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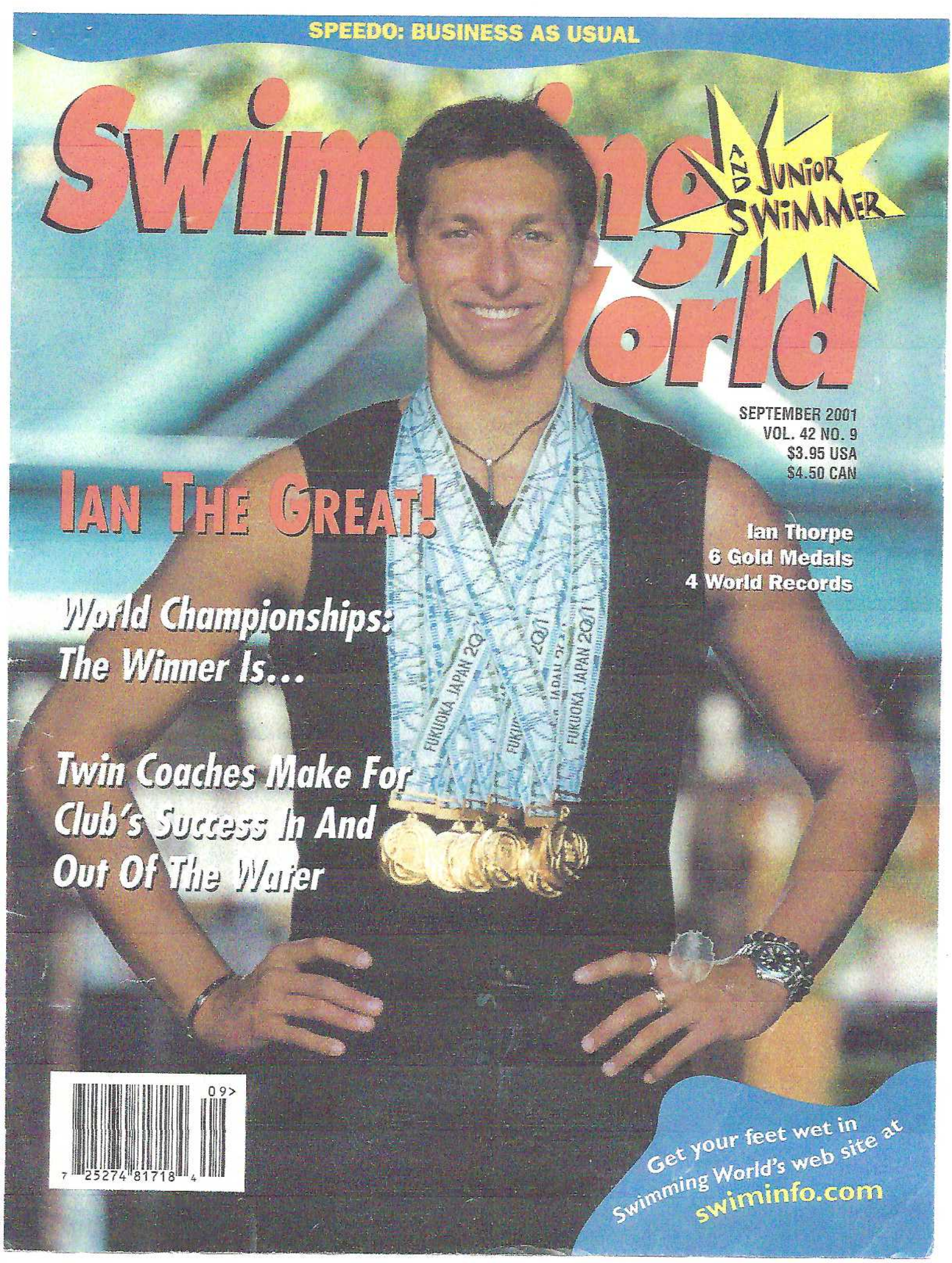

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CLUB SPOTLIGHT

Orinda Aquatics: Finding the Key to Success

Orinda Aquatics' rise to prominence is due to its charismatic twin brother head coaches, Ron and Don Heidary; the values they've instilled in their young athletes; and the genuine sense of family they've developed that encompasses coaches, swimmers and their parents.

By Phillip Whitten

ORINDA, Calif.—The Orinda Aquatics swim team was born a mere six years ago at the Sleepy Hollow Swim and Tennis Club in the sleepy little East Bay town of Orinda, just a stone's throw from Oakland and the San Francisco Bay.

It began, inauspiciously, as a summer league team, but its dizzying ascent to prominence since then has been nothing short of meteoric. Here's their story:

Twin Coaches

Though Coach Ron and Don (or, as the kids call them, "Ronnie" and "Donnie") are only 40 years old, they've been coaching for more than half their lives. And they've developed an unusually close relationship—even for twins.

The brothers began their coaching careers at the tender age of 16, taking the reins of their hometown Pinole Seals summer swim team. They stayed at Pinole for six years until they graduated with B.A. degrees in economics from the University of California at Berkeley, where they both played water polo.

Then it was on to Orinda's Meadow Swim Club for two years. Ron went back to Pinole for eight more years while Don stayed at Meadow earning a living in commercial real estate. The young coaches enjoyed great local success at these clubs, winning seven county championships.

Ten years ago, Don accepted the head coaching job at Miramonte High School. Two years later, his twin was named head coach of Miramonte's arch rival, Campolindo. Both schools had had some pretty fair swimmers. Campo boasted Olympians Matt Biondi and Peter Rocca, to name just two.

But the rival schools blossomed as never before under the Brothers Heidary. Campo has won the North Coast sectional girls'

title two of the last three years. This year, with its best team ever, Campo ranked as the seventh best girls team in the nation in *Swimming World's* national championships (see "Time for a Change," SW Aug.).

Two years ago, Campo built a $4.4 million pool complex, with a state-of-the-art 50-meter by 25-yard main pool, a 25-yard practice pool and a large diving well. This complex is "home" for Orinda Aquatics, as well as Campo High. Miramonte reportedly has a similar pool complex on the drawing board.

Photo by Peter H. Bick

As a sophomore in 2000, Kim Vandenberg swam the nation's fastest high school 100 yard freestyle, 49.41. In 2001, she led the nation in the 200 free (1:48.14).

The bachelor brothers share almost everything. They own a photo-filled home together on (what else?) Coach Lane, and even share checking, savings and investment accounts. Don works until 2:30 each day in San Francisco, trading stocks to keep the brothers financially afloat, then heads over to the pool to assume his coaching duties. Ron has been there all day, earning his "sweat equity." Ron and Don: two totally dedicated coaches.

But they are more than just great, dedicated coaches—at least according to *People Magazine.* The headline for the July 2 issue of *People* read "Sexy, Single, Sizzling," and featured cover shots of George Clooney, Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, Russell Crowe and Josh Hartnett. It was *People's* annual hunkorama, the issue where it names "America's Top 50 Bachelors." There, on page 89, however improbably, are Don and Ron Heidary.

The brothers laugh about their newfound notoriety as two of America's leading hunks. It's a bit embarrassing and, besides, the phone hasn't exactly been ringing with film offers from Hollywood's leading producers...yet. The kids on the team are amused by their coaches' 15 minutes of fame, though there's a lot of pride that comes with the laughter.

Success

But it's not all Hollywood parties and the talk-show, celebrity circuit for the Heidary brothers. These guys are great coaches! And, if anything, the twins' accomplishments in USA Swimming competition have been even more spectacular than their success at the high school level.

In 1998, less than three years after the team was born with 22 intrepid youngsters, Orinda Aquatics finished second at the short course Junior Nationals-West meet in Federal Way, Wash. That summer, at the long course version of the meet in Bakersfield, they repeated as runners-up.

Two years later, they won the women's Junior National-West short course team title and finished second in the combined scoring.

That wasn't all they did in 2000. The team finished first at the California State Championships (Division II), first at the Far Western Championships and first at the Pacific Age Group Championships. In 2001, they won the Midwest Regional title.

Orinda was represented by two swimmers at the U.S. Olympic Trials, five at nationals. Fully 70 percent of the team met the tough qualifying standards to compete at the Far Westerns.

While the Heidary boys emphasize their *team's* accomplishments, they've also produced several outstanding individuals. As a sophomore in 2000, Kim Vandenberg swam the nation's fastest high school 100 yard freestyle, 49.41. In 2001, she led the nation in the 200 free (1:48.14). Amy Thurman, a 16-year-old Miramonte junior, won the high-point trophy at Junior Nationals last year, winning three events.

But Orinda is, by no means, a two-woman show. The team is loaded with talent! There's Katie Arnold, 15, who swam a 56.3 100 back; Maggie Beyer, 14, who went 1:05.70 for the 100 breast; Sara Heath, 14, who popped a 1:53.02 for the 200 free; Justin Chiles, 18, who swam 1:39.71 and 4:30.67 for the 200-500 free; and Scott Metcalf, also 18, who recorded times of 50.33 and 1:49.33 for the 100-200 back. And lots more!

Life After Orinda

If Orinda were only about fast swimming, however, it would hardly be unique. There are, after all, other clubs, some with equally compelling success stories on the wet side. But one thing about which the Heidary twins are most proud is what happens when their kids leave Orinda.

This year, all 11 of the team's 2001 high school seniors went on to college, and nine of them will be swimming for their college teams—at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, UCLA, UCSD, UC Davis, UOP, Johns Hopkins and UC Santa Cruz.

Last year the numbers were the same: 11 grads, nine of 11 swimming in college. Their choices included Stanford, Emory, Maryland, Notre Dame, Johns Hopkins, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara and Dartmouth.

Values

The twins like to quote J.K. Rowling from "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets": "It's our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities."

So it is with Orinda Aquatics, as the coaching team that consists of the twins, long-time assistants Matt Ehrenberger and Kevin Honey, and part-timers Dave Schurff and Christina Risso, seeks to instill in their young charges not only good stroke technique, but also the skills that will help them make the right choices in life. Every Wednesday, the team meets together, and the coaches pre-

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sent moral dilemmas and tell stories of people who have persevered, triumphing despite overwhelming odds against them.

"If you focus on developing the best person, as a by-product you'll get the best athlete and the best swimmer," avers Coach Don. "If you go the other way—focusing on developing the best swimmer—you probably won't get the best athlete or the best human being. And you might not even get the best swimmer."

"We emphasize the little things," Don says. "Coming to workout on time, working hard (because hard work is, in and of itself, a positive virtue), always using perfect technique. One result is there are no egos on this team."

Orinda Aquatics prides itself on having a family atmosphere. Part of Orinda's family includes (from left) Coach Ron Heidary, Scott Metcalf, Allison Shasky, Justin Chiles, Taylor Dahl and Coach Don Heidary.

The swimmers agree. Scott Metcalf, a freshman at Harvard and a speedy backstroker, is most proud of teaching the "Bear Group"—a group of mentally disabled kids—to swim, and coaching them over the past two years. "My reward is seeing them smile, having them hug me and hearing them say, 'Thank you,'" he says.

His Orinda teammate, Justin Chiles, a freshman at Princeton, sounds much the same note: "Ron and Don are intense about our swimming, but they're more concerned with building character. My goal is to be the best I can be. I love swimming, but I'll never let it take over my life."

Taylor Dahl, who was co-captain of both Orinda Aquatics and Campo High and is now a frosh at UCLA, says: "Ronnie and Donnie are amazing people. And they're great at making *us* better people, not just faster swimmers. They're about teaching us good values, about focusing on the Big Picture."

Allison Shasky, a freshman at UOP, concurs, saying the coaches "helped me grow, both emotionally and intellectually."

Family

The Heidarys talk of their team as their "family." It's a common enough theme in the sports world, and is usually no more than P.R. hype: emotional palaver to sell tickets and put people in seats. But these guys mean it. What's more, they and their team *live* it.

Listen to Scott Metcalf: "Ron's been like a father to me. He's made me the happiest I've been in my life, and the angriest. Mostly, though, he's helped me through some very difficult times."

Or Justin Chiles: "Orinda Aquatics is a true family—the coaches, swimmers, parents—we all know and respect each other, and we all get along well."

Or Taylor Dahl: "For me, what's most important is the Orinda Aquatics family and the many friendships I've developed that will last a lifetime."

The Heidary Twins seem to have found the key to success. Both in and out of the water.

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