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Six Pack Plus One Sign with Top Schools

By Lou Fancher



Coxswain Molly Fehr (Miramonte) and rowers (from stroke to bow) are Camilla Polakoff (Bentley High School), Nikki Dahlberg-Seeth (Miramonte), Kelly Bauer (Miramonte), Ali Mittleberger (Brown), Dana Walsh (Miramonte), Barbara Barnes (Stanford), Nicole Sung-Jereczek (Piedmont High School), Katie McKeen (Piedmont High School) Photo Leann Petersen

Rowing appears to attract a special breed of athlete. Nikki Dahlberg-Seeth, once an avid basketball player, discovered a surprising affinity for the sport. "My mom dragged me to the summer camp," she admits, "but after I started the first season, it was definitely something I wanted to do." Asked what particular skills she brings to the team, her answer is simple, but revealing: "I'm good at following." She's not shy, or falsely humble, she just gets it. "There's a code of conduct," she says, "we talk to each other, but you're not pointing at someone and saying what's wrong, because it's about the team." Sitting in a boat, attending to Fehr's calls, and rhythmically mirroring the stroke rower, has taught Dahlberg-Seeth the value of community and the power of cooperation.

Whatever lessons the Miramonte Seven have learned, it's clear that rowing has made them magnets for college recruiters. Dahlberg-Seeth will attend the University of Michigan, Fehr will row for Stanford, and the remaining five rowers have signed National Letters of Intent with Lehigh, Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Pennsylvania (Wharton). While this year's "six-pack plus one" hail from Lamorinda, the OS welcomes student athletes from all over the East Bay. The club offers scholarships for kids from under-served communities and two week trial periods for novice rowers.



2007 freshman four with cox. Left to right: Gia Hallaman, Kelly Bauer, Dana Walsh, Molly Fehr, Nikki Dahlberg-Seeth Photo Beth Anderson

There's something in the air at Miramonte High School. Little else could explain the seven young women rowing their way to graduation and entry into the nation's top colleges. In today's fiercely selective collegiate race, one or two standout student athletes in the sport of rowing would be cause for boasting, but seven is incredible.

Derek Byrnes, head coach of the Oakland Strokes (OS), where the seven Miramonte girls train and race, cannot explain this year's phenomenon, but does speak to the transformational impact of rowing. "Rowing creates a determined, more vocal, more self-assured young woman," he says.

There's a hypnotic factor to learning a single skill, then practicing it over and over before performing it-like meditation, it focuses the mind. And like all sports, it tests the body. "Once you start, you can't stop," says Bill Fehr, Chair of OS's fundraising, "At 500 meters the pain sets in and you have to find an inner strength to keep going 'cause if you stop, it's all over." Not a rower himself, but father of Molly Fehr, the team's coxswain, he downplays his own words but not his daughter's achievements.

Molly Fehr, steering the boat and guiding the crew of eight rowers from her position as coxswain, presents an impressive picture. At 5'3", she's a sixteen-year old charismatic commando hidden in a petite package. Headed to Stanford, the top school in the NCAA's Division 1 women's rowing rankings, Fehr understands her role. "You're directing eight girls who are all bigger and stronger than you are," she says. Earning their trust and respect comes from being on top of every practice. "The best boats are the [ones with the] girls who are best friends, or who become so during the season," she explains, offering the first glimpse into the Miramonte girls' success.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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