

Published August 8th, 2018

Top swimmers shine at OMPA

By Jon Kingdon



Kate Rochios, Moraga Country Club (MCC), 13-14 Girls Backstroke start. Photo Gint Federas

With the clarion call of car horns blaring throughout Lamorinda last weekend, it could only mean one thing - the 62nd annual Orinda/Moraga Pools Association Championship Meet. With 1,698 swimmers, 600 volunteers and up to 5,000 fans, this is an event that always seems to bring out the best in the competitors with a large majority of the swimmers improving on their best times coming into the meet. There were 476 swimmers that qualified for the county meet to go along with 378 more swimmers who met or surpassed the qualifying times for the upcoming county meet. Soren Jensen who swims for the Orinda Country Club recorded a time of 26.52 in the 15-18 boys backstroke, which was amazingly 10.39 seconds better than his seeded time.

For the 18th straight year, Orinda Country Club (4876) came in first, followed by Meadow (3044.5) and Sleepy Hollow (2855.5).

Matt Ehrenberger just completed his 25th year as the head coach for Sleepy Hollow appreciates how special this meet is: "My swimmers know that this is not just another meet. This is their Olympics, a culmination of 15 weeks of hard work for them and their team. It's a way for them to confirm that they can be what they want to be. These swimmers have been starting their workouts at 7:30 and it needs to be more than about swimming. It has to do with their team and their teammates."

Ehrenberger highlighted three of his seniors, Christian Meckfessel, Zoe Zabetian and Kate Minden, citing their spirit and commitment to swimming: "They are more than just about swimming. Committed and hard workers. They have been solid swimmers all the way through along with impeccable character." Meckfessel who will be swimming for Cal Poly SLO next year has been swimming for Sleepy Hollow since he was 6 and appreciates how special this meet is: "My best memory goes back to when I competed for the first time when I was 6 years old, standing on the block waiting for the starting gun with the people screaming. It's a selfless event where kids have fun and there is lots of spirit. Coach Ehrenberger is one of the greatest people I have met. He raised so many of us and has been a role model for me, teaching us to have pride in ourselves and in everything that we would do in and out of the pool."

Minden who will be attending UCLA next year came away with a similar reaction to Ehrenberger: "He has also been a role model to me and has shaped me who I am today. This meet is so special because it is the culmination of our season and the whole community is involved and is a little sad because this is my last meet for Sleepy Hollow." Even though the County Meet is still to come, Minden sees OMPA as the penultimate event of the season: "The county meet does not include our entire team. Here we root for all of our swimmers in every event."

Meckfessel attributes the better times to a couple of factors: "For this meet, we do things like shaving down and there is real inspiration from the intense support from the crowd. Along with the swimming, the competition, the atmosphere and the training, it's the people that have been most special to me. Nothing makes people closer than being half-naked and working out at 6 a.m."

Katrina Drake who swims for Orinda Country Club and will be playing water polo at UCLA next year set meet records in the 100 IM, the 100 free and the 200-meter relay. Drake also finished in first in the back stroke. Though she did not set the meet record in this event, the record she did not beat was the one she set last year.

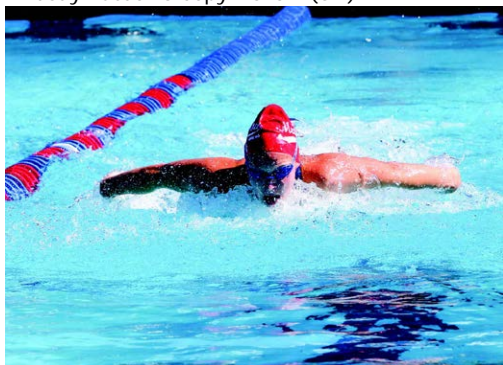
Drake whose Miramonte High School water polo team won the championship this year had similar success at the OMPA meet. "Water polo is strictly a team effort. Swimming with the Orinda team is a combination of an individual and team event. This is a special event albeit a little bitter sweet because it is my last time to compete here because all of the teams are here unlike the dual meets and there is such support from the community. Coach (Steve) Haufler has played a huge part in my success as did Matt Ehrenberger when I began at Sleepy Hollow. Simply, Steve puts all of his heart into making us better swimmers."

For the seventh straight year, the East Bay Sea Serpents, a team comprised of special needs athletes competed in their relay prior to the other clubs relays to great fanfare from the crowd. Speaking for the team, Mitch Reed raved about the experience: "Our kids really look forward to this meet. There is great crowd support. Each swimmer can have their own success whether is just finishing a lap or learning a new stroke."

Steve Christensen, whose daughter Alexandra has been with the team for three years, shared his feelings: "The program allows Alexandra to be included and involved with the team. I have seen improvement in so many areas. She has become more physical and even eats and sleeps better. It's been a magical experience for our family."



Lindsay Lucas -Sleepy Hollow (SH)



Grace Tehaney, Meadow swim team



Justin Cole, Moraga Valley Pool (MVP)



Lily Holloway, Moraga Country Club (MCC)

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