



# THE OBSESSION WITH SWIM TEAM ALONG I-680

MICHAEL COPELAND & CLAIRE COPELAND

If anyone out there thinks Tri-Valley families along the I-680 corridor have an unhealthy fixation with soccer, especially girls soccer, trust me when I say soccer's got nothing on swim team. I can objectively make this statement because our family is involved with both. Swimming, like soccer, is a fanatical obsession in the suburban sprawl situated along the base of Mt. Diablo. Families in the communities of San Ramon, Danville, Blackhawk and Alamo are especially religious about their swim teams. You've undoubtedly seen hundreds of vehicles driving around town with colorful graffiti supporting their clubs throughout the summer months. During the late spring/early summer months, bold and boastful swim slogans such as; "We Rule the Pool", "Eat My Bubbles", "We Rock the Blocks" and "Catch Me If You Can" are painted on the windows of every third SUV and minivan in Contra Costa County, as a display of team pride, club spirit and competitive intimidation. Think high school football in Texas and you can get an image in your mind of the frenzy that swim team mania generates in this part of the East Bay.

Recently, my nine year old daughter, Claire, and I compared our impressions of the whole swim team experience. She and her sister are active members of the two time VSA and Contra Costa County Champion Crow Canyon Country Club ("CCCC") Sea Lions. Growing up, I always enjoyed my time at the Mountain View Parks and Recreation's Rengstroff community pool taking swimming lessons, jumping off the high dive and playing Marco Polo with my buddies. However, I've come to realize there's a colossal difference between swimming and swim team. It would've taken me about one swim team training session to realize I had it easy playing football. Swim team workouts are sadistic. I am incredibly impressed with the dedicated commitment our kids make for the love of the sport and exhilaration of competition. I assume it's either that or parental pressure. Personally, I'm hoping my kids can get a full ride scholarship to one of the Pac 10 colleges considering what goes into a typical swim team season.

## WORKOUTS

**Claire:** They're hard, but it makes us better swimmers. This season I go to two lappers and that makes me nervous. A 50-yard butterfly is going to be tough. (The transition from the 7/8 year old division to 9/10 essentially means that swimmers double their workouts to account for the increase in competitive distance from

25-yards to 50-yards). Friday isn't as hard as the rest of the week and it can be fun when we get to compete against each other. A lot of times the girls relay teams can beat the boys.

**Dad:** I get tired just watching practices. They are gut-wrenching workouts of endurance, conditioning and technique training. The coaches really push the kids hard, but the results are impressive. When I jumped in the pool at the age of nine or ten years old I often heard someone yell, "Whale in the water," as I flopped around trying to tread water like my boat had just been capsized in the middle of the ocean. It wasn't easy being a "husky" youth. If I was asked to perform a typical CCCC swim team workout, at that age, I probably would've: A) Puked, B) Cried or C) Quit. The answer would be, D) All of the above.

## COMPETITION

**Claire:** There are nine teams in the Valley Swim Association ("VSA"): Crow Canyon Sea Lions, Blackhawk Hox, Diablo Sharks, Roundhill Heat, Del Amigo Dolphins, San Ramon Aquacats, Sycamore Stingrays, Club Sport Marlins and Danville Sea Devils. We swim against each one of them. I like swimming in the first heat and against girls I know. Last year our team went undefeated in league, then we won the league meet and then we won the county meet. It's awesome to be the champions. This year is going to be harder because a lot of our top swimmers went to year-round swimming.

**Dad:** Only nine teams? Aren't we typically tied up twice a week for like four months? If my math is correct, that's like 16 teams. As much as I like watching my daughters swim their races, it's a little daunting watching 23 heats of backstroke. It took me three seasons to figure out if my kid was in the IM, free or medley relay. The kids all look alike once they're in the water (boys and girls) so you really have to pay attention before a race. It's easy to lose your little one when every person under 18 at the pool is wearing swim caps, goggles and sporting Sharpie penned markings on their backs and hands (identifying them and their races).

## THE SWIM MEET

**Claire:** I love the meets. It's like a big picnic. It's fun hanging out with your friends, but I wish we didn't have to wait so long between races. I love when it's my turn to race. There are different kinds of meets too. Club time trials, pre-season challenges, league

meets, Woodland's Invitational, the Blackhawk Relays, the league championship, a county "last chance" qualifier and the big Contra Costa County meet.

**Dad:** There's a common misconception that a swim meet usually lasts approximately eight hours and eats up an entire Saturday. It's actually only seven hours and 55 minutes, but because you have to arrive at the pool at 7:00 am, you're typically heading home (for a nap) around 3:00. Swim meets are an incredibly fun and entertaining social event. It's a party twice a week, hanging out with the families on our team or sharing some good natured smack talk with school and neighborhood friends from the other teams.

“**The social aspect of swim team is huge considering at any given 4-5 hour swim meet my kids are only actually in the pool competing for about 1 minute and 45 seconds.** *John Murphy, swim team parent*”



## LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIPS

**Claire:** I love the league meet because everyone is all together except that everyone has their own little area for their teams. You get to see all of your friends and it's really crazy. There's like a hundred heats of every race and you have to leave for your heat about an hour before you swim. Some teams dress in costumes, everybody's car is decorated and they have the best snow cones there.

**Dad:** The league championship meet takes place every July hosting most of the league's 1,500 swimmers competing in 82 events over two days. The VSA board members work hard to create a fun, competitive and spirited atmosphere for the swimmers representing the nine league teams. Approximately 500 volunteers set the stage, allowing every swimmer to participate in three individual events plus relays. The last couple of years, the VSA league meet has taken place at the San Ramon Olympic Pool complex at California High School. Pop Ups, tents, lounge chairs and towels are visible as far as the eye can see. The high school grounds are so overrun by tanned bodies, painted faces, beach balls and festive music that it resembles a Bill Graham Day on the Green from the late 70's. You can usually find a good parking place in nearby Dublin.

## COUNTY CHAMPIONSHIPS

**Claire:** The County meet is scary, but you feel like you've really accomplished something just qualifying. All the best swimmers are there and you really have to be focused. Last year, I was DQ'd (disqualified) twice for leaving early, which I totally didn't. I don't think I did. Okay maybe I did.

**Dad:** The Contra Costa County meet brings together the top swimmers from the County's 56 recreational swim teams. Similar

to the VSA league meet, the county two-day meet assembles over 1,400 swimmers. The difference is that participating swimmers are among the elite 7% of the roughly 20,000 swimmers county-wide who have recorded a qualifying time to compete at the county meet. There's a food court, swim apparel vendors, professional sport action photographers and Henna tattoo artists. Swimmers love to be tattooed up. It's so big time that NBC-3 covered it last year, highlighting the success of past swimmers such as Matt Biondi, Natalie Coughlin and more recently, Madison White.

“**This area is one of the top five swimming regions in the country. We have a wonderful swim team culture in Contra Costa County with fantastic coaches, great facilities and dedicated families.** *Ken Harmon, President of the Crow Canyon Country Club Sea Lions swim team.*”

## COACHES

**Claire:** I like our coaches. They're tough, but they make us better. Our coaches were friends from U.C. Santa Barbara. Dan, Ethan, Jake and Dave all have different personalities, but one goal. They wanted us to win the league and county, which we did. This year we're going to have a woman coach. I hope she's nice. Sometimes girl coaches are tougher than the boy coaches.

**Dad:** The coaches are brutal. They don't let the kids get away with anything. They lay down the law from day one and oddly enough the kids respond to the challenge. Whining is not option. I would never expect the coaches to know every kid by name, yet alone remember how they performed at the previous meet, yet they somehow do. The coaches are unbelievably perceptive about how each individual kid practices, what motivates them and their level of competitiveness. It's not surprising that they get such impressive results. I think Mike Singletary could learn something from swim coaches.

## APPAREL

**Claire:** Some team colors are cool and some are dorky. I like our suits, but I want a fast skin this season. I also have a team parka and flannel sweats that keep me warm on cold mornings. Sometimes I wear my parka around the house during the winter because it's so cozy.

**Dad:** You would think a swim suit is a swim suit. You would be wrong. There are a variety of technical suit options and Speedo has a monopoly on the market although Nike is eating into their market share. If you watched last summer's Olympics, you saw how advancements in the swim suit industry have affected the sport. There is incredible demand from the elite swimmers to find a competitive edge wherever they can. I don't know if they make a \$500 Laser Racer suit in XXL, but if it would allow me to swim like Michael Phelps and communicate with dolphins, I'm buying one.

“ I loved the league and county meets growing up not to mention the invitational events. I have great memories of camping out at the venue the night before to secure a good spot. Swim team was such a big part of my summers and my family and I loved being part of it. Sarah Andrews, former Woodlands team member. ”

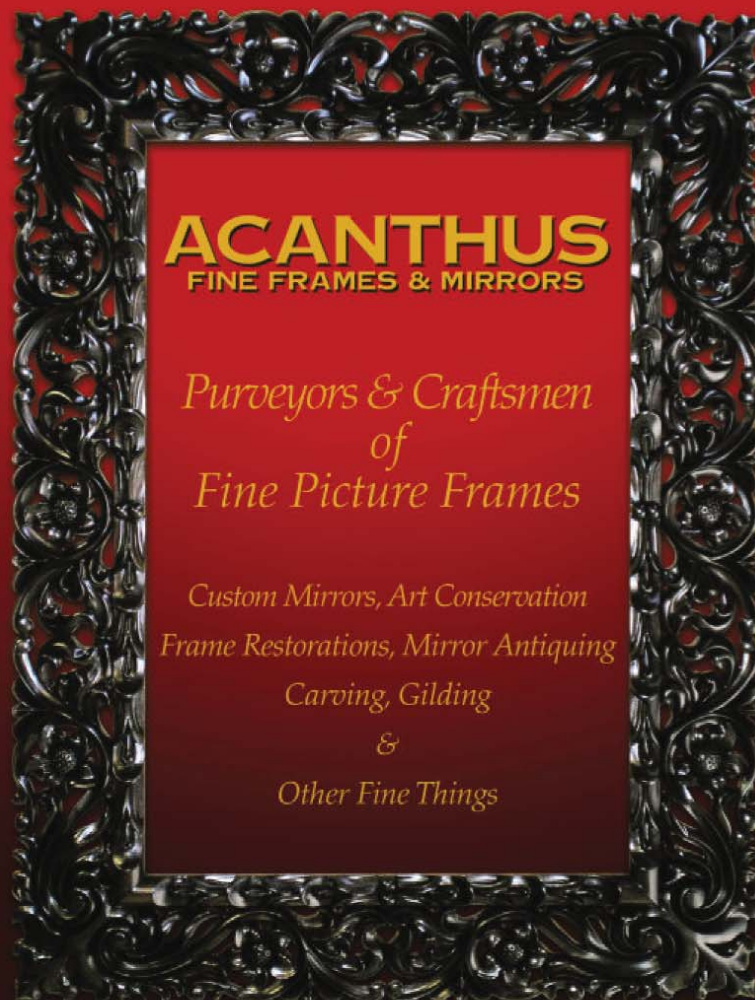
Swimming requires a huge commitment from not only the swimmers, but the entire family. Beginning with pre-season stroke clinics in March through to the county meet in August, it's a six to seven days per week job. That adds up to a lot of hours at the pool. In addition to the weekday workouts, there are the two competitive meets per week (Wednesday nights and Saturday mornings) and the occasional private "stroke specific" lesson.

Over and above the routine swim stuff, there are also fundraisers, socials, and spirit rallies. Having never been exposed to swim team growing up, I reluctantly agreed to sign our daughters up at the urging of my wife (a former swimmer). I can now honestly say that I look forward to the start of the upcoming season. The physical maturation, team camaraderie and goal setting accomplishments my girls have achieved have been incredibly rewarding for all of us. The close friendships we've developed, the fun and excitement we've shared and the overall "swim team" experience has been truly rewarding for our family. I have to believe this is probably the case for a majority of the team families at most of the area's swim clubs along I-680. Call it fanatical or an obsession, but it's what we do. Now eat my bubbles.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Dave "Pooh" Maddan. Coach Dave was a treasured member of the Crow Canyon Country Club swim team family. Sadly, at the conclusion of last season, Dave lost his battle with cancer. He will be dearly missed by every member of the team, all of us parents and his fellow coaches.*

*Photos courtesy Beth Morelan*

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