

## The Swimming Path to College

By Jennifer Wake



Orinda Aquatics swimmers cheer for one of their teammates at a local meet

Photo supplied by Orinda Aquatics

With a record 3.2 million graduating high school seniors flooding college admissions offices this year, getting into college requires more than good grades or high SAT scores. For some, entrance comes from academic diligence with the support of a collegiate coach.

Ninety percent of Orinda Aquatics swimmers go on to compete in college at many different levels and at some of the finest institutions in the country. But it is not easy. It only comes after long hours, tireless dedication, and being part of an organization respected by college swim coaches.

Twin brothers Don and Ron Heidary started Orinda Aquatics more than 15 years ago to allow swimmers to develop at the national level and go on to intercollegiate swimming.

"In a time when it's so competitive, if they do reasonably well

in the sport and get good grades, they can get into highly regarded colleges," said Ron, who is also the head swimming coach at Campolindo High School. "I literally had kids tell me that counselors said they wouldn't get into any of the UC's or other list of schools based on grades, but they would get into many of them because of swimming."

"We had one kid who was a senior and brilliant, and applied to all the Ivy League schools, but he got wait-listed," said Don, who is also the head coach at Miramonte High School. "It was devastating. The interesting part of the story is that he did not go through a coach. Having the support of a coach can tip it in your favor."

Since its beginning, Orinda Aquatics quickly made a name for itself. The team currently has eight swimmers advancing to the 2008 Olympic trials, four 2007 USA

Swimming National qualifiers, three 2007 SC National Qualifiers, five 2007 Junior National Qualifiers, and eight 2007 USA Swimming Scholastic All-Americans.

"We had national success early on," Don said. "We are college focused, and tell our kids that attitude is your option. You choose – but if you choose nega-

tive, you go somewhere else."

Orinda Aquatic swimmers regularly are accepted to premier colleges and universities including Princeton, UCLA, Stanford, NYU, Notre Dame, Tufts, and Duke University.

Campolindo senior Haley Strausser was recruited by Brown University and Campo senior Nate Erickson had offers from all three military academies, and will start at the United States Air Force Academy this fall.

Orinda Aquatics alumni Scott Lathrope was recruited by Stanford two years ago and is a 2008 Olympic Trial Qualifier in the 400 meter IM and 200 meter Butterfly. "Swimming year round made me focus on academics, as well as disciplining myself," he said. "I had to decide not to hang out as much with my friends because I knew I had to get the work done. People come [to Orinda Aquatics] because they love swimming. The coaches just beat into your head the balance of academics and swimming."

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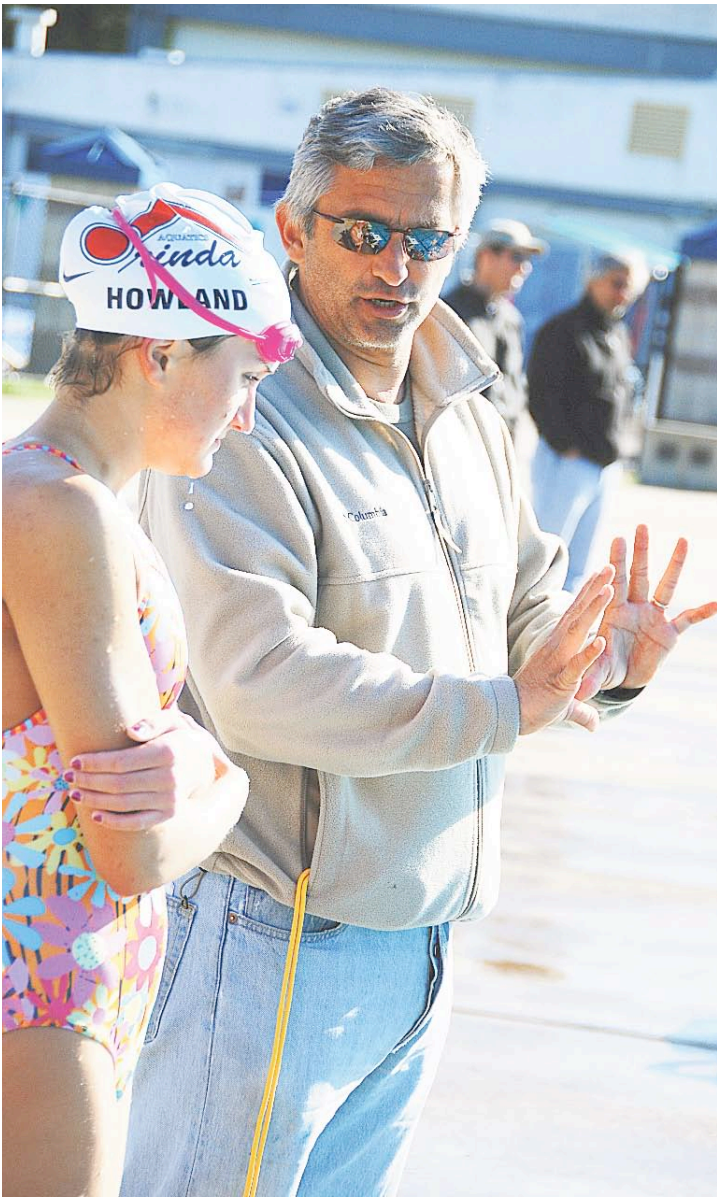
Don Heidary in the middle

Photo Gavin Schissel

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Ron Heidary gives pointers at a Saturday morning practice Photo Gavin Schlissel

Miramonte senior Kendall Weikert, who was recruited into Dartmouth's swimming program (and was one of the eight 2007 OA team Scholastic All-Americans), says that her involvement in Orinda Aquatics helped her find a balance between athletics and academics.

"You have to prioritize in a shorter period of time," she said. "You're part of a group of teens who are making the right choices. It's a really positive environment. Our team is known nationwide and other coaches have seen swimmers from our team."

Ron describes OA as a "safe comfortable place where they don't have to worry about peer pressure and they can be who they are."

"They support each other," he said. "They're academically oriented and are proud of it and respect each other for that. It's required that

they have to make certain social sacrifices. If they can't make the sacrifices, they shouldn't be here."

Although Orinda Aquatics swimmers have done well nationally, Don says they value somebody becoming a team captain as much as going to the Olympic trials. And the training begins early.

Matt Ehrenberger has coached Orinda Aquatics swimmers between the ages of 10 and 12 for the past 20 years.

"A lot of these kids come from rec programs, so I try to bring aspects of training and hard work together, and bring in the fun of rec swimming," he said. "These kids are motivated. They get here and realize they love working hard and they say, 'Hey! I can do this!'"

"The coaching staff and people we work with have been with us since the program started," Don said. "They're like family. There's no way we can have such a strong program without strong, like-minded coaches. And the kids in our program are the best. I can't imagine any other team doing this with no discipline problems."

"We're big picture kind of guys," he added. "Character first is just a very loud emphatic message. Out of that comes discipline, responsibility, respect. It makes you a better athlete; it makes you a better person."

Ron wishes there were more organizations like Orinda Aquatics.

"Teens want to be better people," he said. "If you do the right thing and be the best person you can be, it's a life issue versus a swimming issue. You're a human being a lot longer than a swimmer."