

Orinda Aquatic Team Banquet 2016

Jesse Krompier, Guest Speaker

A little about me: I'm 28 years old. I learned to swim when I was 5, and I began swimming in a year-round program when I was 10. When I was 15, I joined Orinda Aquatics. But, I didn't just "join." I had to pass the test first with Ronnie, who asked me about my background, what I hoped to achieve by joining Orinda Aquatics, and what I thought I could contribute. Ronnie talked about the "character first" philosophy, and I remember nodding and thinking in the back of my mind, "Yeah, sure, sounds great, I'll put character first, second, third, wherever you want me to put it as long it helps me swim fast and get into a good school."

To me, "character first" was a somewhat ethereal concept that wasn't something anyone could really control. My experience up to that point was that swimming was generally an individual sport. At my former team, there was a special jacket that was awarded each month to whoever had the best workouts for that month, as voted on by your fellow teammates. So, we had effectively invented American Idol before American Idol existed, except the judges were 12-year olds and the contestants were each other. It was fascinating. But, ultimately, not great for team-building.

When I joined Orinda Aquatics, I realized that Ronnie and Donnie's "character first" philosophy was the real deal. First of all, we all got to wear the same jackets. But it was more than just that --

In my first workout, Ronnie put me in a lane with Scott Lathrope, a 400-IMer who was well known in Pacific Swimming at that time as the top guy in pretty much everything. I was really nervous. The possibility of training with Scott felt to me like training with Ivan Drago from Rocky IV. I half-expected him to punch me out if I looked at him wrong, but thankfully -- Scott wasn't like that at all. He introduced himself, was friendly, and a *little* dorky -- we raced a little, and at the end of practice he told me, "good job." For me, that was a huge deal. Scott was a pretty quiet guy, but he always showed up early, stayed late, dedicated himself 100% to each workout, and inspired me to do the same. Personality-wise, we were completely different, but he embraced me as a teammate. He often invited me to his house to play Halo in between double workouts, even though I'm terrible at Halo -- I don't play video games. But he'd have a group of us over, and I thought, "WOW. How cool is it that a guy *this* good ALSO cares about hanging out with teammates and being inclusive?"

It wasn't just Scott. Everyone showed up for practice early, helped setup lane lines, and worked hard in dryland following long hours in the water. We enjoyed Nations' breakfasts as a group together after Saturday practices. At meets, it was understood that if you weren't swimming a race, you should be at the end of the lane cheering your teammates -- and we did it, in large numbers. Ronnie and Donnie pushed us to excel in the pool, but also instructed us to stay disciplined academically, make the right choices regarding drugs and alcohol, and prioritize relationships over athletic success. They told stories about the successes and failures of team leaders who preceded us -- Katie Arnold, Justin Chiles, Peter Varellas, Kim Vandenberg. Then, those people would actually show up at the pool, talk with us, and share their experiences.

I believed in the system, but I was still messed up sometimes. When I was a junior in high school, I won DFAL in the 100 fly, and then I spun around and flexed my biceps in celebration. I don't know why I did it, but I guess I just thought it was cool, and I didn't think it was a big deal. The next weekend, before my race at NCS, Ronnie walked up to me, took me by the back of the arm, and said, "If you win this, you're *not* going to flex. That's not who you are. That's not what we represent." I didn't know it at the time, but there was something about "character first" that I still didn't quite get.

For college, I went to swim at Stanford for Skip Kenney, which was my life dream. It was a challenging experience. I had a great time and met some of my best friends, but my swimming career ended in relative disappointment after my sophomore year. As a freshman, I failed to improve on any of my times, and I was diagnosed with mono after having completed the season. As a sophomore, I dealt with an on-and-off shoulder injury and failed to improve again.

Ultimately, I made the decision to retire from swimming and move on to other things. I joined a sketch comedy group on campus and headed the Film Society. When I graduated, I moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in film

production. In order to pay rent, I gave swim lessons, started a photography business, and worked as a host at a restaurant in Beverly Hills. Every new venture was a learning experience and a reminder of some of the “character first” principles Ronnie and Donnie taught: positive attitude, sacrifice, and humility.

I eventually began my application to law school, which requires an LSAT score. I did the whole process, took the Testmasters course, took every practice exam and every supplement I could get my hands on, meditated, visualized my testing room, sent positive energy to the proctor, the works. On the day of the actual exam, I panicked. I ran out of time on a few of the sections, and I knew I didn’t do well. I left the facility and broke down and cried. I had invested so much time, energy, and effort – everything in my life had led me to that point, and I felt like a complete failure.

But, I brushed myself off, signed up, and did it again a few months later. Same thing – I ran out of time. My second score was slightly improved from the first, but it was still much lower than what I wanted. I was at a complete loss. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out how I had tested so highly on my dozens of practice exams, but I kept running out of time on the real thing.

I talked it over with my girlfriend, and she figured out what was wrong with me in about two seconds: I had been cheating on my practice exams. When I took the tests on my own, I often gave myself extra time here or there so I could finish each section completely. That extra time wasn’t there during the real test, but I had inadvertently trained myself to rely on it in practice.

I hesitated to go through the process a third time in six months, but I knew in my heart I wouldn’t be satisfied if I settled with the scores I had. I had a long phone call with my older sister, mapping out the pros and cons of doing it again, and I received a healthy dose of encouragement from my older brother and my parents.

So I did it again, and this time, my girlfriend sat in my apartment for four hours at a time, timed me, and forced me to put my pencil down at each 35-minute break. The result: my score on the third exam improved significantly. After that, I had multiple scholarship offers roll in, and I was fortunate to end up at UCLA Law, where I am now entering my third year (and looking forward to the Bar exam next July).

During the LSAT process, I often thought back on my time with Orinda Aquatics and reflected on some of the “character first” principles that Ronnie and Donnie talked about. Some were obvious:

Hard work. Positive attitude. Resilience. Dedication. These are things you acquire at the 5:30 AM practices. Doubles. 3-hour practices on Saturdays when all your other friends are sleeping in. Getting in the water in the middle of January when it’s 30 degrees outside and the kickboards are stuck together from the frost. I knew that if I could do those things well, I could do the LSAT for a third time.

Other things were less obvious. For example, *integrity*. Up until the point where I had asked for help from my girlfriend, I hadn’t really been truthful with myself about how I was taking the practice exams. Being truthful with yourself is something you can learn in the pool: when a set calls for 100% effort, only you can really tell if that’s the effort you’re giving. When you do it, you’ll feel good, and your teammates will notice and follow your lead. And by the way, that principle applies in all aspects of life.

Humility. It was hard for me to admit that I was doing something wrong with my study habits, that I needed help, and that I couldn’t solve the problem by myself. You might win some races in swimming, but in school and in the workplace you can’t always just flex your biceps, especially when you screw up. *If you wouldn’t do it in times of disappointment, don’t do it at all.* Otherwise, you’ll train yourself to act on emotions, you’ll look inconsistent, and people won’t see you for all the good things that you accomplish.

Teamwork. Taking a standardized test is about the most individualistic thing you can do, but I could not have accomplished my goals without the support and encouragement of my family and my girlfriend.

Through my experiences, I've learned that "character first" is not just a checklist, but it is a core philosophy. That is an important distinction. Doing things like setting up lane lines and cheering for your teammates are *necessary, but not sufficient* to leading with character. In other words, those things are good, but they're not enough on their own.

Having good character starts with you, internally. It means believing in yourself, knowing that you have more to give, and seeing the big picture for yourself. It means being unafraid to push your comfort zone and try new things AND equally unafraid to take the love and support that's around you and use it when you need it. Whether it's in swimming, at school, in your career, or in your personal life, things don't always work out the way you plan them. At the end of the day, you still have to have something to guide you.

In closing, I'd like to offer three pieces of advice:

First, have fun. Cultivate your friendships. Go to breakfasts together, play ultimate Frisbee, invite your friends over to play Halo – I guess, if that's your thing. Life can get too serious sometimes, and if you don't give yourself a chance to goof off a little and have fun, it's not sustainable.

Second, listen to Ronnie and Donnie. The "character first" principles they talk about continue to apply beyond your swimming career in ways you can't predict. Ronnie and Donnie may not always be there to grab you by the arm and give you direction, but you'll think of them. And, if you stay true to yourself, you'll find your way. There's a reason why their swimmers keep coming back to check in.

Finally, say "thank you" to your parents. Really, say "thank you." A lot. It was pretty cool that my mom drove me to all those morning workouts and swim meets growing up. My parents were there for all my swim meets. I've gone to watch some swim meets in my post-swimming life, and believe it or not, they're not nearly as interesting when you're not competing in them. That's a lot of long hours they sacrifice for you to be there. And even after swimming, your parents, your family, and your closest friends will be supporting you *and* keeping you on track.

Jesse Krompier, OA Class of 2006