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Swimming with the Heidarys

By Jon Kingdon



Ron and Don Heidary

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Pacific Swimming, the third largest of USA Swimming's 59 regional associations, which comprises 120 swim clubs and more than 16,000 swimmers, named Ron and Don Heidary (Ronnie and Donnie to their swimmers) Oct. 11 as the "Age Group Swimming Coaches of the Year."

With both having received awards and accolades too numerous to mention, having coached and taught swimming for over 40 years, it was just another reminder of what an institution the Heidarys have been to the swimming community in the Lamorinda Area.

It began at the age of 9 for the twin brothers, according to Don Heidary. "We began swimming at Pinole," he says. "As we progressed, along with swimming ourselves, we began helping out with the team, beginning when we were 16. We both fell in love with coaching and working with

kids and we have been coaching together every day since then."

In 1984, with swimming primarily in the summer season, the Heidarys saw a need to provide a fall swimming program for the community and began The Polar Bear Club. Starting with 12 swimmers, this program has grown to over 350 members.

In 1995, the Heidarys co-founded Orinda Aquatics. It was their goal from the start to be more than just coaches to their swimmers. According to Don Heidary, "Our philosophy from the beginning was that integrity and character was not only relevant for the team but for the athletes' personal lives as well. We have tried to make that the center point in everything that we do. In doing that, our swimmers find value in the team and they grow closer and stronger and learn that integrity is important in everything you do. We teach them work ethic, humility, compas-

sion, selflessness and teamwork. Fortunately, these ideas have been embraced wholeheartedly by the kids. They have learned that leadership is being selfless and humble. It is important that as coaches we get to know the kids well and what differentiates them from others, and make the subtle adjustments for each swimmer personally, emotionally, technically and physically."

Ronnie Heidary echoes that sentiment. "We are trying to help the young men and women grow through character and discipline and provide the life values to help them become better, more productive and happier adults. We want to be impactful in their lives. The most important thing to us is that what we do makes a difference and helps the parents in the maturation of their kids."

Channing Hanley, a freshman swimmer at Orinda Aquatics and Campolindo High School, began swimming at age 4 and appreci-

ates the atmosphere engendered by the Heidarys. "Besides being excellent teachers of technique, they create a positive environment for the swimmers and they make us feel confident and relaxed when we are competing."

Vince Castillo, the board president of Orinda Aquatics, discovered how well the Heidarys are respected not just in the Bay Area, but how "they have a very close relationship with a number of the college swim coaches around the nation."

Castillo's son, Vincent, also swims at Orinda Aquatics and he appreciates how they coach his son, not only as a swimmer, but as a person. "Even though this is a very competitive sport, where Donnie and Ronnie have been very successful, it starts with the swimmers being trained to be good people," he said. "You will see all age groups cheering on their teammates. They teach values and skills that apply both in and out of the pool and will stay with them throughout their lives. They learn time management and hard work will lead to success."

Hanley can vouch for the need for time management. "I train six days a week and on three days a week, I train twice a day," she says. "With such a schedule, time management is crucial. Donnie and Ronnie realize that school does have to be the priority."

As a senior in high school, University of California freshman and former Orinda Aquatics swimmer Rishabh Roy was the team's co-captain and was awarded the Impact Swimmer of the Year by Pacific Swimming. He intends to continue swimming for the California swim club this year. Having learned under the Heidarys, Roy was exposed to different training techniques. "Ronnie practices on quick, fast speed work and Donnie was

more focused on drills and then a longer main set – threshold and endurance base," he says. "Their training is long-term oriented – you work on everything and over time you see their training pay off."

Roy has not forgotten the lessons that were taught by the Heidarys. "Their philosophy is character first. They teach that in everything; being a good person, supporting the team, be willing to help out where you're needed. They teach their swimmers how to be better people."

Ron Heidary appreciates how fortunate he and his brother have been to be able to coach in the Lamorinda community. "The swimming facilities in the area are ubiquitous, which leads to a heavy concentration of swim clubs in the area," he says. "The parents understand that this is a healthy sport and if nothing else, they know that their kids are going to learn how to swim."

Working together at Orinda Aquatics is one thing, but Ronnie Heidary, who coaches at Campolindo, and Donnie Heidary, who coaches at Miramonte, face off against each other when these schools compete against each other.

"It is a unique situation," Don Heidary said. "It is an intense meet with the rivalry between the schools but we support all of the kids that are swimming. It's a win-win situation."

As for their legacy, Don sums it up this way: "We believe our commitment to the kids, the leagues, character and team cultures has made a positive difference. It is what we focus on and think about every day."

Says Ron: "It's been a privilege and tremendously rewarding for us to have been and to continue to be a part of these kids' lives."

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