the end of the year."

Roemer continues to run a triangle offense despite so many changes in personnel. "We're really struggling with getting our players on the same page," Roemer said. "We have a lot of physical talent and speed, but the younger players just don't have that water polo IQ yet. We're going to try and run a high tempo offense again this year, but it's going to be more difficult because we don't have the depth that we had before."

Key to the chemistry of the team has been the work of the team's three senior captains, Rosalie Hassett, Tali Stryker, and Mira Halder. "They're doing very well taking on that responsibility," Roemer said.

There is a solid core of six starters for the team's offense, Stryker (10 goals), Bea Hearey (22 goals, 7 assists), Hassett (15 goals, 9 assists), Ally Larsen (6 goals) and Allison Sagara (7 goals, 10 assists).

Stryker has proven to be the key player on both offense and defense, despite coming off an off-season surgery. Tali is playing primarily with her right hand as she is still rehabbing her left wrist," Roemer said "She does so much for our team because she is so fast and so smart. She makes everybody else better. She sets up our offense with her ability to think a step ahead and makes good decisions getting the ball in the right place."

Of the 98 goals the Matadors have scored, 46 have come off of assists. "That's a good percentage but I would like to see almost even and that's our goal and I believe that percentage will improve as the year goes on with our players playing for each other," Roemer said. "They will pass up a good shot to pass to their teammates for a better shot."

In their eight victories, Miramonte has had 64 steals. "We have a pressing defense where we are way up in the lane where our opponents may then drive to the goal," Roemer said, "We have to trust someone down the line to pick them up and rotate off, getting into the passing lanes and doing our best not to foul the ball."

Hassett is leading the team with 16 steals followed by Stryker (10), Audrina Kang (9), Marta Maninetti (7), and Hearey (6). "As our center defender, Tali allows us to press as she can front the center and is smart enough to know when to get behind," Roemer said. "She will call out our defense depending on who is where to take out their best players on their offense."

Junior Eliana Bottene, in her first year as the starting goalie, has only given up 23 goals with 51 saves. "Eliana played club this off season and has really improved from last year," Roemer said. "She is doing a great job in blocking at five meters. She has gotten quicker and plays big and her mental attitude is much more serious."

Roemer's ultimate goal for his players this season? "I want them to understand what we do in various situations without me telling them. I want their IQs to go up and be able to improve physically, mentally, and ultimately to be able to go on and play in college."

Acalanes

After making it to the second round of the CIF championship last year, Acalanes has not missed a beat starting off this year winning 12 of their first 14 games. The Dons have a strong veteran core with seven seniors and three juniors, and youth with one sophomore and two freshmen on the roster.

Once again, the offense is being led by first team all-league players, sophomore Ella Del Rosario (44 goals, 12 assists, 20 steals) and senior Brooklyn Plomp (17 goals, 7 assists and 7 steals).

"Ella is just an awesome, dynamic talent that gets everything out of every square inch of her frame," head coach Misha Buchel said. "Her counterattack and anticipation set her up for getting out on the breaks. In halfcourt, she can shoot from the outside. She's great inside posting up so we run a lot of things through her. Brooklyn is primarily an attacker but does a little bit of everything. We use her as kind of a facilitator at the top of our offense and she often leads our counterattack because of her court vision and passing ability. Together, she and Ella have drawn 26 ejections against their opponents."

There is very good depth on the offense with sophomore Addison Dankworth (10 goals), SR-Liv Hoppe (7 goals), SR-Sophie Hendrickson (3 goals, 9 assists), JR -Levand Koopah (9 goals, 5 assists) and freshman Finley Graff (10 goals, 1 assist). (Statistics not included in last two games.)

"Addison has shown a lot of improvement from her freshman year," Buchel said. "She's just a sniper from the perimeter with good height mechanics and long arms with an incredible whip on her shots. Liz was on a team at the Junior Olympics this summer where she was everywhere defensively. Sophie was also at the Junior Olympics and as a left-hander for us, she has become a primary distributor from the right side of the pool. We really feel her presence in the pool though she is currently out with a broken finger but should be back soon. Levand is a utility player that is more of an attacker and Finley is a big strong kid that is going through the transition of playing 14 and under club to playing against high school seniors. She is not bashful about mixing it up and she has the size and strength to be successful at this level."

The defense is led by the last in a long line of Heffelfinger's, Wendy Heffelfinger. "Wendy's primary position is center defender and matches up against our opponent's best center player," Buchel said. "On offense she is usually at the top and almost all of her goals are from the perimeter. Finley also has the size and strength to play in the center position. Brooklyn is also a very good defender that matches up against our opponent's top non-center player. Senior Kyra Weiss has really shined and made some really important defensive plays. She is a battler that gets into good position which gives our goalie a chance to make the save."

Replacing last year's league's outstanding goalie Audrey Cox (Indiana University) is freshman Adelyn Horciza. "Adelyn just jumped into the position and we're over the moon with her performances so far," Buchel said. "She is just finding her voice but her shot blocking and passing is really advanced for her age. She is a big presence and very agile in the net. She has remarkable arm strength, and she can cover the whole pool putting right into their hands and it a real weapon when you don't have to go station to station when we counterattack."

There is a triumvirate of senior leaders on the team with Heffelfinger, Plomp and Hendrickson. "They are great leaders, but all of our seniors have taken on various responsibilities of demonstrating to our underclassmen what it means to play here," Buchel said. "We try and give them all the opportunity to try and take some elements of leadership because it's good for them later in their lives as well as to keep that balance and have someone at various times to be a voice for everyone."

Campolindo

With only three seniors and four juniors along with seven sophomores and one freshman, there is a lot of youth on the Campolindo team. "It's really nice that they all really get along and that there's no drama," said Kim Everest, Campolindo's head coach. "Everybody's really happy to be here. The underclassmen are super close, and they connect really well with the juniors and seniors who have really embraced all of them. That part's been great and when it really translates to the pool, it'll be even better."

The connection between the players seems to have already begun with the team starting the season by winning six of their first eight games, with their only losses coming against Miramonte.

The offense is led by seniors Ana Pieper (23 goals, 5 assists), London Menard (11 goals, 1 assist), juniors Nikki Frazier (15 goals, 3 assists), Sammy Frazier (11 goals, 7 assists), and freshman Lily Holloway (9 goals, 3 assists).

"Ana is an attacker and she's been a big scorer for us her whole career," Everest said. "She is quick, super-fast, a really good outside shooter and will be playing for UCLA next year. Sammy is a quick attacker and a strong outside shooter who gets down the pool very quickly and is a super smart player. Freshman Lily Holloway is an attacker and has been starting and is definitely up and coming. She is lights out fast and quick, which can allow Ana to conserve some energy for other areas of the game. She also has a good outside shot. When she gets more aggressive, she's going to be great. Nikki Frazier is an attacker who is

quick and very smart. Eva Anderson (3 goals) is a left-handed attacker who is on varsity for the first time and is going to have a big impact on the team this year. They all have great futures ahead of them."

On defense London Menard is the team's starting center and senior captain and is backed up by Ainsley Hogan (4 goals) who is also a quick defender, along with two younger players that will post up quite a bit this year. "Ainsley is a phenomenal defensive player and is really aware of the ball."

After splitting time in the goal last season and still being named second team all-league, sophomore Sydney Kring is established as the team's starter and is ably backed up by Addie Wen. "I'm super stoked about Sydney," Everist said. "She had a big year as a freshman and though she did not play this summer due to an injury, she's completely recovered, and teams are having a hard time scoring against her. She is an incredible passer and has a goal, airmailing the ball into the corner of the net."

Everist is not reluctant to share the optimism she has for the season: "I'm really excited about the team. We just need a little bit of time to come together as a group. Other teams are already in their systems and we're still sorting through things and trying to figure out our lineups and how we fit. The more we play, we'll start getting really dialed in on the details. Once this team comes together in the pool as they have on the deck, they're going to make some really, big things happen this season."

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