

LAMORINDA SPORTS

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i9 Youth Sports brings a new model for youth sports to Lamorinda

By Jon Kingdon

In the past few years, we have witnessed a massive growth of competitive sports, with sports-specific clubs almost becoming the norm for young kids. However, research from the Aspen Institute, the US Olympic Committee, the Clinton Foundation, and major think tanks have suggested that there is a need for more recreational style programs that also put the needs of the kids in the first place.

"The problem is that the structure is set up, where if you have resources and the talent, you're going to have options within the club system," according to Sebastien Dubois, a business owner with i9 Sports, an organization with 4.5 million kids participating around the country which began offering programs in Lamorinda in 2024.

The name "i9 Sports" means "i to the ninth power," representing the nine key differences in its approach to youth sports: imaginative, innovative, interactive,

integrity-driven, impassioned, inspirational, instructional, insightful, and inclusive.

The goal of i9 Sports looks to involve boys and girls in sports regardless of their athletic ability. "Every child has value inherent in them, so we don't just highlight their athletic ability, we honor whatever they bring to the sports engagement and teach a sportsmanship value every day," DuBois said. "For example, we talk about positivity with the kids – always having a positive attitude and encouraging your teammates, and we honor individuals with sportsmanship awards. I'm a huge fan of competitive sports but what we are providing with i9 are more options by opening doors to more kids, teaching life lessons through sports, and trying to help kids be active for life."

The i9 program is in its early stages in Lamorinda and utilizes the fields at Campolindo High School. "Our primary sports in Lamor-

inda are soccer, flag football, and seven and under baseball, but we will be adding a number of different sports in the future," DuBois said. "We offer three sports simultaneously year-round so if the kids are playing one sport, they can see the other sports, which may lead them to try that sport the next season. We are fully operational now and we're looking to have more kids involved with our programs because the more kids we have, the better the experience and the more lives we touch."

To DuBois, there are too many poor examples set by athletes and their coaches, down to the lower levels, and that is what he is looking to address early to the participants in i9. "Our mission is to help our kids succeed in life through sports and where that can really make a difference is teaching a different sportsmanship value every week."

Kids range in age from three to 14 and they are broken up into age

groups of 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 and up depending on the numbers. A lot of organizations don't work with three-year-olds, as they can be easily distracted. The American Developmental Model for Youth Sports was created in part to support age-appropriate instruction.

"Age-appropriate instruction is absolutely one of the biggest differentiators," DuBois said. "Our staff and coaches are trained to work with that specific age group. All of our programs are backed by the science of teaching kids."

The program also involves the parents, and the lessons learned are expected to carry over into their lives away from sports. "Along with playing the sports, we call the kids and their parents together and go over the sportsmanship value of the day," DuBois said. "One day it might be about respect, making sure that the kids and parents know what it means and that is fundamental to the experience



Photo provided

that we're delivering and then go back to practicing. We want the lessons to transcend the field to carry over to their households and schools."

The lessons learned by winning and losing also carry value with i9 Sports. "Our values are not just humility and respect, but also entails determination and teamwork. We phrase it healthy competition and we will ultimately have awards for the team that finishes in first place," DuBois said. "I got involved with this because

I believe in the model and more community-based type programs that put the needs of kids in first place and secondly, I wanted to be absolutely involved with the community where my kids grew up."

Signing up has already begun for the fall season with a fee of \$239.00. Each session is for seven weeks with practices and games held on the same day, making it convenient for the parents. Parents can sign their kids up at i9sports.com

Thirty years of success with Orinda Aquatics in and out of the pool

By Jon Kingdon



30th graduating class of Orinda Aquatics

Photo provided

When Don and Ron Heidary began Orinda Aquatics, they had a vision that was at the time unique, and have stayed true to their ideals as they have recently celebrated their 30th anniversary.

"Over these years, we believe that we have created a model that is atypical, not only in swimming but in youth sports with a character driven culture," Don said. "We've created a culture that is based in deep values of integrity, respect, compassion, and embraced effort; and a training program that is based on efficiency rather than volume. We care about every member, and we found that if you focus on building a culture out of character and integrity, it becomes a rising tide that elevates everybody to a much higher level of effort, performance, and

team commitment. It has been an extraordinary and extremely rewarding experience for us and, we believe, a life-changing experience for many young people.

Orinda Aquatics has had athletes on U.S. Olympic teams such as Kim Vandenberg, who won a bronze medal (800 Free Relay) and Peter Varelles, who was on the U.S. water polo team. In Paris, Daniela Moroz, a long-time Orinda Aquatics swimmer, competed in kite sailing, having been a perennial World Champion. Additionally, Orinda Aquatics has trained or developed 30 Olympic Trials qualifiers.

A byproduct of the culture is career longevity, and as a result, athletes remain in the program, with the vast majority going on to com-

pete at the collegiate level. This year in particular, Orinda Aquatics has twenty-one graduating seniors (from a team of 150). "We have had a number of extraordinary classes, but this year's senior class is as strong as any and an extraordinary example of the student-athlete model at the highest level," Don said. "And it is clearly elevated by parental and peer group support."

This year, 17 of the 21 graduates have committed to swim in college. "That's a very high percentage and the ones that are not swimming would compete if the opportunity was available," Don said. "To have 21 athletes that have stayed in the program through graduation speaks to the culture of Orinda Aquatics and the love of the sport, as

many of them say that they could not imagine their life without swimming."

Success in the water but not in the classroom is anathema to one of the key tenets at Orinda Aquatic – academic excellence. "The academic achievements of our kids are a who's who of high school and university achievement, and counter the misconception that the demands of year-round swimming detract from academics," Don said. "In reality, it is the opposite, as virtually all of the graduates are NISCA Academic All Americans, USA Swimming Scholastic All Americans or CIF Scholar Athletes with an average GPA of 4.0 for our 90-member senior group."

Becoming a collegiate leader is also very important to the Heidarys, and is an extension of the very heart of the program. "While we take great pride in the number of our graduates that go on to become team leaders and captains of their collegiate teams, which is well over 60, we know that virtually everyone leaving our program could have been," Don said. "We've built this into the organization from the start, with our youngest groups, by talking about the importance of leadership, and by speaking about and demanding the very components of leadership-integrity, compassion, service, hu-

mility, and team commitment. Ultimately, it just becomes part of the Orinda Aquatics culture, to be a leader and a role model. At our banquet, we recognized this year's graduates, and part of the introduction of the group was recognizing them as the very pinnacle of a student-athlete-leader model, and that every one of them could walk into a program and be a collegiate captain today. They are extraordinarily mature, and they have come out of a culture that breeds that level of awareness that makes them want to be a role model and to make to a difference."

The colleges this class will be attending is split between Division I and Division III schools on the East and West Coast with graduates attending schools such as Cal, Santa Barbara, Pomona, USC, Cal Poly, UOP, Occidental, and Westmont on the West Coast, and Georgetown, Dartmouth, Brown, Amherst, Tufts, Middlebury, and Carlton on the East Coast.

"What we try to do is to find the best overall fit that suits their academic pursuits and swimming objective, with some leaning more to academics and others towards athletics," Don said.

An example of the confluence of culture and training philosophy and methodology, is that Orinda Aquatics had 53

swimmers out of their 150 total, qualify for the USA Swimming Sectional Championship meet. "It's unheard of for a team of this size to produce those numbers," Don said. "When asked by USA swimming we suggested that it is the model that supports it, and again, that our coaches care deeply about the development and potential of each swimmer."

Not to be overlooked was the success of the Campolindo High School girls swim team, and swim team in general, coached by Ron, which won the North Coast Sectional for the 18th time (men and women), and finished second in the state last year and eighth this year. "There is a heavy crossover from Orinda Aquatics to Campolindo," Don said. "I know that Ron is proud at Campolindo's success along with it also representing Orinda Aquatics."

The success of Orinda Aquatics did not go unnoticed by Tim Hinchey, the president and CEO of USA Swimming, who wrote a personal note to Don that said: "Orinda Aquatics is certainly the gold standard for clubs your size in our country. Congrats on the amazing anniversary as well. Thanks for all you do for USA swimming."

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