# ORINDA AQUATICS

# CLASS OF 2023

"Do all the other things, the ambitious things – travel, get famous, innovate, lead, fall in love, make and lose fortunes … but as you do, to the extent that you can, err in the direction of kindness". George Saunders - Syracuse University2013

"Life is not about warming yourself by the fire. Life is about building the fire. And generosity is the match. If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap, but if you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody". Larry Lucchino

**"Today's children are the future leaders in business, politics, and sports. People in such positions of authority encounter ethical dilemmas on an even grander scale. It is imperative for teens to learn about ethics and wise decision-making today in order to equip themselves for tomorrow."** Life in Perspective

# Graduating Senior Letters

## Evan Velek – UC Irvine

- **Orinda Aquatics Inspirational Award**
- **Campolindo High School Inspirational Award**
- **Sectional Qualifier**
- **Scholar Athlete**
- **Academic All-American Candidate**

Through my years at Orinda Aquatics, I've grown from a shy nine-year-old into a team leader who gets the opportunity to work with and lead a group of people who are not only astounding swimmers, but even better people. The strength of our team stems not from our difficult practices and strenuous drylands, but our ability to work as a team, embrace challenges, and view things in a positive light.

I used to be a negative guy, thinking about how cold it was outside, and when I would get to go home and get in the shower. However, I've changed from, "Do I have to help?" to "How can I help," and now I am the one who people come to with those questions. The shift from saying "I have to" to "I get to" started out as a very conscious decision I made to try to be more positive. For weeks I would correct myself every time I would say "I have to" to the point where people thought I was joking around, satirically criticizing the OA motto of character first, but I wasn't joking. I was just trying to have a more positive perspective, thinking it would make me a little bit happier day to day. After a few months, however, ***I became a different person***. I essentially stopped saying "I have to," and began enjoying opportunities that arose. Every time anything happened, I would think about all the good things that would come out of it. The minor shift in my vocabulary ended up completely transforming my outlook on the world. It changed from just enjoying my time in the pool when it was cold to truly feeling content with how I live my life.

Another profound change in my life that came from this team is my increased ability to lead. While I know I still have so much more to learn, I am proud of my progress from when I started on this team. When I was about 12 or so, I had 2 "little buddies" in the junior group, mentees in a way, to try to help them get accustomed to the team. One day, after we had gotten out of the pool, Donnie pulled me

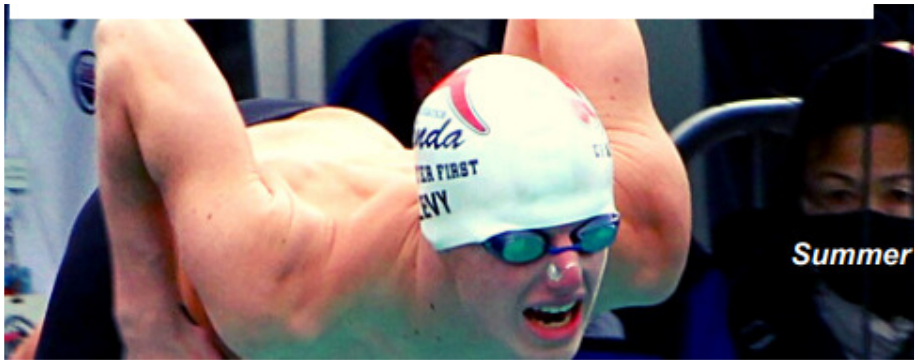
aside. He said, “Why do you think you have two younger buddies?” I responded, “I don’t know,” and he said, “Because I think you have the potential to be a great leader.” I was stunned. I was just some shy kid who could barely make 50 freestyles on the 50 second interval — how could I be a leader? But through my time on this team, I’ve learned a lot about leadership. I’ve gained a lot of confidence in addressing groups of people and learned that people respect leaders more if the leader first respects themselves. I also learned that my voice can be much louder than I thought that it could be (both metaphorically and literally). When I was younger, I was too afraid to tell anyone what to do out of fear that they wouldn’t listen, but now I know that to be a leader, all you have to do is believe you are a leader and act like a leader. And to be a good leader, you have to be able to be a good follower.

Finally, I found myself trying to help everyone around me. I cannot stress enough how important it is to me to help when I see something that needs to be done. I’ve learned just as much from the fifteen minutes before practice as the hour and a half during practice. And I would even argue a large part of my improvement in swimming has come before the practice even started. By helping set up the pool, I’ve grown to have a connection with the pool, deeper than when it was just a pool with lane lines in it. It became my home away from home.

Orinda Aquatics has taught me a great deal. I’ve become more confident, outspoken, perseverant, positive, excited, and willing to follow my passions. I’ve learned what leadership is and I’ve learned that although I will not be swimming after I leave OA, that will not take away the biggest lessons I’ve learned from the team. Yes, I’ve dropped 20 seconds in my 100 breaststroke since I joined the team, but I’ve gained 20 times more in life lessons, relationships, and experiences than I have gained in athletic ability.

Evan

## Nate Levy, Pomona - swimming



- ***OA Swimmer of the Year***
- ***Swimming All American***
- ***Scholastic All American***
- ***Academic All-American candidate***
- ***NCS Champion***
- ***Summer Junior National Qualifier***

It is challenging to express and summarize six years of Orinda Aquatics in a short letter. The experience is ongoing, the lessons do not end – whether I am at Soda center every day or not, I'll always feel like a current member of the OA community. There is no "graduation" from OA – it is part of who I am.

I am sharing a significant part of my childhood that has shaped who I am today – my six years as a member of Orinda Aquatics. These memories are more than just recollections; they're a testament to the invaluable lessons I've learned and the friendships I've forged.

From the very beginning, joining a swimming team was about more than just swimming. I enjoyed rec swimming at Moraga Valley Pool and loved being at OMPA. I liked it so much I decided I wanted to swim year-round, which is why I joined OA.

Joining OA was more. It was about learning to work hard, to push myself beyond my comfort zone. Early morning workouts, when the water was freezing, taught me the value of discipline and dedication. Our coaches didn't complain – we were all going to deal with whatever obstacles were thrown our way. They talked about character and instilled a simple philosophy: as members of OA, we were taught to *always* put character first.

Like anyone that has been on OA, I can speak of practicing or competing in the scorching heat of Roseville and Clovis. I can also write about jumping in water in the biting cold of a Moraga winter. I can write about injuries I faced, or sicknesses during peak meets. We all faced adversity and swam on. We counted every stroke, and we all learned the strength of resilience. These experiences taught me, and everyone on OA, that true growth doesn't happen in ease, but in overcoming challenges.

I've had successes and disappointments as a swimmer. My career is less important than how I changed, both individually and as a team member. At OA, I don't feel that we are just teammates; we are a family. I remember the older swimmers who encouraged and taught me how to act – Isaac Kim, Henrik Barck, Connor Ormsby – there are so many who helped. Having practiced each day with Théo, Devin, Andrew and others – I know that I have friends for the rest of my life. I learned from all of them how to be a teammate *and a friend.* These friendships became the pillars that supported us through every lap and every obstacle.

Ronnie helped me become more than just a fast swimmer. He put up with so much complaining and frustration both in and out of the water. It would have been so easy for him to ignore me and divert attention to faster swimmers, but he helped me even when I thought I was beyond help.
Looking back, those years on the swim team were a pivotal chapter of my childhood. They molded me into someone who isn't afraid to face challenges, who understands the value of teamwork and who knows that resilience is the cornerstone of achievement. These lessons go far beyond the pool; they're life lessons that I carry with me in everything I do.

Thank you for taking the time to read about this formative part of my life. I'm truly grateful for those years on the swim team and the coaches and teammates who were a part of it. I'll be forever in debt. OA will always be a part of me.

***Nate Levy***
***(with bonus EPIC POEM):***

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I am Nathan, son of Jon,

I learned to swim from Ron and Don.
Through Roseville's heat and Moraga's storm,
A swimmer's soul, I began to form.

Start with Matt, pulldowns improve,
Swimming with Ronnie, I found my groove.
Yet life at OA is never easy,
Sets are hard, my stomach queasy.

Keeping up with Théo, speeding at my side,
Each stroke a battle, his wake a tide,
Travel was tough, beds were creaky,
And every so often, my googles were leaky.

The journey was long, the path not always clear,
but as I leave it is not without tear.
A love for my teammates, coaches and friends,
I can now see them, through a very clear lens.

It took years to fathom this enduring truth,
Orinda Aquatics, the forge of my youth.
In waters' embrace, we found our place,
A legacy forged, time shall not erase.

## Théoden Yavuzer-Judd, Cal Poly - Swimming

- ***Summer Junior National Qualifier***
- ***Orinda Aquatics Swimmer of the Year***
- ***NCS Champion***
- ***Team Leader***

These past three years on OA have been the most inspiring, motivating years of my life. It's more of a story than a letter but also a thank you. For me, joining this team was a remarkable journey of inspiration, character development, and personal growth. Joining Orinda Aquatics in the summer of 2020 wasn't easy; I had just moved to Moraga, a new school, new people, a new swim team, and a new lifestyle. I struggled for a long time trying to fit in, and since school was online and practices were socially distanced, it was hard.

My first two years on OA weren't very productive. I lacked effort, dedication, and a positive attitude towards improvement, not only in swimming but in my academics as well. It was a challenging transition for me, coming from a school in Albany where the idea of pursuing college after graduation was not even a consideration for most students, and then adapting to Campolindo.

Considering that my parents relocated from El Cerrito to support my swimming on OA, it was unfair for me to lose focus and discipline. During my junior year (20-21), my times were simply not competitive, and although I had an average high school season, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to swim in college, let alone get in with my grades.

My senior year came (21-22) I got faster but still lacked motivation, and discipline. Consequently, I was removed from Ronnie's group for a few months, earning neither his respect nor my concern at the time. I didn't have a genuine love for the sport. I struggled my way back into Ronnie's group but still lacked his respect due to my actions. Then December 2021 came around, I swam the 100 breaststroke and dropped from 58.56 - 56.87. It was an impressive accomplishment that garnered attention, but it was achieved without any hard work or putting in effort; it was just talent. After that swim, I found a renewed sense of motivation for the approaching high school season, driven by a strong desire to improve. I committed myself to attending more practices and pushing harder to achieve my goals. But when faced with the difficulties and physical pain that came with the training I was supposed to be doing, I would often give up. Despite some discussions about college swimming, I failed to meet the application deadlines and neglected to stay on top of the process, resulting in the realization that college swimming was not in my immediate future.

As the summer went by, I made slight time improvements here and there, yet I failed to consistently attend practice. It was during Sectionals in July 2022 at Roseville that Ronnie had a powerful conversation with me that marked a significant turning point in my swimming career. Ronnie made me commit to taking a gap year to focus on swimming and never miss a workout, to get better not only as a swimmer but as a person. I lacked self-discipline and character when it came to things that mattered in my life. So I put my head down and went to the morning practices, the afternoon practices, the practices when I felt like it, and the practices when I didn't feel like it. I never missed a workout. One of our favorite quotes is by Brandon Fischer, "What's on the other side of pain?! GREATNESS!" I transformed my swimming career in a matter of months. Then in October 2022, I committed to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to swim, and I'm so grateful for this opportunity.

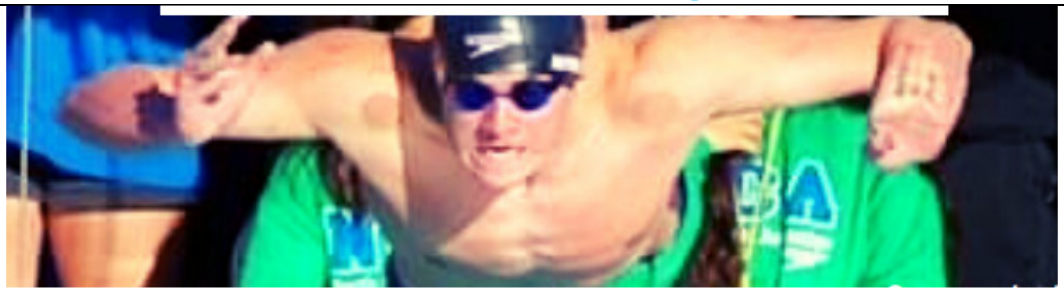
Since then, I have been putting in more effort than ever before, consistently improving my performance, becoming faster, and my motivation for the sport continues to be unwavering. Not only for myself but also to inspire those around me, both as individuals and swimmers, to strive for improvement. Nate Levy, Andrew Hallett, Adriana Smith, Jasmine Fok, all hold a special place in my life. They have been a constant source of support and have stood by me through the highs and lows, never losing sight of our shared aspiration to become fast elite swimmers. Constantly improving, fostering a contagious mindset of determination and drive in my teammates, I ended my OA short course season with a 54.7 100-yard breast, and am forever grateful for all the coaching Ronnie has given me through these months.

One of my favorite memories on OA was the Clovis meet this year in 2023, it was a super fun meet that I wasn't able to experience before like the other kids. I was able to connect with the younger guys and answer any questions they had about swimming. Since I came from a team where role models weren't a thing, it was nice to be that role model for these kids and help them see how swimming can change somebody's life. The most important thing that I stress to these kids is that they have so much time to improve and grow. CJ Mcwhorter and Brooker Landau are two that I talked to a lot at the meet, and they were very optimistic about swimming but had some worries. They were stressed about not being fast enough, or not having the respect of the coaches. I told them that as long as they work hard, stay positive, and never give up, they could become great swimmers. They said they were inspired by what I said and that they would try their best.

My time at Orinda Aquatics was a tremendous improvement in my character and discipline and I am forever grateful to Ronnie, Donnie, Marc, and Dom for always being there for me and coaching me from the beginning. I couldn't have done it without Ronnie's support in the past year, he pushed me to my limits and never gave up on me. He nurtured my tough mentality. He kept his word about coaching me if I committed to the sport.

Thank you, Théoden

## Andrew Hallett, Cal - swimming



- ***Summer Junior National Qualifier***
- ***Orinda Aquatics Swimmer of the Year***
- ***Scholar Athlete***
- ***State Champion (200 Free Relay)***
- ***Scholastic All American***

Dear Ronnie, Donnie, and all the OA coaching staff,

I honestly can't believe I've gotten to the point where I'm writing this letter. When I had first joined, I thought there was no hope for me, and I believe Donnie thought the same. I was slow, out of shape, my technique was terrible, and I couldn't compete with even the slowest swimmers on the team. The months following my first day were so physically and mentally draining that every day I wanted to quit. However, the people on the team kept me there. Everybody was very inviting and really brought me out of my shell. After branching out and making connections across the whole team, I enjoyed my time with OA a lot more. Though the practices never got easier, (they still haven't) I never went

through them alone, and neither did anybody else. Swimming can be a lonely and demanding sport, so being a member of such a warm and friendly community was vital for my success.

The atmosphere this team has established has taught me so many valuable life lessons, lessons such as leadership, dedication, and discipline. I never really understood what it meant to be a leader and being a part of this team taught me what leadership really meant. I learned you don't have to be a person of high authority and power to be a leader, you just have to be willing to put yourself out there to guide people who aren't sure what to do. And this applies to so many areas of life, school, sports, swimming, work, and your community. I'm certain the leadership skills I've gained through OA will significantly benefit my future and I am so very thankful this team could provide such a core life lesson.

Following leadership is dedication. Dedication is a difficult lesson to teach because it comes from within, yet when you find yourself surrounded by people who all share a similar goal, your dedication toward achieving it strengthens. This team did such a good job at selecting and breeding athletes who not only had goals, but the dedication to achieve them. Every swimmer on OA puts swimming before so many other aspects of their life because of the goals and aspirations they have. There is a psychological term called "groupthink" where individual members of groups accept and encourage a viewpoint that represents a perceived group consensus or goal, more than an individual's perspective. I believe the group consensus for Orinda Aquatics is this goal to improve your swimming career and it is the spoken/unspoken goal that strengthens every member's dedication to the sport.

The last and debatably most important life lesson I've learned is discipline. Before joining this team, I used to swim on a laid-back and chill rec team and if I didn't want to go to practice, I simply wouldn't go. Oh man was that a change. Practice attendance was one of OA's utmost priorities so if you had to miss practice you better have a good excuse. I dreaded going to so many morning practices. Hearing that alarm go off at 4:50 am, interrupting the most peaceful dream and forcing you to get out of your warm bed to go swim in a freezing cold pool was so hard, and I never really looked forward to it. Yet I do it anyways and will continue to do it for another 4 years. I do it because in life there are things that you really don't want to do, but you still have to do them anyways, and with AM practice, you get this great sense of satisfaction after completion. That feeling cannot be bought, or given, only earned, and Orinda Aquatics offers that opportunity.

And as for the memories on this team, they were monumental, to say the least. From personal achievements to team bonding, they will definitely leave a mark on me forever. I remember when I first joined, Ronnie had given me an OA towel and he said "One day your gonna be good". Eventually, I learned that he didn't do that for everybody who joined, and Ronnie being inspirational was a very rare occurrence. Knowing that, this flimsy old towel holds more significance to me now than it did then, I will never get rid of it. Another core memory from this team was my first relay-ever swimming club. It was Roseville Sectionals, the summer after my sophomore year. Ronnie had asked me to swim in the relay with the older and intimidating college swimmers. It was such an amazing experience to swim with those guys and to be a part of the winning relay. I think the last memory worth mentioning would be my first rafting trip in 2021. That was the first time I had ever socialized with the team somewhere other than a pool. That rafting trip brought me so close with so many people I looked up to and it was great to have that bonding experience. And river rafting has got to be one of the most fun things ever, I loved it.

I am so incredibly thankful for Orinda Aquatics because I can truly say that it has changed my life completely. Before joining OA I was not motivated academically and no plans for college or any significant swimming goals. Because of OA, I finished high school with one of the highest GPAs on the team and will be swimming with Cal next year. OA changed my view on high school from a grudging 4

years of pointless classes to a perspective where I viewed school as an opportunity where I could create a path that the rest of my life would follow. Developing concrete life skills like leadership, dedication, and discipline that I can take anywhere in my future, and I owe it all to OA. I would like to say thanks to not only my parents, but all the parents on the team as well as Ronnie, Donnie, Mark, Kati, Dom, Matt, Tiffany, Peg, David, and most importantly, Jose, the man who took the tarps off every day.

## Tanner Skrypnyk, York University (Toronto)

- ***Coaches Award Swimmer (perennial)***
- ***Tentanda Via Award for Academic Excellence***
- ***Western Zone Qualifier***
- ***Black Belt Kung Fu***

Dear teammates and Coaches,

Taking the first step is always the hardest. However, those steps can lead to the most rewarding and joyous memories. I remember my first meeting with the senior group and some coaches. I was shy and unsure of what I was doing. I was wondering why I was leaving one perfectly good team for another. The warm welcome of the swimmers quickly silenced those thoughts. We gathered in the community room, and Donnie (or it might have been Ronnie) discussed the group's expectations, reviewed the schedule, and introduced the new senior swimmers. I vividly recall sitting there as Ronnie (or maybe Donnie) continued talking, and thinking, "This is nice, but I'll never meet these standards." Thousands of swimming hours later, I've realized that it's less about meeting those standards and more about committing to move towards them throughout your life. I would like to acknowledge a few people, though mere words cannot truly express my gratitude:

Dom: Thank you for being so patient and positive with me. Your vibrant clothes, personality, and stories were often the best part of my day. I loved the creativity of your sets, and I hope you never stop designing such fun and challenging sets.

Donnie: Thank you for being so understanding with me and my absences due to academic conflicts. I loved being in your group. We usually knew the set focus would be hard, which I loved. I loved that you gave us so many articles and stories. I learned a lot from them, and I still have most of them. I'm also thankful you believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Ronnie: I always marveled at how dedicated your swimmers were and realized that a large part of that was your coaching style and your expectation of nothing but the best from everyone around you.
Matt: I unfortunately came too late to OA to have the opportunity to be coached by you on a regular basis. Thank you for stepping in as my coach the few times I was fortunate enough to join the Junior group swim meets. My apologies to Ronnie and Donnie, but even the short time I had you as my coach convinced me that ... you are the funniest OA coach.

Kati and Tiffany: Thank you for always smiling no matter what else was going on. You made many swim meets and practices easier with your cheery dispositions.

Evan and Reid:  Thank you for always believing in me and for always being there for me.  For the last four years, you two have been some of the few constants in my journey.

To my parents:  Thank you for everything.  From driving me to early morning practices to caring for me during the lows and the highs.  You were the ones that sought out a different swimming environment for me, and I'm overjoyed that you did.

You have all shaped me so much.  Almost everything I know I learned from you: my dedication, my patience, and my leadership skills.  I'm a far superior human being because of you.

My final advice is that while a year (or four) might sound like a long time, it will fly by.  So, live in the moment and try to get as much as possible from everything.

Sincerely, Tanner Skrypnyk

## Ashlyn Widmer, Kenyon College – swimming

- ***National Merit Scholar***
- ***AP Scholar with Distinction***
- ***Scholar Athlete/Scholastic All American***
- ***Junior Nationals Qualifier***
- ***Coaches Award***

When I came to OA just a year and a half ago, I was completely out of shape and coming off of the roughest season of my career so far, one where I didn't make it to a single meet due to various injuries, culminating in missing Junior Nationals after breaking my hand in practice. However, I have since realized that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it gave me the chance to step back and find the courage to transfer to Orinda Aquatics.

The beginning was difficult, of course. I hadn't quite realized just how challenging it would be to get back into practice after so much time out of the pool, especially given that for the month or so before I took my break, I was only able to kick due to other injuries sustained in practices.

One of my first conversations with Ronnie was after my third or fourth practice, when he asked me how long it would take to get back into shape: days, weeks, months, or years. I didn't have an answer for him then, but it was weeks of missing intervals that I used to make easily and months of being the slowest in the group before I finally got back to my previous levels of endurance and overall fitness.

It probably didn't help that my strokes were atrocious, completely lacking in technique because the focus had always been on yardage and heavy training instead of true efficiency and longevity in the sport. The meets in my first few months on OA were emotionally taxing, because I was nowhere near my times. I was so focused on times that I couldn't really comprehend what Ronnie was trying to do by tinkering with my strokes: provide me with a base to continue improvement into college instead of maximizing my speed in high school, giving me a good chance to stay in the sport instead of quitting when the inevitable plateau or decline began.

I hadn't previously understood that that is what a swim team should be all about, to help maintain a love for the sport by ensuring that swimmers have the proper foundation to continue dropping time, even at the end of their careers. At the end of the day, times aren't everything. In a few years, when you look back on your swimming, it's not going to be the times you went at various meets that you remember***, it'll be everything in between***.

Despite my meet struggles, I was probably the happiest I'd been in practice, swimming in an environment where people were truly supportive. I'm not the most outgoing person in the world and in new environments it can be quite difficult for me to open up, but everyone welcomed me with open arms and helped set me at ease. The mantra of character first was evident almost immediately, a complete juxtaposition of the ideals of teams I'd previously been a part of, where people were focused primarily on themselves and their performance rather than the more team centered approach of OA.

Overall, joining Orinda Aquatics has probably been one of the best decisions I've ever made. I've been able to experience a different approach to swimming, one where the emphasis is on continued improvement, looking toward the future instead of only the present, and building the whole person, shaping leaders and providing skills that will outlast any swimming career. My only regret is that I didn't make the change sooner, that I was never able to go through the ranks and experience all that OA has to offer, both in the pool and out of it.

Thank you, Ronnie, for sticking with me even when I must have seemed hopeless and spending so much time trying to teach me to swim properly. Thanks to you, I can now sometimes swim somewhat straight backstroke. Thank you, Donnie, for working with me when I first joined during early morning practices even though I wasn't in your group, and providing so much insight into what it means to be a selfless leader. I don't know where I'd be without either of you and OA.

Thank you for everything, Ashlyn

# Mackenzie Kawashiri, LMU - swimming

- **Orinda Aquatics Coaches Award Winner**
- **Scholar Athlete**
- **Academic All-American candidate**
- **Team Leader**
- **High School Salutatorian**

My first initial impression of Orinda Aquatics was two years ago, when (who I now remember was Ronnie) came over to my previous team's pool with three swimmers. They practiced with us and gave us a very long, intricate talk about OA's principles. The other memorable thing from that day was working with Ronnie for probably 90% of that practice on my butterfly stroke. Giving context, I wasn't the best or fastest swimmer on the team. My coach introduced Ronnie during warmups to the other kids on the team that were faster, but I remember her telling me that he saw me swimming butterfly and immediately said "Who's that?". Although my team was small, I had never really been singled out completely like that before, and I was almost starstruck that this amazing coach from a ginormous, D1, collegiate-athlete- producing team had chosen me out of many to work with.

Unknowingly, this experience had opened my eyes to what I would soon come to realize was my possible 'potential'. And before we go on, I am not an Olympic Trial Qualifier, nor a Junior National, nor a Futures or even Sectionals qualifier. In fact, I have recently undergone a plateau in a majority of my best events. What I hope can be identified after all of this is the idea that potential is more than just how and what you can perform.

After this interaction, the months went by, and soon came the time for me to leave my previous team. Scanning for other options, it appeared that a rather unlikely team was going to be my next home for my last years of swimming. This was a rather hard yet easy decision, as it took a while to configure the hours, miles, and team size I would be committing to. Crunching the numbers, I live in Vallejo, about 35 minutes from the pool, and I go to school in Napa which is just about an hour or so from the pool. Considering this would be my last year of swimming on a club team, I decided that choosing Orinda would be a worthwhile decision.

Before I joined, I was told I would get "lost" in the sea from the many swimmers on the team. Being one out of many, I made the effort to recognize each and every teammate's face, get to know and develop personal relationships with as many coaches as possible, and make very little excuses for not playing an active role on the team. I'd like to think I've made all of these goals possible, and truly enveloped what a "Character First" mentality embraces. To me, it's not about who is faster than who, the person that does the most pull-ups at dryland, or who has the most friends on the team.

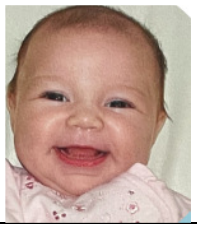
To sum everything up, I've learned how to put my heart into things I am uncomfortable with: extremely hard sets, making new friends, being on a new team, because the results can become more valuable than expected. Some things along the way have been very difficult, but life is difficult, (and honestly, a lot of what kept me going throughout this whole process were the quotes written on the workouts). If you want the results that you dream about, you are going to have to put in the effort in order to truly achieve it. Every hour spent driving to practice, every bi-weekly stop at the gas station, and every time I woke up 30+ minutes before likely every teammate for morning practices, I was reminded of my commitment to this journey. My commitment was to more than just the lengthy transportation, but to the work I knew I would have to put into swimming and this team in its entirety.

As I rose to receive recognition during my final OA banquet, I looked out at the sea of faces that I was once told I would get lost in, which in actuality was less of an unknown and choppy ocean, and more of a comforting lake: full of familiar personalities and memories I've been blessed with and extremely grateful to have. It took almost an entire year (and some) to realize everything I was able to accomplish, and how my potential was really rooted in the mindset of putting Character First.

***"Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened," -Dr. Suess.***

Thank you to everyone at Orinda Aquatics for having a special place in my development. Mackenzie

## Annabel Piel, Georgetown - swimming



- ***Futures Qualifier***
- ***Scholar Athlete***
- ***Academic All-American candidate***
- ***NCS Finalist***
- ***State Consol Finalist***

I've been swimming year-round for eight years now. Only two of those years have been spent on Orinda Aquatics. Over those eight years I've seen both the good and the bad in the sport. Swimming always had a pull over my emotions. It affects me in a way very few things in my life ever have.

I started year-round swimming when I was 10 years old. I was fresh out of rec, so I still had that fearless nature that most rec kids have. It stayed with me for about a year or two, but eventually it withered and was replaced with fear. The fear stemmed from the immense pressure I put on myself. I was terrified of swimming poorly; terrified of the hurt that came from the races; terrified of feeling that hurt for no reward.

It was a lot to handle. I remember crying minutes before the 200 Back at Summer Sanders, concealing tears in my goggles. Obviously, I swam poorly and promptly after the race I threw up. The throwing up and crying continued for a whole season. These are some examples of the bad I have experienced with swimming, but it's not all been crying and throwing up. Swimming has given me some of my best memories, most loyal friends, and valuable lessons.

One of the biggest misconceptions about swimming is that it is an individual sport, but it's far from it. Every day you are surrounded by your teammates. Your teammates not only have influence over your swimming, but who you are as a person. I remember one of the few times I ever swam the 800 Free relay. I finished my leg, and my teammate hugged me and lifted me off the ground. Not one person wanted to be in that relay, but the fact that we all did it together made it special and a memory I still look back on.

Swimming has taught me a lot of lessons over the years: resilience, determination, etc. But I have to say my years on OA have taught me the most about myself. Being on OA I was forced to be very honest with who I am. I'm not exactly sure what did it, maybe the hour long talks with Ronnie, or the environment, but I was able to acknowledge my flaws and grow into someone I'm proud of. Joining OA was truly one of the best decisions I have ever made.

One thing I would like to say to younger swimmers who are either on the team or thinking about joining. I have been on three different year-round swim teams, and I have been coached by at least ten different coaches. Not one coach, nor any other team has rivaled the amount of care that OA coaches have for their swimmers.

## Ben Kang, US Naval Academy

- **Orinda Aquatics Coaches Award**
- **Sectional Qualifier**
- **Scholar Athlete**
- **Senatorial Nomination to the US Naval Academy**
- **Academic All-American Candidate**

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I can firmly and confidently state that Orinda Aquatics has played a major role in shaping me into the person I am today. The journey all started when I was swimming on Sleepy Hollow and my brother was swimming on OA. I vividly remember going to all of his meets and seeing the friendliness, mentorship, and positivity of the team. Talbot Jacobs, a senior in high school at the time, treated me as if I was his little brother. He looked after me, carried me on his shoulders, and coached me. Ever since he left for college, I strived to become the person he was to me - a disciplined, yet humorous, inspirational figure to the younger swimmers on the team.

This team has been nothing short of positive and encouraging from day one. One such instance stands out to me the most. At the start of the pandemic, while people began to quarantine at home, my dad decided to continuously endure the hardships of work as he knew that he was the sole breadwinner of our family. Unfortunately, shortly after, my dad fell severely ill to the Coronavirus. Throughout the ordeal, while my dad was in a coma in the hospital, fighting for his life, my mom, brother, and I received endless support from all the coaches and several of my close teammates. Ronnie and Donnie would consistently reach out telling me to keep my head up and offering to help if we needed anything at all. Without this team's support, encouragement, and positivity, I wouldn't have been able to overcome this dark time in my life as smoothly as I did.

Now, I would like to take the time to write some appreciation remarks.

To my parents: I don't even know how to express my endless gratitude and appreciation for you. You have been with me every step of the way, no matter what obstacle we faced. Mom, you are the strongest, most resilient, wise, and decisive woman I know. No matter what has stood in front of you, you always find a way to push through without complaining or raising any negativity about it. During Covid, you managed to juggle taking over the store with no prior business experience, while taking care of our situation at home and with dad struggling in the hospital. One of the biggest lessons you have taught me, which I am still trying to work on, is "always finish strong." Despite everything you go through, you always manage to come home with a smile on your face. I just don't know how you do it. But you have taught me that nothing good comes from experiencing easy and that some level of pain and suffering are necessary to succeed. As I leave for college, I promise to continue making you proud. I love you all.

To my brother: You are my best friend, mentor, and idol all combined into one. I don't think that anyone could be prouder to have an older brother like you. I am so glad that we have this inseparable bond between us. Since day one, you have always looked out for me. I couldn't have achieved most of the things I have done without your help and you paving a way to guide me through. You have taught me to claim responsibility for not only my actions but the actions of those that I lead. You have taught me to never blame others for my problems and to face every problem face on without cowering behind others. *You have also taught me what it means to be an advocate for those who have trouble standing up for themselves*. I love you so much and am so grateful to have you in my life. I am really excited to serve in the fleet with you in four years!

To my coaches: Ronnie, ever since my little incident at Far Westerns when I spilled a cherry flavored shaved ice on my white shirt, you have always been able to make me laugh. Your sense of humor will really be missed, and I am so thankful to have been able to swim under your guidance. Donnie, your teachings of character, integrity, and respect will forever stick with me. I will never forget everything you have done for this team and what you have been able to instill in us. I intend on spreading the positivity and wisdom that you have so often preached to us as I move on in life. Matt, since Sleepy Hollow, I haven't been able to bond with a coach as closely as you. From the original red Pringles to the diet Pepsi's, I will cherish all the special moments that we've had together. Dom, you are the coach that I, and certainly most other swimmers, can relate to most. Your laid-back and chill attitude will be something that I will be looking forward to when I come back to visit. Marc, from Jr 1 until now, I think we have developed a bond that can't really be explained in words (possibly because I would splash you all the time during kick sets when you put me in the wall lane during Jr 1). But all jokes aside, you have been my true first and personal impression of year-round swimming on OA, which has led me to be the person I am today. Kati, you are one of the nicest and most caring coaches I know. Your in-depth knowledge of yoga, swim recovery, and body health has been a lifesaver at times during my time here. You have given me equipment and exercises to try when I had my shoulder injury- I will always be appreciative for that.

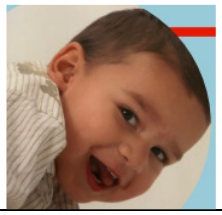
And lastly, to my close friends and teammates: You guys are really the reason why I enjoyed coming to practice every single day, rain or shine. Whether it was the early morning practices during the frigid mornings in February or the double workouts during the long course season, you all have been a part of my motivation to keep pushing on. From the team travel trips to the gaming tournaments in our hotel rooms, to the ice baths, to the post practice food runs, to the car rides, I am incredibly glad to have been able to form such a close relationship with you guys. I wish you all the best of luck in your swimming endeavors, and I am one-hundred percent certain that the friendships that I have made here will last a lifetime. I look forward to coming back to visit and seeing you all succeed. I love you all so much, and I'm going to miss seeing you guys every day.

Once again, thank you so much, Orinda Aquatics, for everything you have provided me with over the past eight years. I will forever be in debt to this amazing team.

Peace,

Ben Kang

## Devin Purewal, Chapman - swimming



- ***Futures Qualifier***
- ***Summer Junior National Relay***
- ***NCS Finalist***
- ***Scholar Athlete***

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As I was thinking about writing this letter, I wasn't exactly sure what I should say. I don't really have any specific life-changing moments that I remember super vividly, and it doesn't seem real that this swim team has been such an integral part of my life for as long as it has. However, after sitting down to actually write something I was flooded by a wave of gratitude for the people that this team has brought into my life.

I want to start out by thanking Ronnie and Donnie for shaping me into the person I am today. I would not be where I am without them, and I hope to do right by them for the rest of my life. I am definitely a stronger, kinder, and more confident person because of their coaching, not just in the pool, but in life, and I will continue to strive to become the highest quality person I can be because of them.

I also need to give even more credit to my parents, who have done everything for me and then some. From waking up way too early just to get to practice and meets, to taking the job of meet director so that the team could have opportunities to compete. They've also been there for me whenever I have needed them (which has been often), and I hope to do right by them as well. They are superheroes, and I will strive to be half the person they both are. I'd also like to give a little thank you to my sister who has been in my corner as a friend the whole time. I am excited to see the amazing person she will become.

I need to thank the friends I have made over the last seven years on this team, as amazing as they have been. People like Nate Levy, who has been with me since our initial OA tryouts, and Théoden Yavuzer-Judd, who has motivated me to continue to try my hardest to improve in the sport. I also owe a lot to the older teammates who have served as mentors, both in the past and the present. People like Mac Follmer, Henrik Barck, and Isaac Kim are all people who have helped me stay motivated and excited about swimming, as well as life in general.

Finally, I have to thank the Senior 4 group from this past season. It has been the most enjoyable period of swimming of my life and that's thanks to the people I spent it training with. It has been an amazing group, and I am excited to see what everyone does in the future.

This list doesn't even scratch the surface of all the people I am thankful for, as that list is too long. I just felt the need to demonstrate the foundation this team laid for me as I matured into the person I am today, as well as stress the importance of the values and people that foundation was made up of. I cannot put into words how thankful I am that I decided to not only join OA, but stay with it, and I am looking forward to tackling the rest of my life with the people the team has introduced me to, as well as the person it has made me.

Devin

# Ethan Coover, Cal Poly - club

- ***Scholar Athlete***
- ***Academic All-American Candidate***
- ***DAL Consol Finalist***
- ***High School Coaches Award***

Dear OA,

I can't decide where to begin. I joined Orinda Aquatics scared. I joined with the notion that I would be the slowest swimmer on the team because OA is the "next level". After being accepted, I felt like the team truly welcomed me with open arms. Yes, I joined my last year of high school, but that didn't change the massive amount of love I felt starting on day one. The truly unique characteristic about the team is the caring, sincerity, and compassion of this group. It is atypical in the community and from what I have seen in teenagers in general.

Fast forward to the present day, I am so grateful to Donnie, Marc, and Dom for taking a chance on me, and also for all of the swimming and life experiences I have gained along the way. I learned that no matter how hard the set is (or my day), there are ALWAYS smiles, ALWAYS encouragement, ALWAYS great friends, and ALWAYS great music playing at the pool. Case in point - I could miss one day of practice and immediately upon my return, as soon as I entered the Soda Center, friends would rush towards me and ask where I have been and armed with plenty of hugs.

I remember during my first OA swim meet, I was standing on the blocks, and I looked out to the other side of the pool, and I saw a group of my swim mates cheering me on. It was amazing. These people have become some of my closest friends. We are regularly seen in Starbucks after practice, as well as planning fun weekend excursions.

My greatest advice to the younger swimmers is to make sure you savor each moment with your team because time flies by and before you know it you will be a graduating senior too. There is one word to describe OA and that is, family.

Thank you so much for all of your help through my highs and lows. I could say a thousand thank you' s and it still wouldn't be enough. The only regret I have is that I should have joined OA sooner!!
Sincerely,

Ethan Coover

# Zach Zener, Boston University

- ***Sectional Qualifier***
- ***Scholar Athlete***
- ***Academic All-American candidate***
- ***Orinda Aquatics Coaches Award***
- ***High School Team Captain***

I would like to start this letter by thanking my parents who put a countless amount of time, stress, and care into my swimming career. Waking up for morning practices and spending entire weekends at swim meets is never easy. I can't even imagine how much more difficult it has to be to drive me to those morning practices, spending countless hours volunteering, and buying hundreds of dollars of equipment while having other kids. So, thank you mom and dad for all your encouragement, dedication, and love.

When I started swimming for Orinda Aquatics in my sophomore year of high school, I felt completely lost and frankly, unqualified. Between learning the new sets and following the distancing protocols that seemed to change every week, I found it hard to find a place for myself. Despite how challenging I found every workout, I wanted to take advantage of the extraordinary opportunity that Matt and Donnie had given me to be on the team. I was determined to become faster and to fit in with the group.

For months, I kept showing up to practice. At this time, we still weren't having meets and I felt like I had little connection to my teammates outside training. However, this all changed in February 2021 when Orinda Aquatics began hosting meets and time trials again. Even though we had to socially distance our chairs, put our clothes in bins behind the blocks, and wear masks in the team area, I realized I had been missing out on the team connection and support that defines Orinda Aquatics. I don't remember how I swam that day and definitely don't remember my times, but I can clearly recall how happy I was making new friends and getting to truly be part of the team. At that small time trial in February, I got to know more people and made more friends than I had in my entire first five months swimming with the team. That meet was a turning point in my life because I finally began to understand the importance of community in swimming. I would even go as far to say that it wasn't until this meet when I finally became part of the team.

OA has taught me how much your character and that of the people around you matter. I know it sounds obvious since the motto of the team is "character first" but it isn't as easy to put into words as Donnie makes it seem. The all-encompassing meaning of "character first" has never stopped evolving for me as I've gotten older. Seeing the kindness of older swimmers on the team, the unwavering

dedication of the coaches, and the integrity that teammates operated with outside of the pool, taught me that there's always a seemingly infinite number of ways you can improve the way you act and behave.

From my perspective, the character first mindset to me is a moral compass that is passed down from generation to generation of Orinda Aquatic swimmers. As I graduate from this team and go onto college and life, my greatest takeaway will be the morals and principles that guide this compass.

In closing, I want to now thank all of my coaches who I have had the privilege to spend many happy, sad, and exciting moments with over my swimming career.

**Matt:** Thank you Matt for being one of my biggest supporters, especially throughout my career as a rec swimmer at Sleepy Hollow. I will always be extremely grateful to you for advocating for me to join Orinda Aquatics despite how unqualified I was. Long before I joined OA, I remember when you gave me the opportunity to swim at the OPP Relays because you recognized the hard work, I had put in that summer by not missing any practices. Similarly, there was one morning after a Wednesday evening practice when I didn't show up to practice and you yelled at me because you knew I had the potential to do better. You were the first coach I had who taught me the value of hard work, discipline, and integrity.

**Marc and Dom:** It always amazes me how much both of you are so committed to every single swimmer you coach regardless of their speed or potential. When I was in the Senior 2 group, and it seemed like there were a multitude of things wrong with every race I swam, it is amazing how patient you two were with helping me improve. Whenever I had a bad swim, it was always you two who helped me keep my head up and focus on improving instead of the times.

**Donnie:** Out of all my coaches in my life I think that you have been the most instrumental in shaping me as not just a swimmer, but also as a young adult. It isn't an easy thing trying to guide young kids in the right direction towards a character first mentality when there are so many obstacles and distractions that *seem* much more appealing. Despite this, I will never forget the amount of emotion and sheer effort you put into driving me in the right direction even when things seemed hopeless. Whenever you tell the story of how you were wondering how I made it on the team, I always get a wave of relief and gratitude that you allowed me to stay because I cannot imagine my life without you and this team.

**Ronnie:** I am really glad that I was able to end my Orinda Aquatics career under your mentorship. When I first joined Orinda Aquatics, I never would have imagined that I would be able to train with you. I am so grateful for the opportunity to swim with your group because, not only have I met some amazing friends, but I have also learned what it is like to train at a higher level. I am really going to miss your interesting book recommendations and being your co-pilot at travel meets.

Thank you to my friends, family, and mentors, Zach Zener

# Audrey Le-Nguyen – Drexel, swimming

- ***Futures Qualifier***
- ***Swimming All American***
- ***Scholar Athlete***
- ***Academic All-American candidate***
- ***State Meet Champion***

The “Infamous Ronnie Conversations” usually entails two things. One, arguing, more often than not, a seemingly losing battle on several topics that have nothing to do with swimming. And two, making the most outrageous of counterarguments in the hopes of extending the conversation for as long as humanly possible. Walking away from such conversations is typically accompanied by shakes of the head and huffs of frustration. One thing that is severely overlooked, however, is the underlying message that somehow seeps through, though it may take time to reveal the true impact.

On a random day of the week, I mindlessly walked on deck, grabbed my equipment bag from the fence, and lazily threw it into the vicinity of my lane. Upon turning back towards the locker rooms to change I overheard a conversation Ronnie was having with a fellow swimmer and instantly became intrigued. He was outlining the basis and impact that spirituality and religion have on the daily lives of society, believers, and nonbelievers alike. Religion and spirituality had never had a prominent presence in my life, though arguing certainly did, and thus I felt compelled to project my ideology into the conversation. We went on continuously, countering each other's points and hopped from topic to topic. From religion and spirituality to true crime, crop circles, and finally settled on the power of forgiveness. Ronnie told me the story of a young girl who was abducted and consequently killed (an unexpected opening to a story about forgiveness). Her kidnapper and murderer was eventually caught and to their surprise, the parents of the young girl forgave them for what they had done. When asked why the parents did what they did, they simply confessed that their forgiveness acted as a weight taken off their shoulders. Carrying the resentment for another individual was doing them more harm than good and thus forgiveness was doing them a service. Now at this point I was baffled. I was unable to grapple with the fact that two parents could ever forgive such an atrocity done to them; ripping apart their family and potentially scaring them for the rest of their lives. I left the conversation unresolved and questioned everything I had heard, mulling it over for the entirety of the time I spent in the pool that day. After that, Ronnie and I never talked about it again, but periodically what was said would enter my headspace, still unable to decipher the entire purpose of what Ronnie said.

Over the next two years, I experienced setback after setback that completely derailed my swimming career and truly made me want to quit the sport entirely. Two knee surgeries back-to-back summers led to extensive muscle atrophy in my right leg requiring intensive rehabilitation that in total lasted roughly 365 days. I struggled with regaining my flexibility, strength, and speed that I once had, and it was getting more draining by the day to come one step closer to where I once was. I had watched my brother, Zach, go through the same recovery process years prior and come out stronger and faster than ever. I assumed my will would be as strong and thus, at the end of my recovery process, I would have the same results as he did. When I was finally cleared to return to full activity, I attempted to give myself some grace, to lower the expectations that I always held so high for myself and found myself on a plateau. I could not come close to any of the times I previously held, and I found that I utterly resented myself for it. I felt as though I was failing myself constantly and I lost faith in my abilities. This cancerous mindset soon spread to other aspects of my life until I had no belief in myself. I could not understand why this was happening to me. Why despite every attempt I could not perform to a high enough level to satisfy my expectations.

Having come out on the other side of this crazy rollercoaster of a journey, still swimming, and deciding to continue to swim at the collegiate level, I have had some time to reflect. I realized that no amount of internal screaming, self-hate, or unreasonable expectations would have altered the course of my recovery in a positive manner that could have resulted in me fulfilling said expectations to a greater degree or in a more timely manner. I assumed that if I willed it hard enough, I would have the power of the world at my disposal and 100 percent control over every aspect of my life. And thus, when I ultimately fell short, I blamed myself for everything. That blame soon turned into resentment and I continued to dig myself into a hole of self-loathing. What I needed as an athlete and a human being was forgiveness; to treat myself as exactly that, I human being. I needed to forgive myself for every external factor I thought I had under control. I needed to forgive myself for my pessimistic view of mistakes, as setbacks instead of opportunities for growth. I needed to forgive myself for being human. And as life, and proper perspective would have it, I did end my career, my senior year, swimmer faster than I ever have, and enjoying an extraordinary year.

And so, I return to the story Ronnie told me. Resentment is easy. It develops in undemanding circumstances. It is incredibly tenacious. It is blinding. The common misconception about forgiveness is that it is always directed at someone else for their benefit; sometimes you need to be able to forgive yourself for yourself. The weight of resentment gets heavier and heavier as years pass. Sometimes it is easier and more beneficial to forgive.

I never thought one seemingly trivial conversation would have such a profound impact on the way I develop as a person, and though learning this lesson took time and many frustrating setbacks, it is one that I will forever remember and forever be grateful for.

Audrey

**The following letter was written by Ariel Indrisano who relocated earlier this summer.**

Thank you.

When I moved here three and a half years ago, I could not have imagined the person I have become. I never in my wildest dreams could have imagined how important a swim team could become in my life. How much of an impact the two words 'Character First" could have on my day-to-day life.

Orinda Aquatics is the most amazing team. The sheer concept of this team, putting character above high performance when it is often swapped, is one in a million. This team has taught me many things about myself, about who I want to be, a selfless, trustworthy, hard-working person. Because of this team I have met someone of the most amazing role models and have made the most amazing friendships. This team is something special, something I am proud to say I was a part of. Thank you for the dedication to improve my swimming from day one. Thank you for the space to grow as an athlete but also as a person, as a leader. Thank you for the hard sets, for pushing me. Thank you for creating this team, this program that has and is changing lives.

I am going to miss everyone so much; this team has been everything to me for so long. I am always happy and excited to be on the deck, to be in the pool. It is going to be hard to find a team on the east coast that lives up to the expectations OA has set for me. Having a close group of kids who are all working towards a common goal is hard to come by.

Thank you and all the coaches for being a supportive and positive force in my life. This team has truly changed me forever. I will miss you all terribly and I can't wait to visit.

~Ariel Indrisano

## The following letter was written by a parent of a graduating senior.

Each year I carefully read through the letters written by the graduating seniors which encapsulate their OA journeys and their profound reflections on learnings, ups and downs, and gratitude. Their journeys have shaped who they are. I read every word of these letters because what could be more powerful, honest, and raw than stories about how strong characters are built. Inspired by these letters, I felt compelled to write a reflection of my own Orinda Aquatics journey, because, after all, we as parents grow and learn too. What is the result of being an OA parent? A wiser and humble parent with a deep sense of gratitude for the OA family who has together raised our children.

At first, OA was just another athletic program - more driving, more coordinating, and fewer free weekends. But little did I know at the time how OA was so much more than an athletic program. Whatever the team needed - I did, if I knew how. Honestly, the more I volunteered, the more I appreciated the program. I was able to deeply understand the meaning of the "Character First" philosophy. It also doesn't escape me that the more I understood the organization, the closer I became to my child. I was able to better relate to the 25+ hours a week spent training, for I knew the OA training routine and philosophy. I truly found joy in spending time volunteering and being there.

OA is founded on the Character First philosophy, which is entrenched in profound wisdom drawn from many famous writers and philosophers. Just read the many quotes in the memory book and on the OA website. OA truly believes that there is a deep purpose to training athletes, which runs parallel with developing caring, disciplined, and responsible humans with integrity. One shouldn't be done without the other, the coaches would say. For this, I appreciate OA so much.

Additionally, the staff at OA honors parents' anxieties, ignorance, and love for our children by partnering patiently with us. OA encourages a true parent community of mutual respect and accountability. I have made so many new friends, and the volunteers do their jobs with dedication. This speaks volumes to how the parent community feels about the importance of OA in their children's lives. And most importantly, thank you OA for creating the perfect environment of growth for our kids - one that strives for excellence, with love and care. Thank you coaches for holistically seeing our children - intellectually, artistically, and athletically, because this is the way we see our children.

An OA Parent