Senior Letters





CLARE BAKER

Vassar College

SECTIONALS QUALIFIER

OA MOST IMPROVED AWARD

NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN

CAMPOLINDO SWIM TEAM MOST INSPIRATIONAL AWARD

FAVORITE QUOTE

Today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.
– Kalidasa

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Avoid becoming too set in one way of approaching a goal. Flexibility is key or you'll only hold yourself back.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

It's always better to take action sooner rather than later, especially when you want to avoid doing something.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

My 100 Back in Oregon, where everything came together for me. Chloe TL was pointing to the scoreboard so excitedly, I knew I had gone under a minute for the first time before even seeing the time.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

Going to In n Out after Clovis 2024—I watched Donnie lead a group of 80 excited swimmers along the sidewalk like the pied piper and the post-meet energy was amazing.

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

I went to Campo golf practice to take just one photo of their team for Yearbook, but we miscommunicated, and they thought I was volunteering to run their whole picture day. They were really excited to get free pictures, so I said nothing about my original plan and stayed for an extra hour taking individual and group shots for their team.

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

When I hurt my shoulder on Sunday at Clovis this year, Calei Calica agreed to swim twice in the same relay so I wouldn't have to swim. I was so nervous to ask her but she was amazingly kind and understanding and seemed really happy to help.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

Open your mind to alternative possibilities.
– Ronnie

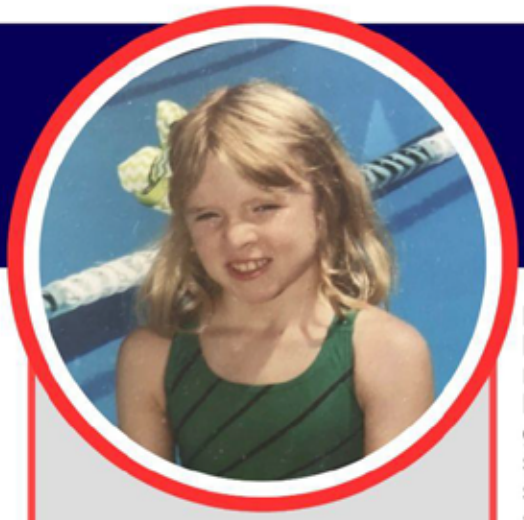
As my time at OA has taught me, progress is not always a straight line. I had a breakout year as a freshman with OA and on Campo's swim team, when I swam the 500 and 200 Free at nearly every meet and improved almost constantly. Committing myself to swimming was easy that year—my potential seemed unlimited, I loved my sport, and I felt like it loved me back. But hopes of greatness in the 500 were dashed when I developed shoulder and back pain. For the next two years, I struggled through long races, modified practices, and seemingly endless physical therapy, losing faith that I would ever improve again. I questioned staying on the team or even continuing to swim at all.

But something always held me back from quitting. The act of swimming was physically painful and discouraging, but I still looked forward to spending time with the people on deck and in the pool. I loved the environment at Clovis, teambuilding exercises during theme week, counting for others, and especially cheering for teammates. So, I focused on improving myself as a teammate, and my team lifted me up after bad races and inspired me not to give up on myself. For two exhausting, injury-marred years, swimming didn't love me back anymore, but swimmers—on Orinda Aquatics and at Campo—still did. And this was even more true after I became an OA dryland leader; talking more often to kids outside my friend group helped me realize that swimming becomes more fun the more people you know.

Among the life lessons OA has imparted, perhaps the most important to me is the value of maintaining a flexible mindset about goals. At the Tualatin Hills meet in Oregon, I was shocked by a huge improvement in my 100 Back, which I considered a secondary event. After that swim, Donnie changed my swimming career with some of the best advice I've ever received: it was "time to move on" from mid-distance freestyle. I realized that I had been too rigid in my approach to swimming, unknowingly holding myself back by focusing narrowly on two specific events. By opening my mind to the bigger picture and embracing an identity shift from "struggling mid-distance freestyler" to "rising backstroker", I gained self-confidence and new possibilities. It's a lesson I'll carry with me throughout my life.

My journey on Orinda Aquatics has been a rollercoaster—but the exciting kind that not only surprises you at every turn but makes you run back into line as soon as the ride ends. I can hardly believe it's almost over. This fall I'll be swimming for my dream school, Vassar College, a prospect that seemed unthinkable during the lowest points. Thank you to my parents: for waking up early, driving us to meets, cheering during every race, working meet jobs to support the team, and everything else you do. I could never express all my gratitude and love for you. Thank you to my coaches: for your advice, long hours of work, and dedication to shaping us into more caring, upstanding people. And thank you to my teammates: you keep me smiling and committed during tough times and brighten every practice, meet, bus ride, and dryland session with your humor and spirit.

Go OA!
Clare



JULIET MCILWAIN

Bates College

SCHOLAR ATHLETE

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN CANDIDATE

US PRESIDENT'S SERVICE AWARD (3 YEARS)

STUDENT-ATHLETE BOARD REPRESENTATIVE

ACALANES HIGH SCHOOL SWIM TEAM CAPTAIN

FAVORITE QUOTE

We are each other's harvest: we are each other's business: we are each other's magnitude and bond.
-Gwendolyn Brooks (from the poem *Paul Robeson)*

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Pace, Pace, Build, Race!

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

Hard work is more important than talent.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

Finally going a 58 in 100 Free as a leadoff in the Clovis relay, and then getting out of the pool and screaming for my teammates.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

Clovis (team building and roommates)

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

Helping a younger swimmer feel included on my high school Viejo trip.

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

I was the lead-off leg of the Clovis relay, trying to get a best time split in the 100 Free. Just as I was stepping up to the block my cap ripped, and I was visibly stressing out. Without being asked, Siena Santos removed her cap and flipped it onto my head, knowing she also needed it for her swim. After my swim, I immediately flipped it back to her so she could dive in. Kindness and teamwork!

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

Don't take the path of least resistance.
-Donnie

I joined Orinda Aquatics during 9th grade after developing a love for swimming during summers on my rec team. I told my mom that I always wanted to be a swimmer for my whole life. My mom suggested trying out for Orinda Aquatics and maybe getting a leg up before the high school season. I was pleasantly surprised that I made the team since I was still developing as a swimmer. When I started in November, after the water polo season, I was immediately impressed by the cohesiveness of the team and the fact that it didn't seem cliquish. Even coming in late, everyone was welcoming and inclusive.

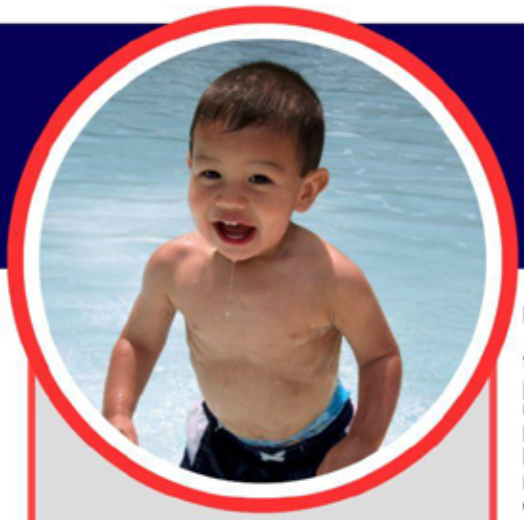
Early on I remember hearing Dom tell us that we should try new events, since we didn't have many meets and it was a good opportunity. I took that very literally and signed up to swim the 400 IM at my first Fall Jamboree. I was a little nervous to swim it since I didn't even swim the 200 IM that often, but right before I got on the blocks I looked up and saw that almost the whole team was standing on the other side of the pool, in my lane waiting to cheer me on. Even though I was scared that all eyes were on me, I felt so supported that I wanted to perform for them. I wanted to be like them. The event itself was a bit of a disaster, but as I climbed out of the pool, barely able to stand, every person I walked by in a red Orinda Aquatics shirt told me what a good job I did, and that I was courageous for wanting to swim it. They made me feel like I belonged, and most importantly set an example of how to be a great teammate. I know this helped me become a better leader with younger swimmers on my high school team and a better friend as well.

It is very rare not to have cliques on a team the size of Orinda Aquatics, which says something about the standards that Ronnie and Donnie hold for each swimmer on the team. They make each of us accountable and show that each of us matters. Through being on Orinda Aquatics I have learned how to deal with being uncomfortable, how not to give up, and most importantly how to have a strong work ethic. All these things strengthened me in school and other areas of my life, including helping me to become more independent.

I want to thank Marc in particular. You have always been so encouraging toward me, even when I first joined the team and you weren't my main coach yet. I always looked to you for technique advice. I want to thank Donnie too, for recognizing the value in every swimmer. I felt like he believed in me as a person, and I was humbled that he agreed to support me in talking to college coaches. I may or may not be swimming in college, but through that experience I learned a great deal.

In closing, I just want to say thank you to all the swimmers and coaches! I feel so fortunate to have had this experience. I will miss the special camaraderie we all had on those chilly mornings and late afternoons. But now I hope to be the one helping to create similar experiences for others as I grow and progress in life.

Juliet McIlwain



GARRETT MOLITOR

Georgetown University

JUNIOR NATIONAL QUALIFIER

SCHOLASTIC ALL-AMERICAN

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN

NATIONAL MERIT FINALIST

ATHENIAN SWIM TEAM CAPTAIN (HELD ALL 8 SCHOOL RECORDS)

FAVORITE QUOTE

A man cannot cross the same river twice, for he is not the same man and it is not the same river.
-Socrates

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Punishing yourself underwater each and every lap WILL pay off. Push through.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

There will always be ups and downs. When you can find the good in the lowest parts and cherish the highest parts, you will have a much, much happier life.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

At Junior Nationals 2023, a meet in which I was only swimming a relay, I swam a 1:06 and earned my first Junior National cut. Right after, Ronnie punched my chest unbelievably hard.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

Before the room relays at Clovis 2025, there were nearly 20 guys behind the blocks, all doing a chant, and we even had people from other teams joining in.

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

Motivational speeches during tough meets.

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

Hugs after a very hard set in practice.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

Not a saying, but Ronnie just wordlessly pointing at you and then out of the pool to get your attention...

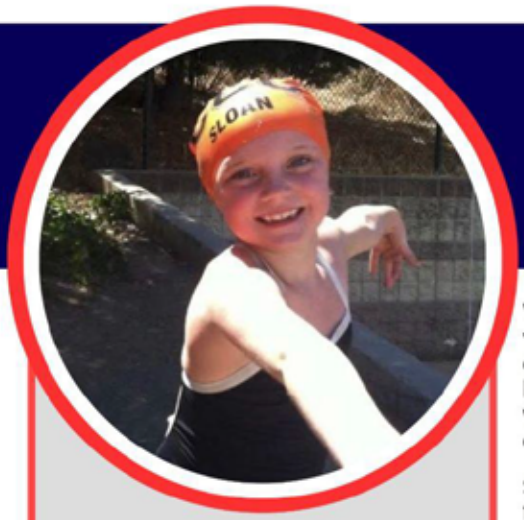
I met Ronnie and OA through high school swimming. A teammate at Athenian (Annabel Piel) introduced me at a time when I was looking at switching teams. I then attended some morning practices to 'test the waters.' At those practices, I discovered Ronnie had a twin and promptly began mixing them up. Ronnie told me that my breaststroke pulldowns, a part of my breaststroke I was proud of, were "nowhere close to competitive." Ronnie then pushed me harder than I had ever been pushed in every part of my swimming. Over the next two years, I met new friends, said goodbye to others, and pushed, again and again. As my pull-downs went further, I was told I needed to get across the pool in fewer strokes. When I did that, I was told to make those strokes come faster. There was always something new to refine, some part of my swimming that could always be better. This never-ending process has built me into the swimmer I am today. Looking back, I could not have been nearly as accomplished in any part of my life if it weren't for the work ethic this team built and demanded of me. This growth wasn't limited to swimming.

When I joined the team, I had to learn everything, starting with how to tell apart Ronnie and Donnie. But as I got better at that, I had to learn names, then build relationships. Every Friday, the team would sit down for a meeting and learn to be a better person as a whole, pushing and pushing to live up to the mantra on our caps: "Character First." Most weeks, Ronnie would sit us down and give us a story. It may have been something he had done in the past, a letter, or even a clip from a news article, but every time we would be presented with an immaculate example of character, and we were pushed to live up to it. We were told stories of walking 20 miles to fulfill a promise made after a car failure, stories of military men refusing to leave a ship until they were certain no one else could be hurt, and letters from past swimmers telling their stories of how they've been affected by those two simple words: "Character First."

More important than times, cuts, or even college recruitment is the impact that putting "Character First" has had on my life. Time and time again, I've been entrusted as a designated driver, to keep a secret, or to be a pillar of support for a friend in need. I've learned through this team that this trust and praise are a privilege, not a burden. Just as I looked up to previous classes of swimmers giving their all for the team, in and out of the water, I've pushed to be a similar role model and to give back all I can. As I graduate, I want to pass a reminder to those who will stay: There is always more to take on, and the measure of your character is not necessarily how much you do, but rather how little you have left to give. I've seen junior group kids, not even teenagers, giving support to the senior group during theme week. I've seen injured swimmers come to the pool just to kick a set, and they still have it in themselves to provide words of encouragement. Every step of the way, this team has encouraged its swimmers to push themselves to be their absolute best in both swimming and life. I couldn't be more grateful for this opportunity.

I want to close by expressing my gratitude. When I joined this team, I was transported from my previous life of showing up, swimming, and leaving. I was jumping into a brand new environment where everyone laughed with each other, supported each other, and most of all cared for everyone else. In my first month on the team, I participated in Theme Week, the annual rafting trip, and every team-building activity Ronnie and Donnie have come up with. If it weren't for their relentless pressure to make sure every kid is included, I don't know if I would have become the person I am today. At my first OA banquet, I'd only been on the team for a month and expected my name not to be called. Instead, Ronnie said, despite only having a short time with him so far, he was proud of what I had done and expected big things. Thank you, Ronnie, for your continuous support. Another thank you to the friends I've made through this team, who taught me that swimming truly is a team sport. And finally, thank you to my parents, who have come to every one of my meets, who have supported me every step of this journey, who have talked with me through college, through plateaus, and through every good and bad experience I've had. I truly could not have had such a wonderful life without the support of each and every one of you.

Garrett Molitor



SLOAN PULLEN

California Lutheran University

OA COACHES AWARD RECIPIENT

SCHOLAR ATHLETE

4-H JUNIOR LEADER

FAVORITE QUOTE

Sometimes giving up is the strong thing, sometimes to run is the brave thing, sometimes walking out is the one thing that will find you the right thing.
- Taylor Swift

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Stepping outside your comfort zone is where growth begins.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

Change can be uncomfortable, but staying the same just to avoid it will only ever hold you back from what's meant for you.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

The Clovis meet, all the memories with the team and finally dropping time in events I hadn't seen improvement in for a while.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

In n Out dinner on the way back from Clovis!

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

I always keep an extra cap and goggles in my parka at meets for people who need a pair last minute behind the blocks!

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

At a summer rec meet when I was little I was struggling to put my hair in a bun and got really stressed out. An older girl noticed and helped me do my hair and cap so I didn't miss my race.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

Lock In.

When I was looking through an old photo book for a picture of myself as a young swimmer, I found an old school assignment of mine with a prompt asking about favorite seasons. Judging by the questionable drawing and handwriting I'd guess the assignment is from first grade. In big letters I had written my response, "I like spring because swim team starts" and included a very poor drawing of myself at a pool with what I think is a kick board.

Some things never change, because every spring and summer I would look forward to being back in the pool with my rec team, Campolindo Cabana Club. Although I tried many sports, swimming was always the one that had my heart. And I truly believe that love for the sport is what pulled at my heart and brought me to Orinda Aquatics.

My time on this team, though short, has been such a gift and truly transformative for me, not only as an athlete but also as a person. When I came to OA last August, I was incredibly lost and uncertain about what my future held for me. In the past I had had a clear vision for my future - it was running in college. I made running my entire identity, and all I cared about were the numbers on the clock, what rank I was, or what my coaches said about me. But halfway through my junior year, my plans were wiped. I had spent a year battling an injury and accompanying that, poor treatment from my coaches and teammates. I was so mentally and physically exhausted by the end I couldn't even think of running without crying, let alone continue on to college.

Leaving running behind was terrifying for me simply because I had no clue who I was without it. But had I never stepped away from running, I would have never been in the position I am today, and more importantly, I would have never found this team.

I am beyond grateful for every coach, parent, and teammate who has made Orinda Aquatics the extraordinary community that it is. I truly couldn't have asked for a more driven, compassionate, and uplifting group of people to surround me. The past several months have been amazing, and I am so blessed to have spent them with you all.

When I first tried out for OA, I had no idea how much it would change my life. I came in with a rather strained relationship with sports and performance. I was stressed about college, unsure of myself, and honestly, doubtful of my potential. But this team met me with open arms. With every practice, every meet, every day, my love for swimming began to grow so strong to the point all I could think was, "I can't ever leave this."

And now, something I once believed was out of reach, swimming in college, is my next chapter. That dream exists only because of the extraordinary people who reminded me why I fell in love with the sport in the first place.

To the coaches: Thank you for more than just the workouts and technical advice. You took the time to check in, to ask questions, and to truly get to know who I was, what I wanted, and where I hoped to go. That care and effort made me feel seen, supported, and capable of dreaming bigger.

To my teammates: You all built a space where I could grow, fail, push myself, and find joy in sports again. That kind of community is rare and I will carry it with me and cherish it forever.

It's hard to say goodbye to a team that gave me so much more than I knew I needed. Though this chapter is closing, the love and lessons I found here will be with me through everything that comes next. Thanks to you all, I know exactly what kind of teammate, student, and person I want to be moving forward.

Best,
Sloan



LANA RICHARD

Wellesley College

WELLESLEY

SECTIONALS QUALIFIER

OA COACHES AWARD WINNER

OA DRYLAND LEADER

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN CANDIDATE

SCHOLAR ATHLETE

4-YEAR CIF STATE MEET ATHLETE

FAVORITE QUOTE

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.
-Aesop

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Growth isn't linear and takes patience and dedication.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

Appreciate the journey because it is easy to get caught up in worrying about the future.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

Watching Emma Shane swim her first backstroke race.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

The OA rafting trips.

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

Inviting younger girls in our group to breakfast on Saturdays for team bonding.

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

When someone offers to put my equipment bag away for me.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

It's a slippery slope!

I started swimming competitively when I was seven. At my first swim meet, I was surrounded by Orinda Aquatics swimmers wearing white caps with the words "Character First." I had no idea what these words meant. I even looked around for higher level groups "Character Second" and " Character Third." As a young swimmer, I was focused on my times. I cheered for my teammates, but I always wanted to win. I was conflicted and I really didn't know how to be a supportive teammate *and* the best swimmer that I could be.

After I joined Orinda Aquatics, started participating in Coach Donnie-led meetings, and spent time with teammates, the phrase "Character First" became real to me. During my first practice, everyone welcomed me. I watched the team set up the pool, working together, waiting for one another before getting in to start the workout. During practices and at meets everyone supported each other and cheered for each other, even if they were competing in the same event. The first time I swam with the Senior 3 group, Audrey Hoover, a teammate, complimented me on my stroke.

I am grateful to Ronnie and Donnie for creating an environment and expectation for swimmers to be collaborative, supportive, and accountable, all while maintaining a positive mindset. Racing my friends became "matching up." Getting beat in practice wasn't defeating, it motivated me and I felt proud of my teammates' progress. For me, the Orinda Aquatics environment was constructive, healthy, and affirming. I feel fortunate to have benefited from, and contributed to, its legacy.

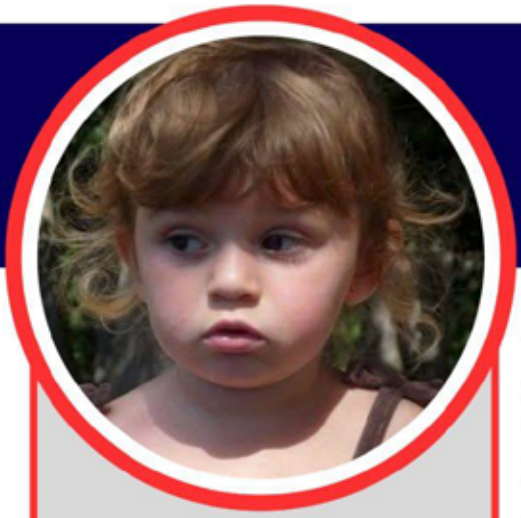
My Orinda Aquatics experience was made possible by the unwavering support of my family - Mom, Dad, and my sister Butterfly. Thank you for driving me to practice in the early mornings and afternoon traffic; cheering for me at local, regional, and state meets; encouraging me to have fun and do my best, and supporting me with my college swim decision.

Donnie, when I joined the Senior 3 group, you shared with me that there was always someone looking up to me, and to be the example that you would want to see. Thank you for having confidence in me to take on that responsibility. I appreciate the amazing team culture you have created and all the people that live by it. Thank you Ronnie for teaching me to see the bigger picture in everything; to stay focused on what matters and not get sidetracked by details, distractions, or challenges. I trust your judgement and knowledge inside and out of the pool. I know that you care deeply about your swimmers. Marc, thank you for being a supportive and positive role model and mentor in swimming.

I have met the most amazing people at Orinda Aquatics. Much love and appreciation to my best friends Viola, Emma, Kat, and Siena. Thank you for making every practice the best, and for being the funniest people in the whole wide world. My experience on the team would not have been the same without you.

I have learned a lot since being in the pool at seven years old. I now understand that Character First means to be a selfless leader and caring deeply about the success of others.

Love,
Lana



EMMA SHANE

Tufts University

FUTURES QUALIFIER
OA DRYLAND LEADER
ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN
SCHOLAR ATHLETE
NCS CHAMPIONSHIP FINALIST

FAVORITE QUOTE

Worrying doesn't take away tomorrow's troubles.
– Randy Armstrong

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Connections made through swimming will always be more memorable than any time on the scoreboard.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

The right path will usually feel uncertain, but it will always be the one worth taking.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

Traveling to Oregon with my teammates and swimming indoors for the first time.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

Coming up with and leading the team cheer at Clovis 2025.

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

I always put others' equipment bags away for them!

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

When I split my toe open at summer sectionals, my roommates helped me feel better.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

"Good Emma" (Emma Sh) and "Bad Emma" (Emma Sl) however, it switches sometimes.
– Ronnie

Those who know me well are aware that I have struggled with anxiety for many years. For an introverted middle schooler, the thought of joining a new swim team felt overwhelming. However, this transition turned out to be surprisingly smooth, thanks to my amazing teammates and to Donnie, who guided me during the toughest times - moving from the chaos of Covid into the beginning of high school. The anxiety lingered, but something within me shifted. Swimming, once a source of stress, became a refuge and a source of calm. In fact, swimming evolved into something that grounded me.

In my first two years of high school, I was still caught up in my times, cuts and rankings. I remember Donnie sketching out the concept of a non-linear path on the back of a workout sheet - a gentle reminder that progress isn't always a straightforward path. Still, the pressure mounted, especially once the idea of college entered the picture. I always dreamed of swimming in college, but at that moment, it felt as if I was falling short.

It wasn't until the beginning of my junior year, when I realized how much energy I wasted on worrying about the things beyond my control. All I could truly do was show up to practice and give my best every day in the pool. That season brought some of my best swims – not because I was obsessed with times, but because I learned to enjoy the process and celebrate my teammates' successes, as much as my own. The friendships I had built since middle school, along with the newly formed bonds with my teammates and coaches, pulled me through the rough moments, reminding me of what truly matters.

Now, at the end of my senior year, I genuinely believe that I ended up exactly where I was meant to be: heading to a college that I love, with the opportunity to continue swimming at the collegiate level. What I hope for in the next chapter of my academic and swimming career, isn't tied to a scoreboard. It is to discover the same kinds of bonds that I found on OA– friendships built during early morning practices, the joy of racing side by side, and the best weekend breakfasts with my teammates.

Donnie, thank you for patiently listening to every anxious spiral I've brought to you since Junior 3 and for being so much more than just a coach. You've been a steady voice and a true mentor. Ronnie, thank you for creating an environment where I could train at a high level and push myself to improve every day.

Reflecting back, I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the most remarkable support system - coaches, friends and family. The relationships I've created on Orinda Aquatics are truly irreplaceable, they are among the greatest treasures I will carry with me to college.

To anyone facing the stress and uncertainty of high school or struggling with anxiety: trust the non-linear process. Let go of the need to control every outcome. When you learn to embrace the unknown, you make space for growth – and with it, you unlock doors to possibilities you haven't yet imagined.

With Love,
Emma Shane



ADAM SUTRO

Northwestern University

WESTERN ZONE QUALIFIER

COACHES AWARD WINNER: ORINDA AQUATICS, COLLEGE PREP

OA DRYLAND LEADER

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN CANDIDATE

COLLEGE PREP GRADUATION SPEAKER

COLLEGE PREP SWIM TEAM CAPTAIN

FAVORITE QUOTE

Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. – Conclave, the movie

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

Habit, routine, and consistency will eventually yield success... and, on the flipside, inconsistency will create disappointment.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

The environments in which you live your life are greatly responsible for your happiness and success.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

Long course breaststroke practices with Ethan, Parker, and Garrett during Theme Week in 2024.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

The whole team cheering as Matthew L. got 200 fly sectionals.

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

Being a listener. Throughout the years I've offered an ear to many, whether that be teammates struggling to drop time or friends struggling with relationships.

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

Sydney Griscavage (and other senior friends) helped me look for my lost Apple watch when I was new to the team, swimming in the Junior Group.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

Take the path of most resistance.

Dear Orinda Aquatics,
In many ways, my journey as a swimmer is extremely unique. Before joining Orinda Aquatics, I was a "successful" age-group swimmer. As a 10 year old, I was a Far Western finalist, competing alongside a young Luka Mijatovic in the 50m backstroke! Unfortunately, at the age of 14, I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease, a chronic inflammatory autoimmune disease affecting the GI system. As a swimmer, the consequences of the disease have included late development (I'm now 5'8" but was 5'2" my freshman year of high school), struggles to gain weight, reduced blood-oxygen carrying capabilities, and many trips to the bathroom during practices. Adding to my health struggles, in my upperclassmen high school years I struggled with an injury to my hip, which made it difficult for me to train/compete in my main stroke—breaststroke.

But, I kept swimming. I often tell Donnie that if I had been on any other team, I think I would have quit. However, once a part of the Orinda Aquatics community, **quitting became an impossibility.** As many people in my life came to label me as the "sick" kid, Donnie and the team always believed that I could do great things. In the pool, I was never made fun of for not keeping up. Rather, I was constantly pushed by my teammates and coaches to be the best version of myself and to work hard every day. Swimming during Theme Week, Senior 4 breaststrokers would invite me to match up with them, and I would move up intervals, doing sets I never thought I would have been able to. **They believed** I could swim with them, and that belief inspired me to push beyond my physical limitations. The Orinda Aquatics environment did not allow me to give up, and pushed me every day to find happiness and to embrace the "work". For this I am forever thankful.

Additionally, I truly can't say enough about what Orinda Aquatics has taught me about working hard and training to achieve a goal. Work ethic is **INDISPENSABLE** to success in life, and a skill which will far outlast any swimming career. One time, after a bad freestyle race in Pleasanton, Ronnie talked to me about my race. He told me if I wanted to get better I should "over-kick" every repeat of every set. Though it was hard for me physically to train as hard as I would've liked, I have worked to apply Ronnie's "over-kick" advice to every aspect of my life. At school, I over-kicked my way to my dream academic school. At home, I over-kicked to be a great son. And in college, beginning a new stage of my life, I will over-kick, and I'm confident that it will pay off.

To my parents, thank you for being my ride or dies no matter the conditions. I oftentimes took out my frustrations on you, but you were **ALWAYS** there for me, with care, love, and laughter.

To Donnie, you are one of the most remarkable people I've known in my life. I will always remember the care you showed me in my darkest hours, and everything you have taught me about how to be a leader. Many times I have come to you scared that you would reject me, but I have always been met with compassion and belief... that has meant the world.

To Ronnie, every conversation we've ever had—whether about nutrition, health, Mollie & Sydney, crop circles, or swimming—made me feel at home at Orinda Aquatics. As an 8th grader, it made my world to know that the National Group's coach said I was one of his favorite swimmers. Thank you.

To my fellow teammates, it has been a pleasure to grind alongside you all everyday in practice. Thank you, Matthew, Kyle, and Eason, for always being my boys. Trust the process, and always remember to be happy. **True hard work always pays off.**

Love, Adam



ETHAN TAYLOR

University of Chicago

SUMMER JUNIOR NATIONAL QUALIFIER

ORINDA AQUATICS SWIMMER OF THE YEAR

ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICAN

SCHOLASTIC ALL-AMERICAN

FINALIST, CIF STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

NCS CHAMPION, 100 BREASTSTROKE

FAVORITE QUOTE

Whatever you are not changing, you are choosing.
- L. Buchanan

LESSON LEARNED (SWIM)

When you let yourself off the hook once, it lowers the bar every time after.

LESSON LEARNED (LIFE)

Who you surround yourself with shapes who you become.

BEST MEMORY (SWIM)

Swimming 200 breaststroke at 2024 Summer Sectionals and seeing everyone cheer.

BEST MEMORY (TEAM)

Clovis bus rides and post-meet iTea runs

KINDNESS TOWARD ANOTHER

Driving Matthew to Sea Serpents on Sundays (though once, Matthew had to climb up his hill when my EV ran out of battery!)

KINDNESS FROM ANOTHER

Théo and Nate voluntarily mentoring me when I was new to the team.

COACH-ISM (OR BAD JOKE!)

"Where's all the muscle?"
- Ronnie, as he squeezes my arm

When I look back on my time with Orinda Aquatics, it's not the medals, time drops, or team victories that stand out the most, but rather the special memories I made with my teammates. From getting pulled out of JV B practice by Ronnie, to eating Texas BBQ with Garrett, Stella, and Elise, this team has become a core part of my life that I will carry with me forever.

At the start of my high school swimming career, I was a weak and slow swimmer. I was usually the last off the wall in JV B, except when we did breaststroke kick. When I first met Ronnie, he told me I had a lot of room to improve and suggested I join OA over the summer. But I stuck with my rec team, and it wasn't until my sophomore year that I finally joined OA.

Looking back, that decision changed everything, not just for my swimming career, but also for how I saw myself. I was suddenly surrounded by some of the best athletes I have ever met, and with breaststroke being my only strength, I quickly got used to placing myself last in the lane. That automatic positioning, along with my natural shyness, made it easy to feel out of place at first.

But the OA team welcomed me as if I was already part of their community. From day one, I was met with kindness, encouragement, and genuine support. The upperclassmen would go out of their way to engage with me, and that meant more than they probably realized. They showed me what real leadership and dedication looked like, and I became determined to get better.

Over time, my experience on the swim team started to transform my confidence and change how I interacted with those around me. With the support of my teammates and coaches, my technique improved, and I started to see real drops in my race times. After each race, my determination to get faster grew, and I started pushing myself harder in workouts. I began reaching out to my teammates for tips on how I could improve, and I found a new excitement at swim meets, not just to swim well, but to cheer on my teammates.

To sum it up, the culture that Orinda Aquatics has built is truly life-changing, and I'm beyond grateful to have been part of this team. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the endless support from Ronnie and Donnie - thank you for your guidance, patience, and belief in every swimmer. Your emphasis on building character first will leave a lasting impact on me. And a special thank you to coach Tiffany for seeing something in me that I never could have imagined on my own.

To my parents, thank you for the countless drives, the constant encouragement, and the unconditional love that made this journey possible. And to my brother, thank you for your love and loyalty, your quiet support, and for always being there for me, even when I didn't say it enough. I love you and can't wait to see you grow into your strength.

Orinda Aquatics has given me more than just a place to swim, it gave me a second family, unforgettable memories, and a deeper understanding of who I am.

Ethan Taylor

A very sincere thank you to ALL the athletes and parents for creating a team and culture that is second to none. We are incredibly blessed to be a part of this organization.



The Orinda Aquatics coaching staff