



ANOTHER CHOICE: THE CASE FOR D-III SWIMMING (PART 2)

Last month, in the first of two installments, college coaches weighed in on the benefits of NCAA D-III swimming (524 teams at last count) and the realities of finding an aquatic home in college. In Part 2, we share the thoughts of Don Heidary, co-head coach/founder of San Francisco Bay area Orinda Aquatics, two of his swimmers and several others who have continued their careers at D-III schools.

..... BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

ORINDA AQUATICS' DON HEIDARY ON DIVISION III SWIMMING AND THE BROADER COLLEGIATE PURSUIT

"Division III swimming has been a blessing to our program and to countless swimmers whose careers have been extended, and who have flourished as collegiate athletes, teammates and leaders. In many ways, it has been the avenue that has fulfilled the 'dream of swimming in college,'" says Coach **Don Heidary**.

"At Orinda Aquatics, we begin with the premise that every swimmer will/can be a collegiate athlete. While this may sound presumptive, it is based on a culture that actively supports, encourages and promotes that premise. In addition, it becomes an academic and athletic motivating force that fuels club retention and provides a pathway to collegiate swimming opportunity. We instill early in swimmer careers that athletic excellence opens up academic options that in the long term ultimately serves them, coach, team and the parent.

"As a staff, we have created a culture that doesn't simply suggest that an athlete will or can swim in college, but more importantly, that they can't imagine themselves *not* swimming in college. At Orinda, our goal is to create swimming as an anchor in their lives. The captivating hooks may be competitive, disciplinary, structural or social combined with the need to be on a team or to simply be a teammate.

"At Orinda, we exhibit these characteristics to help the college experience come to fruition. We believe:

- The culture must be *long-term-oriented* in terms of

expectations, demands and possibilities.

- We have a history of leaders and role models with high-level academics and strong motivation who return during school breaks and talk to younger swimmers about their experiences, opportunities and paths to admissions.
- Coaches must be integrally involved in each athlete's journey, supporting them through the college/program search process. We see this as a staff obligation to help our athletes arrive at the very best college decision (swimming or not).

"We never begin our discussions about school divisions. We start with 'fit,' as it relates to academics, athletics and admissions. When examining a swimmer's academic objectives, desire/dedication, athletic potential and goals—and their ability to handle the stresses of both swimming and academics—we help them systematically cultivate a broad list.

"We assist in narrowing the list to reach backup schools with both swimming and non-swimming options. We suggest that all things being equal, swimming is an invaluable experience and strongly recommend it. We examine three filters: academic, athletes and living (classroom, pool, campus), and identify three critical factors of each.

"One swimmer may want to compete at the Olympic Trials or at the NCAA D-I Championships. Another may simply love the sport and want to be a great teammate and contribute in any way they can.

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>> PICTURED ABOVE: **Claire Kenna, Saint Vincent College:** "To those who want a college swimming experience, I say don't be afraid to take the chance. There are teams out there for everyone regardless of the level at which you can compete. Find a team with whose culture you fit. Swimming is hard. You will spend many long hours with your teammates, so finding a team with whom you mesh is really important. But it's worth it." [Photo Courtesy: **Saint Vincent College Athletics**]



>> **Don Heidary, Orinda Aquatics:** "Although there is no clear distinction between the quality and culture of programs at the D-I, D-II and D-III levels, there is no question that D-III swimming has opened doors, created incredible opportunities and made dreams come true for countless swimmers."

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>> **Brooke Woodward, Emory University:** "Swimming D-III gave me the opportunity to find balance as a student, athlete and member of the campus community. I was able to train with a team of swimmers who all continued to swim for the love of the sport and the team, while also being encouraged by our coaches and teammates to engage in other pursuits on campus." [Photo Courtesy: **Emory University Athletics**]

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A swimmer looking to compete with the best (team success/great culture) and strong academics might look at Texas or Cal, while elite academics, a smaller setting and team participation might lead to MIT, Chicago or Pomona.

"And, of course, one of the premier blends of performance longevity, academics and team culture would be Emory University and the program that Jon Howell has cultivated for decades. We have seen every scenario play out from Olympic Trials swimmers struggling at high-level D-I programs to a novice swimmer with physical challenges competing for four years and becoming a team captain (D-III).

"Although there is no clear distinction between the quality and culture of programs at the D-I, D-II and D-III levels, there is no question that D-III swimming has opened doors, created incredible opportunities and made dreams come true for countless swimmers. For young student-athletes with a deep passion to continue in the sport, college swimming is the real end game."

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An Orinda Aquatics swimmer and a two-time team captain at Miramonte High School in Orinda, **Brooke Woodward** matriculated to Emory University (Class of 2014) and majored in anthropology. Primarily a breaststroker and IMer at Emory, she was a three-time CSCAA All-American (six-time honorable mention) and helped the Eagles to four straight national titles. Her best times, while respectable, would not have qualified for the D-I national championship.

"Swimming D-III gave me the opportunity to find balance as a student, athlete and member of the campus community," says Woodward. "I was able to train with a team of swimmers who all continued to swim for the love of the sport and the team, while also being encouraged by our coaches and teammates to engage in other pursuits on campus such as volunteer work, research and projects. I think the balance served us athletically and beyond—it helped us show up at our best at the national level each year, and it is amazing to see my teammates now thriving in their professional and personal lives as adults."

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Another Orinda and Miramonte grad and freestyler, **Scott Wu** graduated from the University of Chicago (Class of 2020). He double-majored in comparative human development and biological sciences while earning *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa honors. He is currently in his third year of medical school at Northwestern University. He plans to take a gap year upon graduation and pursue an MBA.

"My experience at the University of Chicago was overall quite positive," says Wu. "Academically, it allowed me to explore all of my interests within the biological and behavioral sciences and prepared me incredibly well for medical school. Athletically, while certainly intense and very demanding from a time and energy standpoint, it immediately gave me a social outlet with many teammates and friends with whom I am still very close.

"I felt like each year/class was very close from the start of each season. I could always reach out to upperclassmen with questions about school, swimming, extracurriculars and other college experiences (dorms/apartment living, navigating the city, etc.).

"Eventually, I ended up as a team captain and also served as president of UChicago's student athlete committee (mainly a community service organization). This allowed me to continue contributing to the team in a non-performance manner, which was fortunate since I was one of the slower swimmers on the team by the time I graduated."

COACH JIM KOEHR'S SETON BUNCH (Manassas, Va.)

Over the last 20 years, Coach **Jim Koehr** has transformed the athletic landscape at Seton School, a small private high school located in Manassas, Va. Last year, 126 of Seton's 350 students were members of the swim team, winners of 28 consecutive Delaney Athletic Conference titles and nine Division II Virginia Independent School State championships since 2006.

Two of his recent graduates opted to attend and swim for D-III Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pa. **Claire and Mary Kate Kenna** come from an athletic family of seven. Sister, **Anna**, who went to D-I William & Mary, is the college's second fastest backstroke ever and current CAA 100 back champion. Brother, **Joe**, was a captain on the University of North Carolina lacrosse team. Claire and Mary Kate opted for smaller.

"Being a big fish in a little pond and having a chance to make an A-relay on a college team can make for an enhanced experience," says Koehr. And so it was for both girls. Mary Kate, Class of 2013, chose Saint Vincent because of the "location, beauty of the campus, small student body, Catholicity, major and D-III swimming with a nice coach and teammates. It checked all the boxes."

And it was fulfilling with improved times over high school. As a senior at the President's Athletic Conference championship meet, she finished second in the 100 breast (1:09.09), third in the 200 breast (2:30.48) and 12th in the 200 IM (2:17.68). Today she enters her fifth year as an assistant swim coach at Franciscan University.

Mary Kate adds, "I always tell our recruits to make sure the college they are considering has everything they want and not just swimming. Division III level is still very competitive at most schools, so you can often achieve your goals and hit times you want if you put in the work. And you can still pursue other interests because you are a student-athlete where your student role comes first."

"Unsure? Meet with the teammates and the coach. Watch a practice and do an overnight. Go back for a second visit if you still aren't sure. And most importantly, choose the school for other things besides the swim team."

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Claire Kenna (Class of '20) was also moved by campus surroundings. "It was so beautiful!—with a great business school. When I stepped on campus, I felt like I had entered someone's family room. Everyone made it feel like a family. The swim team had a great mix—swimmers who made NAAs and those who struggled to make the designed main set. A bonus was that I was able to play lacrosse as well."

"Initially, I never thought I would be good enough or have trained enough to make the swim team. Prior to college, I swam—but three times per week with the Seton team and only two times a week with my club team. My times were never super competitive in high school, but a coach believed I could keep up."

And keep up she did.

"My college coach made everyone feel a part of the team. Practices and meets were challenging, and at a mid-season invitational, we competed against some Division I teams," she says. By her senior year at the PAC Championships, she was second in the 100 free (54.07), third in the 50 free (24.57) and fifth in the 200 free (2:01.22). She also anchored the 400 free (53.11-first) and 200 free (23.64-second) relays and swam breast (29.95) on the runner-up 200 medley relay.

"To those who want a college swimming experience, I say don't be afraid to take the chance. There are teams out there for everyone regardless of the level at which you can compete. Find a team with whose culture you fit. Swimming is hard. You will spend many long hours with your teammates, so finding a team with whom you mesh is really important. But it's worth it."



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>> **Bridget Wunderly, Marymount University:** "In high school, swimming was a huge part of my life. I loved the discipline, the effort and the virtues the sport taught, but it was also a team, a family. I wanted that in college—an opportunity to learn and grow in ways different from the classroom. D-III let me have that, and also to be part of a team, the community and still do other activities." [Photo Courtesy: **Marymount University Athletics**]

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Bridget Wunderly, another Seton swimmer, scored in all seven of her events her last two years at her high school state championships. She was fifth as a senior (Class of 2011) in the 500 free (5:25.69), eighth in the 100 fly (59.82) and a member of the runner-up and third-place medley and 200 free relays.

"Choosing a college was not easy," she says. "I wanted a smaller school that was close to home and where I would be known by name." She chose Marymount, a 3,800-student university in nearby Arlington. "In high school, swimming was a huge part of my life. I loved the discipline, the effort and the virtues the sport taught, but it was also a team, a family. I wanted that in college—an opportunity to learn and grow in ways different from the classroom."

"Swimming in college was always on the table. D-III let me

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>> **Maddie Alagia, Rhodes College:** “When I got to Rhodes (for my recruiting trip), I found the campus stunning. It was like Hogwarts. The women’s team had just gotten second at conference, and it was really clear that (Coach) Charlie (Boehme) was building something special. I was completely sold...and I loved the Rhodes experience.” *(In May, Maddie graduated from Georgetown Law and is now in L.A. working for a firm specializing in entertainment law.)* [Photo Courtesy: **Rhodes College Athletics**]

have that, and also to be part of a team, the community and still do other activities.” In the pool her senior year, she posted Catholic Athletic Conference championship finishes of third in the 100 and 200 butterflys (59.18, 2:13.25) and sixth in the 200 IM (2:15.48). “Outside of the pool, swimming allowed me to grow in ways I could never have imagined, all of which translated to the real world.”

UP THE STREET AT THE MADEIRA SCHOOL (McLean, Va.)

For **Maddie Alagia**, a water sprite at age 4, swimming was always central to her existence. “It was therapy for me. During practice, my mind was only on the water. I loved what my teammates

and coaches gave me,” she says.

An age group swimmer for Sea Devils and then Machine Aquatics, Alagia morphed into a distance swimmer at The Madeira School in McLean, Va. (Class of 2013). There she scored in all 16 of her high school events at the Virginia Independent School state championships, posting best times of 2:01.04 and 5:21.08 in the 200 and 500 freestyles.

Like Wunderly, she wanted a small liberal arts college—“a small-size school like Madeira (321). I strongly considered Trinity College (Hartford, Conn.), but had two friends who had gone to Rhodes (Memphis, Tenn.), and they convinced me to go on a recruiting trip.

“There was something about Coach Charlie Boehme and his program that I found intriguing. When I got to Rhodes, it was raining and I found the campus stunning. It was like Hogwarts. The women’s team had just gotten second at conference, and it was really clear that Charlie was building something special. I was completely sold.”

Sadly, shoulder injuries derailed Alagia’s competitive career, though she did compete in the 200/500/1650 freestyles at the Southern Athletic Association Championships. “Nonetheless, I loved the Rhodes experience. Charlie became a mentor for me outside of the pool.”

Life after Rhodes hasn’t been so bad either. In May, Alagia graduated from Georgetown Law, took the bar and is now in L.A. working for a firm specializing in entertainment law. ♦

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach, golf and swimming writer. His critically acclaimed coming-of-age golf novel, “Too Much Loft,” is in its second printing, and is available from store. Bookbaby.com, Amazon, B&N and book distributors worldwide.

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