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More Than a Pool, More Than a Team

The time is 5:30 a.m. as the stars gleam overhead on a blustery Tuesday morning. Laughter and quiet chatter from my teammates entwines with the patter of rain splattering on the pool deck. I help to uncover the pool and then hustle into the locker room with my teammates where we change into our swimsuits and then quickly head back out. Although it's never easy to get up to go swim when the stars are out and the sun is still sleeping, we honor perseverance. Commitment and dedication are imperative qualities that we strive to live by in order to strengthen our team's unparallel bond with one another. Icy rain pours from the gloomy clouds above. We gather in a circle where everyone listens intently and respectfully to our coach, Donnie, as he describes the workout over the roar of the rain, and reminds us to be "above the weather." The team dives in the pool for warm up and when we finish we quickly hop out again to hear Donnie explain the next set.

This is going to be my third year swimming for Orinda Aquatics, a year-round swim team that's soul purpose is to continue a tradition of team unity and impeccable character. We constantly push our physical and mental limits during workouts and races and we approach swimming with a positive thirst for challenges. Like many sports teams, we persistently encourage each other to never give up. Because our team spends the majority of our time working out at the pool together, we share an incredible sense of family. When I first started Orinda Aquatics, my coach told me that I would develop long-lasting relationships with my teammates. I didn't realize just how right he was until I came back from a long break. The first day back absolutely vibrated with energy as we excitedly greeted everyone with hugs and smiles. Three weeks of vacation had felt more

like three months apart from each other. I am filled with a sense of ease knowing that I have a security net of friends to rely on.

I don't believe that Orinda Aquatics would be the same team that it is today if it weren't for our staunch coaches. In today's world, people who are completely driven by helping other people are hard to come by. Our coaches come to workout with the goal of improving everyone's stroke by the end of practice. They remind us to keep the "big picture" in mind so that we see beyond minor setbacks and learn from mistakes. I have immense respect for all of them, but at the same time I am very comfortable to talk to them about school, piano, or personal problems. They have taught me to keep swimming in balance with the rest of my life. I am grateful to them beyond words for being dedicated coaches, role models, and friends.

When you swim on a year-round team, the OMPA rules won't allow you to swim on a rec team during the summer at the same time. I am so fortunate because my old rec team's coach lets me junior coach over the summer, so I still get to be involved with Miramonte Swim Club. For seven years Miramonte taught me how to race, build endurance, and strengthen my stroke. Miramonte gave me my first experience on a tight-knit team where everyone worked towards the same goal of improving the team's success. I was enthralled with the team spirit and support for every single swimmer. Coaching over the summer is without a doubt the best summer job I could imagine. The kids are eager to learn how to become better swimmers and I love watching their relationships with each other grow over the season. I also become very attached to the kids. My favorite part of coaching is when you work on a stroke with someone and they take your advice and run with it. Nothing makes me prouder than when one of my

swimmers comes running to me in excitement after a race because they crushed their previous time.

A swim team may have the fastest times in the country, but that team will never be the greatest until it has the best character in the country. Integrity is the core of every team's foundation. The people who have made the greatest impact on me aren't necessarily the fastest swimmers in the pool. I have been coached by, coached with, and swam in the same lane as Vinny Liang, an Orinda Aquatics alumnus. I don't think he will ever know how much respect I have for him. Not only does he have a vast knowledge about swimming and how to critique a stroke, he is loved and respected by his swimmers, teammates, and co-workers. Vinny is an extremely competitive swimmer, but he stands out because of his humility, work ethic, and friendly demeanor. I am truly grateful to Orinda Aquatics and Miramonte Swim Club for introducing me to Vinny and so many other incredible people like him.

People always ask me why I swim year-round. They ask me how I make myself get up for morning practices and how I endure the intense workouts. My answer is pretty simple. I love swimming. I love the life lessons that the sport teaches me. Practices relieve my stress by keeping my mind focused on the here and now. I feel proud of my physical and mental strength when I work through difficult sets. But more importantly, I swim year-round because of my team. My teammates are some of my closest friends. We have coaches that are like father figures because of how much they care for us inside and outside of the pool. The environment is always positive and geared towards "putting character first," as our team motto says. I'm sure that Orinda Aquatics will be the best group of people that I will ever have the chance to be a part of.