

Orinda Aquatics Year-End Letter 2023

Thirty Years



Donnie & Ronnie Heidary



“The truth of your character is expressed through the choice of your actions.” unknown

A Look Back at Three Decades

As we begin a new year, and actually, our 30th, we would like to wish everyone a very Happy Holiday and a Happy New Year, and reflect on what this team has accomplished over the past three decades. Time does move quickly. From twenty-five rec swimmers training at Sleepy Hollow (and DVC, and Contra Costa College), the team has established itself as one of the premier smaller clubs in USA Swimming, and more importantly, has become a culture beacon for not only the swimming world, but for youth sports in general. As one veteran coach offered, “Orinda Aquatics is the gold standard.” His reference was to high-level performance year-after-year and decade after decade, to professionalism, to the organization, to industry leadership and service, and to a culture that has “changed the dialogue” in youth sports, as the Executive Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association asserted.

This team has gone from a small group of apprehensive rec swimmers with no true home, and a group of passionate (and obsessive) rec coaches from Pinole, California (*far* from a swimming hotbed), averaging less than 150 swimmers over its history, to:

- Winning Junior Nationals (within five years), Far Westerns, the Western Zone Senior Championships; with swimmers breaking national high school, Pacific Swimming, and Junior National records
- Training twenty-eight Olympic Trial Qualifiers (with twelve OA swimmers at the 2008 Trials)
- Developing over 300 national-level swimmers and high school All-Americans
- Creating the most efficient and productive club under 200 members in USA Swimming (Virtual Club Championships) over the past two decades, among ~2,000 teams
- Having sixty Orinda Aquatics swimmers become collegiate team captains, with forty to fifty competing annually in collegiate programs at all levels (with five OA swimmers at Cal and four at Pomona in 2024)
- Becoming the most successful coaches in Contra Costa County (rec) and North Coast (high school) history, dominating both
- Creating a 380-page Character First manual that has been presented to, and embraced by, thousands of coaches
- Developing and running a Character Camp for 10–14-year-olds, focusing on character in swimming and in life
- Lecturing on culture and club development nationally and internationally
- Becoming Board President of the (12,000 member) American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA)
- Serving on the Board of the World Swimming Coaches Association (WSCA) and USA Swimming
- Writing for Swimming World Magazine, NISCA (Nat’l Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association), ASCA, and WSCA
- Being nationally recognized by the Positive Coaching Alliance
- *And please see the TeamFeed for the incredible performances this December at AGC, Santa Clara, and the top ten finish at Junior Nationals (four team records and one Pacific Swimming Record - Stella Canoles – 14, 50 Free 22.89)*

We guess the pressure is on for the next thirty years!

But the most significant achievement of Orinda Aquatics has not been in any of the above, or in anything quantifiable. It has been in the deep-seated conviction to create an organization driven by human pursuits and not athletic ones, and to care far more about personal growth than performance. It truly has been in “taking the road less travelled by” in youth sports, and yes, the numbers do ultimately speak for themselves, *and* justify the process. It has been in giving the true benefits of the sport, and of athletics in general, *back to the athlete*.

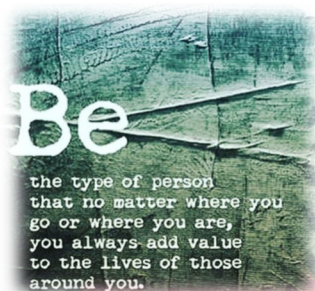
It has also been in creating goodwill with countless coaches pursuing this model, realizing the transformative benefits to their teams, to performance, and to the lives and well-being of those they coach and serve. It has been in coaches seeing that it *is* possible to create a program based on integrity and mutual respect where everyone can and should pursue leadership, not to mention humility, service, and compassion. Margaret Meade said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens (or athletes) can change the (swimming) world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” And we have.

The team philosophy resonates every year at this time as college swimmers return, and post-grads stop by to check in. After college and life updates, the conversations frequently come back to humble beginnings on the team and the lessons learned on the journey (see twenty-five years of powerful senior letters). Even the greatest challenges are seen in hindsight as opportunities for growth. As these young men and women stand on the deck and reflect, they too appreciate, not the meets and times, but the process, the growth, their teammates and relationships, and for an alternative to the contemporary social trends.

And while theirs' are inspiring stories, they were once where your children are today, and we are very confident that we will be having similar conversations in the years to come, with your children. From letters we receive, to graduating swimmer and alumni notes, testimonials, and parent reflections, such as the ones at the end of this letter, we see that sports can be embedded into the life of a child and truly become a foundation of work ethic, resilience, selflessness (team commitment), academics, leadership, and yes, a value system learned from the athletic process and team philosophy. These concepts seem to devolve more than evolve in society as time passes, especially with the advent of social media. With the right message, leadership, and of course role models, we have seen "swimming" become so much more than an athletic endeavor, thanks to these inspiring young athletes - your children.

Coaches around the country must decide on, or balance, success in the here and now (solely performance-driven), vs. values carried over a lifetime (life-driven). These become *very* different pathways and experiences. The adept and caring coach attempts to straddle both successfully. While not easy, it has been our mission to maximize both. And we would add, if a coach doesn't care about what is taken beyond the club, the answer is obvious (again, see the note at the end of this letter).

"It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare." Mark Twain



Person (teammate)



Athlete



Both



Life

"What you do makes a difference, and what you have to decide is what kind of difference you want to make." Jane Goodall

Academics

With academics a core value of Orinda Aquatics, our student-athletes have performed as well as any group in the nation, with an average GPA among the 90 Senior swimmers, at 4.0 (as year-round athletes). They dispel all myths of athletics mitigating academic performance, with the vast majority becoming Scholar Athletes (high school), Scholastic All Americans (USA Swimming), or Academic All Americans (NISCA). They collectively create a high-level academic environment and show that athletics can actually enhance academic performance. And what is most impressive is the number of athletes that go on to compete at the intercollegiate level, or club level, and, as mentioned, nearly sixty Orinda Aquatics swimmers have become collegiate team captains. On a team per-capita basis *or* an absolute basis, this is without question *extremely* impressive. Our Class of 2024 further exemplifies the outstanding student-athlete success at Orinda Aquatics, with sixteen committed to swim in college. They are truly an extraordinary group and class, and we could not be more proud of them. With some commitments pending, they are:

Class of 2024

First	Last	College	Aquatics
Natalie	Aiken	Georgetown	Swimming
Mollie	Appl	Pomona	Swimming
Emilia	Barck	Brown	Swimming
Maddie	Blackwell	Dartmouth	Swimming
Meliana	Calica	Westmont	Swimming
Jasmine	Fok	Georgetown	Swimming
Theo	Holtzman	Pomona	Swimming
Reid	Lalli	Occidental	Swimming
Kaitlin	Lee*	Georgetown	Swimming
Lulu	Martin del Campo	Carleton College	Swimming
Olivia	Pettitt	Tufts	Swimming
Adriana	Smith	Cal	Swimming
Parker	Smith	Middlebury	Swimming
Miranda	Stevenson	UC Santa Barbara	Swimming
Lily	Struempf	U of North Carolina	Swimming
Taryn	Veronda	Amherst	Swimming
Whitney	Wilkalis	UOP	Swimming



Parent and Athlete Reflections

We would like to close with some letters; three from parents with varying perspectives, and two from athletes written well after graduation. Each offers a poignant look at the lasting and life-changing benefits of placing culture and character at the heart of the program, as the foundation of the sport, and as a life anchor.

Parent letters

I'm not sure if you have seen the article(s) about Mary Cain and the Nike coaching abuse. I wanted to forward it to you and express to you how grateful we are that you and your coaches provide such a positive coaching environment for the OA kids and my daughter, and how much putting "Character First" means to us.

I grew up a nationally ranked swimmer with dreams of competing at the highest level, but what is not commonly known is that those dreams were cut short by overtraining, constant verbal and emotional abuse, and chronic injury. I honestly never wanted my kids to ever swim in a year-round program as I had, and I had little hope that much had changed in our sport over the years. The Mary Cain coverage really hit a deep chord with me and caused me to reflect as her story was so similar to mine. But it also made me realize how grateful I am that my child joined Orinda Aquatics. It was with great hesitation that we finally let her continue her swimming dreams with a year-round program, but we put our faith into the positive coaching framework of OA's "Character First" mission, and we haven't looked back since.

Your positive coaching, and "Character First", have made all the difference, and has restored my faith that there are people out there doing the right thing for our young athletes. We thank you and all of the coaching staff for providing a safe and healthy environment where our daughter can continue to thrive and grow. She has developed into not only an amazing athlete, but also a truly outstanding human being who cares deeply about others and doing the right thing...and best yet, she still has so much ahead of her.

When I was her age my swimming career was pretty much all but over and it took me a lifetime to put the gravity of it all behind. We are so grateful that, because of Orinda Aquatics, her journey has only just begun. Thank you for being such an important part of it and for being a shining example of what positive coaching really looks like. Best always.

It is hard to believe that we have been gone from Orinda for eight years now. We have such fond memories of OA and are forever grateful for everything you taught our entire family. Our son got so much out of his OA experience, but not only from swimming. In fact, as an adult he will tell you the lessons learned are life changing and influencing. In the long run, it has nothing to do with the sport of swimming. Of course, you know that, but for parents and swimmers in the moment it isn't always obvious. OA was such a huge part of our lives. Now that our son is an adult, I see so many of his personal qualities that are a direct result of a "Character First" culture. There were bumps along the way, but the life lessons and habits have served him so very well. We cannot thank you enough for all you did to help mold him into the caring, successful, and focused man he is today. If any parent wants to know why OA really matters, I am happy to espouse how it can change a young person's entire life! Take care and be well.

Each year I carefully read through the letters written by the graduating seniors which encapsulate their Orinda Aquatics 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 OA 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. 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 a "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 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. Also, 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.

Swimmer letters

I can only imagine where I would be today, right now, if I had never joined Orinda Aquatics back in seventh grade. I see myself spending this Saturday night in my parentless house with a dozen members of my high school's top partiers, already a few drinks deep in my parent's liquor, behaving like a sloppy mess. I see myself dancing with boys I don't even like, breaking my mom's glass top coffee table, and getting into a car with a girl who swears she's safe to drive but clearly isn't. And I wouldn't even care. It would just be another typical Saturday night. Instead, I'm here sitting on my couch writing a letter to the team that changed the entire course of my life, the team that I owe everything to.

In middle school, I found myself, like so many others do, at a crossroads of sorts. The girls I considered my best friends were making choices that made me uncomfortable on all kinds of levels, but I could still feel myself slipping down with them. Looking back, I can see just how far I was about to fall. After joining Orinda in seventh grade, I made the choice to stop hanging out with those girls. Over time, I began to categorize my friends, as so many other swimmers do, as "school friends" and "swim friends." It wasn't long before "swim friends" was shortened simply to "friends". My life went from slipping downwards, and slipping fast, to something entirely different and positive.

I have so much gratitude towards Orinda Aquatics for everything that the team has done for me over the past seven years. To the coaches, I owe not only my career in the pool, but also the relationships that I consider some of the most important in my life. I know that there are very few people in the world who would do for me what Donnie and Ronnie would in a heartbeat, and I cannot express how thankful I am to have these two people in my life. And to my teammates, well, I love you. We've been through a lot together and I know that in the end we're here for each other. To the girls in my class, you have been amazing friends over the years, and I could not be more grateful. OA has given me so many lifelong relationships, and for that, there is nothing I can say but thank you.

"Character First" became the basis for my entire high school belief system. It has changed me for the better in countless ways and it can define a person for their entire life. I am so grateful to Orinda Aquatics for not only shaping me into the person I am today, but also for making me realize who that person is. Because of Orinda Aquatics, I know my values, and I'm standing by them. I truly hope that the same has happened for my peers and will happen for those to follow. EE

I am writing to you because I am in one of the most awesome classes ever. It is a college freshman athlete class based on character development and how to be successful both in and out of the pool throughout our time here at school. After an amazing person spoke, we were given an assignment to write to a person or persons who have impacted our life and helped us to develop into the person we are today. There is no one better to write to than the two of you.

I think about where I would be in life if I was not introduced to Orinda Aquatics, and honestly, it's scary. I was becoming a person I did not want to be and never thought I would be. I never realized what it was like being around negative people because that person was always me. Today I cannot stand to be around negative people and I make a choice not to. I realized that getting caught up in everyone around me was not how I wanted to live my life. I need to surround myself with the kind of people I want to be like, and I do. Additionally, I was not sure I even wanted to swim again. You both have made me fall back in love with the sport I used to dread, and it is all for the right reasons. And I have learned what is truly important in life and I am not sure I would have figured it out if OA was not there for me. It's hard to believe that being in one place for such a short time has completely changed my life. Thank you for teaching me so much. PM

"A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't want to go, but ought to be." Unknown

I wanted to write you a note to thank you for writing a letter of recommendation for me— but it dawned on me that I have so much more to thank you for. I've been slowly but surely trying to find the words to articulate exactly how you and Orinda Aquatics have impacted my younger years and how to express my gratitude. I grew up reading the Orinda Aquatics senior letters, and I was always excited to write my own; to share the wisdom, knowledge, and lessons I had learned along my journey. And though I may not actively swim for Orinda Aquatics anymore, I still feel that part of my identity is forever tied to the team and its values. I hold the “big picture” very close to my heart, so I present to you: my long-winded, *big-picture* way of saying: thank you.

I still have all of my meeting printouts; I've never thrown one away, even though my last OA meeting was nearly 4 years ago on Zoom. My family even has “The 17 Signs of Immaturity” taped up in our kitchen. We periodically forget it's there until a guest comes over and points it out. I occasionally stumble upon the stack of printouts in a box in the closet when looking for something, and when I do, I take an hour to sit down and reread them. To this day, I still find myself thinking about Robert Frost's “two roads diverged”. It was this very poem that sparked my love for poetry and prose (so thank you for that!!). I'm sure that many look back on their time at OA and define their memories by the popped times, the big meets, and the moments of pride. I've found my own memories to be frankly the opposite; the small things that humbled me have defined my memory of the team, weekly meetings being one of them. The messages communicated within those meetings continue to inspire me and form my decisions today. Orinda Aquatics has brought out the parts of me that are strong, grounded, and authentic. And truly, none of it would've happened without those meetings and without you taking the time to care about each one of your swimmers. Thank you.

You have a true gift to see things within other people before they see it within themselves. It's something I admire about you, and I hope that one day, I will be able to understand people in the way that you do. You saw the leader in me before I did. You insisted on putting me in leadership roles like running dryland until I started to embrace that part of myself. I can't thank you enough for seeing *me* at that age. Knowing that someone outside of my immediate family believed in me so strongly meant, and still means, the entire world to me. The platform I was given on OA to be a leader empowered me to lead with character first in other parts of my life, as I now represent my entire high school as ASB President and volunteer as a STEM mentor for girls at underserved elementary schools. It wouldn't be until years later, looking back, when I would begin to understand what you'd say about leadership being a path of most resistance. Being a leader means being brave in the face of things that challenge us. A lot of times, taking a look in the mirror and seeing yourself is the bravest thing you can do.

As a senior, I've spent a lot of time looking into that mirror that you held up for me and thinking about who I am now. I think that I'm doing right by my 13-year-old self; if 13-year-old Elsa had current Elsa as her senior buddy, I think she would be blown away (and a bit starstruck). For a while, I struggled to define myself outside of the activities I did. I felt that all of my friends had their ‘thing’, and I didn't. I never fit into a single box, even after an extensive search for the perfect one. But the only boxes that exist are the ones we put ourselves in. Some time ago, I decided I'd much rather be defined by who I am, not *what*. To be remembered as a person who was kinder than necessary, as a person who followed their gut, as a person who lived with true integrity and purpose. Not by the classes I took, the sport I played, or the clothes I wore.

Life has come at me pretty fast since I left swimming. I've navigated a post-Covid world, handled waves of health issues, dealt with loss, and made a lot of hard decisions. The resilience I learned from swimming has no doubt made these challenges more scalable, and I am grateful for that. I still get emotional when I think about my time on OA. I can't help it; the support, friendship, and camaraderie between the team and the coaches is something that I am still chasing down. I find that my swimming connections are still strong to this day— I've run into my swim friends grocery shopping, at music festivals, high school graduations, and sports games. I've reached out to older graduated swimmers throughout my college process, and it warms my heart knowing that those connections won't go away, even as time passes. Part of my heart will forever and always belong to the people on OA.

I started my senior year with a simple goal in mind: the goal of inspiring someone. I've seen firsthand just how powerful inspiration can be, as you have been an inspiring figure in my life. If we're lucky, every so often someone comes along with enough passion to leave a lasting impression on our lives. You have left the most positive mark on mine. I've learned so much from your humility, selflessness, compassion, servant leadership, and courage. Your dedication to the team, its success, and culture is nothing short of remarkable.

What Orinda Aquatics stands for is so important. You're shifting culture in a world of conformity and trends, and valuing the development of the person, not just the athlete. In a world where we all just want to be seen, you saw me before I did, gave me a chance to grow, and have supported me through every decision and change. A million times over, thank you. For everything. Character first, always. All my love, Elsa Hartley