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## Mats 18U girls water polo victorious at Australian Youth Water Polo Championships

By Jon Kingdon



Mats Championship Water Polo Team with head coach John Roemer (far right), and assistant coach Clay Douyere (far left). Photo Jon Kingdon

approach from his usual coaching perspective: "Our goal was to go over there and have fun, spending a few weeks in Brisbane, Australia. I used to coach over there in college, so it was like going home in a way for me. The whole country of Australia was involved in the tournament, and it was a good learning experience in that the water polo over there is very good," Roemer said. "So, we went there and won the whole thing, which we did not really expect to do."

Roemer called up his Miramonte players to help put together the team and told them to pick some girls that they wanted to play with and also three other girls to share a room with for two weeks. "John asked for our input because we all know each other from club teams and playing against each other and we gave John the names and he would reach out to them or we would," Rosalie Hassett said. "I had played with all of my teammates at one time or another, so we were all pretty close going into the tournament."

The team had limited practice time and were able to scrimmage at the Olympic Club. After taking a 14-hour non-stop flight to Brisbane, Australia, the Mats trained for a week with the Australian Mermaids team and a couple of teams from New Zealand to get used to playing together.

Roemer used the same triangle offense that he has had so much success with at Miramonte and had similar success in Australia. "With the triangle offense, we move all the time, and our opponents did not know how to defend it with our cross passes for goals, which is something that their coaches hadn't seen before," Roemer said. "In this offense, our players learn how to play every position and they're not just role players, which expands their water polo IQ immensely, and they start understanding what their strengths and weaknesses are."

The offense was new to many of the players, but they were able to pick it up fairly quickly. "What helped was that all of players had at least played against that offense, so they kind of knew the basics and since we had a group of very resilient players, they were all really quick to catch on," Hassett said.

Lily Holloway, in just her freshman year, played against Miramonte five times last season. "The triangle offense was just a little bit different at first," Holloway said. "Because I've played defense against it at Campolindo, I picked up on it quickly and because everyone on the team was so skilled, they were able to do so as well. It's the type of offense that if you run it well, it can be unstoppable."

The Mats also had to adjust to the style of play of the Australian teams. "Over there, it's more international style and physical play," Roemer said. "The hardest thinkg we had to overcome was their physicality. They would grab and pull around and the officials would not call it the first or second time, but they would the third time."

That style of play did not catch the Mats unawares. "Since John had played over there himself, he gave us a heads up on that," Hassett said. "He would tell us how we needed to start practicing with the physicality that we needed to show up with and not build into it once we got there."

"They were super physical, and we had to work extra hard to earn a foul and an ejection, but we got used to it over time," Holloway concurred.

How do you top a four-year run with three NorCal Championships (with one championship canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and a combined 94-2 record? For Miramonte girls water polo head coach John Roemer, it was a matter of putting together a team comprised of five Miramonte players (Rosalie Hassett, Audrina Kang, Ally Larsen, Alison Sagara, and Bea Hearey) and Lily Holloway (Campolindo) along with seven other players from the East Bay and taking it over to Australia to compete and ultimately win the 18U Australian Water Polo Championships, which is the equivalent of the U.S. Junior Olympics.

Roemer, whose team finished second last year in Australia, asked about bringing a team over again this year and the Australians responded accordingly: "Absolutely, we'd love to have you," Roemer was told.

Roemer named the team Mats Polo (a take-off on the Miramonte nickname Matadors) and took a different

The Mats won seven straight games with their only real challenge coming in the semifinal game with a one goal win over the Balmain Tigers from Sydney. "This was their National 18 and under youth team," Roemer said. "They were really good, dialed in and well coached by a professional coach they brought in from Spain and that's why they were so good."

The championship game against the North Brisbane Polo Bears proved to be anticlimactic. The Mats led 12-3 at halftime and the final score was 18-8. "Winning the championship by 10 goals was a little underwhelming because no one was cheering for us," said Hassett who scored four goals. "The fans were a little bitter about it but that's what we came there to do. Other than this, the Australians were super friendly, and we made friends with the other teams pretty easily."

"I think every single person on our team scored in the championship game and that's how well balanced we were," Roemer said. "Lexi Nelson (Menlo-Atherton) was the MVP goalie for the tournament."

The tournament was a team victory in the true sense of the word. "I made it a point to play everyone the same amount of time because I didn't want the girls to come this far and sit on the bench," Roemer said. "We had five substitutes so we would put those five in and one person would stay in and that's how we substituted in all of the games. It was waves of people coming in and out."

The team also met Roemer's goal to have fun away from the pool. "We stayed in a high rise in downtown Brisbane, and we could go out the front door and there was anything that we could want," Roemer said. "It was Christmas beautiful, and it was fun. We visited Queensland, Surfers Paradise and stayed on Kirra Beach all day and then walked down the street with the vendors and people taking pictures of our players wearing their USA, Stanford, and Mats T-shirts. We also went to the zoo and visited different places in Queensland."

Hassett, who will be playing for the University of California next year, had previously played for the U.S. Water Polo Youth National Team and the USA U16 team in Brazil and Greece, respectively. "This trip was definitely more lax because we were like a high school team, so it was not representing the country and we were not under strict rules so we definitely had a lot more free time to explore the city and get to know the area, which was nice," Hassett said. "We went to the Australia Zoo and the Gold Coast and got to see their crazy big beaches and it was really beautiful and since it is summer over there, the water was so warm."

There was a lot of seafood consumed by the coaches and players, but for Hassett, she and some of the players stuck to what they knew best. "We had an outrageous amount of burgers and it was not too much different from American food," Hassett said.

As the only freshman on the team and in her first time out of the country, it was a unique experience for Holloway. "My teammates felt like sisters to me the whole time and we got super close by the time the matches began," Holloway said. "Our hotel was smack in the middle of Brisbane and we got to go shopping and we went out to dinner a lot as a team so we got to know the city really well and did a lot of team bonding. I gained a lot more confidence playing with so many great players who will be going on to big-time colleges and learning from them just made me a better player along with being exposed to international level water polo which helped grow my water polo IQ and overall knowledge of the game."

It also proved to be a learning experience for the Australian teams. "You might have thought they would get upset because a foreign team won the tournament, but they thanked us for coming and they came to realize that they were going to have to raise the bar now to compete with the U.S. and other places," Roemer said.

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