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Margaux McDonald - Success in and out of the water

By Jon Kingdon



Margaux McDonald Photos provided

When you see the term student-athlete, usually there is an emphasis on either the former or the latter. In the case of Margaux McDonald, who will be graduating this year from Miramonte High School, in racing terms, it would have to be called a dead heat. Besides being an all-American swimmer and the team captain at Miramonte, she was the long course junior National Qualifier, swimmer of the year and the team captain at Orinda Aquatics. All of these accomplishments required countless hours in the pool, yet McDonald was able to attain similar results academically, leading to her being recruited and accepted by Princeton University.

McDonald began swimming at the age of 6 at Sleepy Hollow Swim and Tennis Club, under the tutelage of Matt Ehrenberger, before moving on to Orinda Aquatics when she was 10 where Ehrenberger coached her up to freshman year. Besides swimming, she also played soccer, basketball, ran cross country and track and field and danced through middle school. McDonald comes by her athletic talents honestly with both of her parents having been athletes themselves: "My Dad (Trent) was a water polo player and my Mom (Catja) ran cross country and track. They wanted me to know how to swim and I really liked it."

When McDonald moved up to the senior group as a freshman at Orinda Aquatics and Ron Heidary became her coach, he already knew the qualities she brought to the pool: "Margaux was a very good swimmer at the beginning. She was one of the top 11- to 12-year-old swimmers in the Bay Area and I knew she had a lot of potential. She had the talent and was disciplined and conscientious. Those are the things that we built on as she got older."

The demands required to be a top swimmer and the ultimate results are what McDonald finds most satisfying in the sport: "I like that swimming is completely time based so you can see all of your hard work pay off in your times getting better over the years."

Heidary's brother, Don, is McDonald's coach at Miramonte and shares Ron's appreciation of McDonald's talents. "Margaux is an elite swimmer, athlete and leader," Don Heidary said. "She has been a blessing to the Miramonte swim team."

It was Don Heidary who pushed McDonald to focus on the backstroke, an event that was new to her. "When I started training year round, I was swimming the individual medley and the butterfly," said McDonald. "I then began training in the backstroke which was a new event for me and I swam really well at the Junior Nationals in Texas. Donnie put me in the 100-yard Back-stroke at the North Coast Championship where I finished second and then third at the state meet."

It was her success in these events that prompted McDonald to contact Princeton head coach Brent Lundgaard, who soon after invited her to take a recruiting visit which she did last summer.

Prior to McDonald's visit, Lundgaard made a call to Ron Heidary to learn more about her, which very much worked in her favor. "It wasn't until the spring of 2019 that we first learned about Margaux," said Lundgaard. "We only had one or two spots left when Margaux came on our radar. I reached out to Ron, her club coach at Orinda Aquatics where they have a very established culture with coaches who literally have written the book on character development in swimming. The nice part is, when you come across club coaches who know what they're talking about, you really listen. I had a wonderful conversation and he sold me right away."

Ron Heidary, who has had numerous swimmers go on to college, found it easy to recommend McDonald. "She is a straight-A student who is very coachable and always positive. Her time management is excellent and she has a character that is flawless. When you put those things together, she is a 'can't miss' recruit. Fortunately, they saw that and they wanted her in the program."

It turned out to be a great recruiting visit for McDonald. "I loved the campus," she said. "I loved Coach Lundgaard and his training philosophy and the facilities are amazing so it was certainly my first choice."

There was only one spot on the team left for a freshman and soon after meeting with Lundgaard and his assistant coach, McDonald was offered that spot and immediately accepted. It was more than her grades and swimming ability that earned her a place on the team, said Lundgaard: "Margaux's visit was in line with everything we had heard about her and more. We had an instinct that we were going to offer her. On the day that she sat down with me and my assistant - I remember we were eating ice cream - we probably talked for about two hours. We just shot the breeze and right afterwards, my assistant sent me a text that said, 'There's no way we can't offer her.' We both felt that Margaux has this disposition, wisdom and self-awareness which is so far beyond her years. When we are forming our team, that's hard to ignore when you come across that."

Besides her backstroke, McDonald's skill in the freestyle, breaststroke and butterfly were also selling points to Lundgaard. "She swims four strokes; it's all there and you can see the athleticism. As long as she's eager in learning, which she is, and as long as she's competitive and really has a passion for it, then we feel confident that she is going to continue to blossom. Margaux's swimming is great and is going to be impactful for us in any number of events. In fact, I think that she is probably even more versatile than she knows she is."

McDonald feels that there is a lot of room for improvement in her performance, taking the long-term perspective from Orinda Aquatics: "Ronnie's key philosophy is that when you enter high school, it's not how fast you can swim at the end of your senior year, it's how fast you can get by the end of your senior year of college. He sees it as an eight-year process which has been helpful for me because I do have room for improvement in all of my events."

Lundgaard is also looking for McDonald to take that next step: "At Princeton, our swimmers will improve on multiple levels. There was kind of a stereotype that women did not really get faster past 18. The last 20 years have put that on its head. It's common to see women improving not only through college but you're seeing professional swimmers now into their late 20s going with their best times. At 5'7", Margaux will be at the lower end height-wise but she swims big and she swims athletic."

With practices six days a week (double practices three days a week), time management and discipline are essential for swimmers like McDonald to keep up academically: "My days are really structured. I have a sleep schedule so I get to bed at a reasonable time and that has really helped me with my time management. This began my freshman year because it had to."

McDonald is still taking her classes online at Miramonte and looks back with great fondness at her decision to attend Miramonte: "When I began high school, it was between Campolindo and Miramonte because I train every day at Campolindo, but after four years I can say that I am very grateful that I made the decision to go to Miramonte. I really loved having two groups of friends, the people that I swim with (who mostly went to Campolindo) and the people that I go to school with. It was really beneficial for me to have a separate environment that I spend my day in rather than where I train because swimming can be so overwhelming. I knew that I could spend the day with my school friends and not think about swimming and it was a nice break during the day."

It was more than swimming techniques that McDonald took away from Ron Heidary and Orinda Aquatics: "Ronnie was really key in my development. I love the lessons that he taught all of us through swimming and also out of the pool. He's such a positive and encouraging mentor and has amazing morals which he tries to encourage us to also have so he has not only been a key in my swimming but in my development as a teenager into an adult."

Despite all of the travails that everyone is living under, McDonald has still managed to keep her eye on the prize: "Even with the pools closed, I've been able to swim in the pool in my backyard. It's not very long, but it's something just to feel the water."



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