



Orinda Aquatics, USA Swimming

Putting Character First

February 2023
Letter to Orinda Aquatics

Each fall, at the Parent and Swimmer Meetings, we offer reminders of the principles on which Orinda Aquatics has been built, the history and qualifications of our staff, as well as our objectives and process. We are very clear on what distinguishes this program, a team that has been profoundly impactful for dozens of years to thousands in this community. On occasion, I feel compelled to reach out in a broader context mid-season, and in response to recent commentary, I am taking this opportunity to do so.

I would like to reiterate a few key concepts inherent in this process. First, for those who seek athletics as a year-round pursuit, or a student-athlete lifestyle at a high level of dedication, the prospect is daunting. There is no *easy* way to navigate this. It is the proverbial path of most resistance. But to echo a quote that Ronnie has shared, "The one who takes the tram to the top of the mountain learns no climber's lesson." The very nature of the demands forges the personal growth and empowerment like few other pathways. We have witnessed for decades that out of this demanding process come better academics, more focused and resilient individuals, and young adults with a more deliberate value system. In the parent meeting Ronnie talked about the anchor that swimming provides, elevating all other areas of one's life. That anchor, while overtly swimming, is actually discipline, perseverance, time management, and yes, pride. Countless athletes, from high school to college, attest to this. But again, it is not easy.

Second, with regard to our cultural pursuit, trying to move eighty plus teenagers forward in a character-driven landscape, and talk about concepts like humility and compassion (keys to truly inspiring teams), is also not easy. We do feel we have moved the needle in this regard, "changed the dialogue" to the broader swimming community, and yes, changed lives (see testimonials), but there are always challenges. "Character first" does not assume impeccable behavior, only that there is a mission and a standard that we hope to draw kids to.

At the risk of re-selling the team, I want to review the broader successes of Orinda Aquatics and note that the achievements of the program and its athletes are a direct and intentional result of *culture and process*. Nothing we do is haphazard or without intent, and two cornerstones - training philosophy and the character-driven backdrop - are particularly deliberate. Although atypical in the world of swimmers, parents, and coaches, we obsess over long-term development and swimmer health and well-being, rather than in the next race, meet, group, or in a peer's performance. We are keenly aware of the demands, and the "obstacle course" that lies ahead. This has played out to the benefit of the athletes throughout our history, as evident below.

From a performance perspective, and from a team of 140 year-round swimmers:

- We have had **sixty** collegiate team captains.
- We currently have over **forty** Orinda Aquatics graduates competing in collegiate programs through the country (see college history on the website).
- We have over **forty** sectional qualifiers (pre-championship meet season - a number that could reach fifty).
- We average 10-14 national level swimmers each year.

These numbers would rival teams five to ten times our size and are truly standard-bearing nationally.

- And finally, Orinda Aquatics has perennially been the highest scoring team in **USA Swimming's Virtual Club Championships** for teams under 200 swimmers (out of ~2,000 teams that make up the vast majority of clubs across the country). This program measures all ages (single-age) and all strokes and is a comprehensive barometer of athlete development.

For over forty years, our staff has been driven to pursue a double mandate of building successful athletic careers within a highly personal growth-oriented culture. Examples of our competence, experience, and achievement include:

- Certified **ASCA Level 5** (highest coaching recognition)
- Past President of the **American Swimming Coaches Association** (with five US Olympic Coaches on the Board)
- Board member of the **World Swimming Coaches Association** (developing coach education coursework for coaches world-wide)
- Asked to consult on **USA Swimming's** character course.
- Taught age-group and club development around the world (China, Europe Canada, Mexico, Africa)
- Authored and taught a character course that has been presented to thousands of coaches.
- Most successful swim coaches in **Contra Costa County** (rec teams) history
- Most successful swim coaches in **North Coast Section** (high school teams) history (by far)
- Recognized (nationally) by **The Positive Coaching Alliance**
- Have developed over 250 national-level and Olympic Trial swimmers.

With regard to the two cornerstones of culture and training, I would like to add a few comments. You would be hard-pressed to find a competitive athletic program that cares more about your children as people than as athletes, cares more about their happiness than their performance, and never compartmentalizes life outside of team with the needs of its members. One would also be hard-pressed to find a program and coaches that care as deeply for their athletes at age *twenty-two*, or their genuine happiness and value system at *thirty-two*, as we do. Regardless of the level one competes at (JO's to Olympic Trials), it is imperative for us that each athlete takes with them life lessons, values, and personal growth, and that in some subtle or significant way, they are better from their time in the sport and with this team.

Regarding training, which is a byproduct of culture, our objective is to create healthy, passionate careers that extend on to a collegiate experience. We intentionally under-train early, and yes, perhaps sacrifice earlier success (10-13), with deference to technical development. What we have found through decades of dedicated effort and planning is that this methodology supports continued development and maintains passion well into college. We do try to "begin with the end in mind" and are very clear on the end-game as *we* see it.

First-hand verification of the process can be found on the website under Character/Testimonials or in the graduating Senior Letters. While it may be difficult in the moment to appreciate the process, these comments shed light on the longer-term effects and the personal impact from the journey, and the "uphill climb". This, and our results, are the truest assessments of the nature of Orinda Aquatics or the competence of the coaches.

To look forward, we are excited to resume our tradition of team travel and team-building in Clovis next week and to continue both the following weekend at Sectionals in Novato. The spring will bring exciting competition at the age-group level and through the high school championship meets. We are eager to see what lies ahead.

As always, we feel incredibly fortunate to have the strong board, committee, and parent support that we do, and are extremely grateful for all that you do to support the program and your children to be student-athlete-leaders at this level. Please know that we are always here to support your children and your families in any way we can, and we welcome any opportunity to learn how we can better serve you.

I will conclude with a recent poignant note from a former swimmer. *"Orinda Aquatics was truly the turning point in my life where I began to believe that I could trust people (other than my family) and that people loved me. There was no greater gift than that. I am lucky that I had such a strong foundation with Orinda Aquatics. Thank you."*

Sincerely,
Donnie Heidary