

Water Polo Team Win NCS 2017 Tournament

The Drake High School boys 2017 varsity water polo team won the North Coast Sectional (NCS) tournament, and one week later the new Northern California super-sectional, capping a season of victories and myth-busting play against historically dominant southern California and Bay Area teams that gave the Drake boys a third in the nation ranking, and top ranking for a public-school. The achievement is both something of miracle and somehow almost predictable.

The miracle is that the no-cut team draws from a relatively small area compared to the most formidable competing teams. Four of the 7 starters live in Sleepy Hollow, as do 10 of the 22 varsity players, and more of the total 44 on the JV and varsity roster. The 7 starters and the other boys on the Varsity A team have been exceptionally close friends, training and growing and playing together for years, some since they were 5 year olds aiming for the Sleepy Hollow Sea Lions Swim Team and the coaching of Mark Anderson, most before they ever thought of water polo. Their outstanding physical talent became a chemistry in the water, enabling their selfless playing, and inspiring them to be, as they say, “uber-competitive.” Next step for the 7 starters, their age 17-18 SHAQ team will be going for the national title at the Junior Olympics in July at Stanford, then they are all off to some of the most academically challenging universities in the country (which also have strong water polo teams that are about to get stronger).

The almost predictable part is that the 2017 championship came after years of very hard work in and out of the water by the boys, their families, and their coaches, Matt Swanson and Mark Anderson. It came in the footsteps of the many successful athletes, male and female, who have excelled in a variety of sports after building strength, teamwork, and determination in Sleepy Hollow. It came through a framework of opportunity they and all interested boys and girls in Sleepy Hollow have. That framework of opportunity includes the SHSLST, Sleepy Hollow Aquatics (SHAQ), and Drake High’s own world-class pool and strong swim team program coached by Brian Hennessey. SHAQ is a youth development organization of water polo teams from “10 and under” through high school age, founded by Mark Anderson and Matt Swanson in 2007, to offer boys and girls the low-impact physical development, the fun of the game, friendships and teamwork, competition in Junior Olympics, and more readiness for high school water polo if they want to play at that level and beyond.

This space is too small to tell all the stories or quote all the boys and parents who lived this almost predictable miracle. Of their stories and the drama of their matches and competition, Joe Sullivan, grandfather of Emerson Sullivan, one of the starting 7, has written a book, *Miracle at Sleepy Hollow*, available through Amazon. Read it for the in-depth story of the seven starters, their teammates, and the parents and coaches as, together, they made it happen.

We also can’t tell here the full story of the Drake Girls 2017 Water Polo team, who won the Division II North Coast Sectional for the first time ever, once again putting Drake on the water polo map. They now move up to Division 1, and we will hear more of them.

Drake Boys Water Polo: Part Two

Part One originally referred to the 2018 Drake team, which here is 2017. The team playing season ended in 2017, and seniors will graduate in 2018. SHAQ season is year-round, except Drake students do not participate in SHAQ during the Drake water polo season.

To see some of the story behind the Drake results, and perhaps how the “predictables” came together to produce the miracle, we talked to the ten boys on the Varsity A team, a parent, or both, others who closely shared the journey, and the coaches, and we viewed or read some of their words from pre-game rallies and awards speeches.

- Seniors on Varsity A: Spencer and Wyatt Hanson, their mother Hilary Kinney, Connor Moynihan, Danny Roland and his mother Linda, Emerson Sullivan and his father Ross, Stefan Venne, and Laura Woodhead, mother of Quinn.
- Teammates who rounded out the team and now step up for the next year’s team: Logan Anderson, Nick Berry, and Ian Christie and his father Jock.
- Others who shared and supported the journey and cheered the win, including Varsity B goalie Warren Brouwer and Maureen Corr, mother of Varsity B senior Brendan Corr.
- Coaches Mark Anderson and Matt Swanson.

To a person, team members feel that they are following the example of others, that they have had a path to follow: parents who swam or played water polo, older siblings, or even younger ones, who had fun in the water and encouraged them; influence at an early age from SH Sea Lions Swim Team (SHST) coach, Mark Anderson, and assistant Paul Birich, who made the pool a safe place to grow, be with friends, and see the benefit of practice. They know they have had broad parental support and great coaches, often making no distinction between who is the parent of whom or who is a coach. Parents are “on the pool deck” together for hours and years, forming their own friendships and bonds that support the boys. Younger and older swimmers cheer at each other’s SHAQ team games, and the players who came before loom large as inspiration on the eve of key competitions.

Why water Polo? What happened along the way to spur the commitment and team development that became so positive and powerful?

Connor Moynihan, “Beef” to his teammates, who depend on him to “really mix it up in the middle,” sees the SHST as a rite of passage, but really did not like swimming. For him, water polo was a chance to play a game, on a team, in the water, and he loved it from day one. He says at some point the “commitment and trust among us became so strong that we wanted to work hard, even when the coaches were not around.”

Nick Berry, whose dad played at Cal, thought after his first practice that water polo was “the worst sport ever.” He went on to make SHAQ teams that medaled at the Junior Olympics Nationals and further developed the strong bonds that kept all the boys together, in the pool and out.

Emerson Sullivan was “just naturally in the pool and then on the swim team,” as a family tradition and because his friends were there. Friends migrated to water polo for the friendships and the play, and Emerson soon loved the sport and made even more friends. His 12 and under team went to the Junior Olympics when people were asking “Who is SHAQ?” They finished 4th, best ever SHAQ finish, and had proof they were getting better and could really do this!

Danny Roland might have quit the game at an early age, but Laura Woodhead, Quinn's mother, met his demand for "skittles and root beer" if he would try it again. He found he was making friends and having fun. He, as the others, believes in the importance of support from "parents not only their own." A turning point came when, as goalie, he felt "a lot of pressure in big games." Swanny, a former goalie himself, helped him see how to "stay calm and trust his teammates."

Logan Andersons thinks of his early water polo as a "summer day at the Sleepy Hollow pool playing with my friends." Then new players came to his SHAQ team and became part of a close group of friends and families, practicing hard at the Drake pool, getting better. The friendships and family feeling carried over to the Drake team.

Spencer Hanson feels the support of all the parents to "be there" in subtle and tangible ways, whether with transportation (no small task with multiple away tournaments and special travel as far as Croatia!), cheering support, and, of-course food. Hilary Kinney knows exactly how many boys are on the combined JV and Varsity polo teams (44), because she and the other parents rotate having the hungry team after practice at weekly team dinners, a Drake sports tradition.

Wyatt Hanson says "getting beat up" as 10 and unders at the JOs motivated them to work hard to do better. Coaches helped them "stick together" and improve. They have since medaled often, placing second twice, once after a 30-game perfect season.

Stef Venne remembers that "losing was awful." Making it to some championships but never winning made them feel "not exactly vengeance" but a "determination not to let that happen again." How perfect that in the NCS final, Stef goaled to tie the game in the 4th quarter, helping set up the overtime victory.

Ian Christie felt the seniors "looked after him" when he joined the Varsity A team, and taught him how to play "real water polo" and how to balance water polo, school, and social life. Coaches and teammates stressed the importance of the full team working together, and that "practice is not the same if all 10 aren't there."

Quinn Woodhead, became a consistent offensive threat, making plays with his confidence and underwater strength, after learning early that everybody has ups and downs, and that good team mates pick each other up. The key is to pull together.

Insights from and about the coaches...

The boys sometimes refer to both Anderson and Swanson (Swanny), as "Dads." Other times Anderson is the "team psychologist," and Swanny is the tactician teaching them "xs and os." Both coaches live and teach the value of hard work, accountability, support for and trust of teammates, and the importance of being a good person and role model for others, in and out of the water. Both have helped the boys with time management and other life skills, making clear that if they ever find they have to choose between homework and the pool, choose homework. The boys see the payoff: their water polo team has the highest G.P.A. of any Drake team, and all seniors are off to excellent colleges and universities.

Tactician Swanson has inspired the boys to react to losses by training harder, playing harder, and wanting it more. He does not track individual statistics, and in the midst of a loss, he has taken the boys out of the moment, asking them “to look up at the moon, and know that we will get through this.”

Anderson and Swanny have coached together for 18 years and guided this year’s seniors for 10 years through SHAQ and Drake. Their vision of a program that could build good people, who could grow to be their best selves in the pool and out, and do some serious winning to boot, is strong. Not surprisingly, they and their teams are quick to give thanks to Brian Hennessey for his strong swim team program at Drake, in which many of the polo players participate for conditioning and competition, and to Chris French, who they say has brought a lot to the team in the two years he has been working with them.

So, what now for these boys and those who come after them?

When it comes to encouraging younger kids to play water polo, and encouraging rising team mates, their shared responsibility comes through, again with each boy’s perspective. Coaching younger kids, at camps, SHAQ, and whenever they can, is a seamless part of “what they do.” Their attitudes about the rest of this SHAQ season through JOs in July, outlook for their own futures, and their hopes and advice for those who come after them suggest that the life lessons from coaches and parents have taken root. Laura Woodhead, when describing the experience of her whole family and this team, put it something like this, “Sleepy Hollow gave us a path to follow, a safe space to embrace competition and a culture to improve.”

Connor “Beef” Moynihan encourages young kids to play water polo for the fun of it. “All you need is your Speedo.” For him, the season won’t be over until the SHAQ team wins at JOs.

Ian Christie urges “start swimming early.” And rouses all ages to be fans. “Kids can watch from the front row. Community support helps players and youngsters. The ‘field’ is small and you can see everything...well, maybe not everything that goes on underwater.”

Danny Roland tells the youngest to “Go for it. Don’t judge it after one week. Take time and try many sports.” To the Drake team for next year, he hopes they will “be close to each other,” use SHAQ to improve your level year-round,” and “try for top 4 in the NCS.”

Wyatt Hanson hopes the younger kids will be “inspired by our success,” the way we were inspired by others before us.

Emerson Sullivan tells younger kids to play for the fun with friends, not the level of play. Go to the games and cheer.

Nick Berry counsels that “it’s going to be hard, but after the first week, it’s the best sport there is!” And for the rising players at Drake, he wishes for them the sense of being one team in and out of the pool.”

Spencer Hanson wants kids moving through SHAQ or thinking of playing in high school to know that water polo is still enough of a niche sport that it can be the extra edge to get you into a great college.

Logan Anderson believes next year’s Drake team “knows what it takes” and wants to lead where he can.

Brenden Corr told his teammates that being part of the amazing effort and success through Drake 2017 was a formative experience in his life.

Warren Brouwer would tell youngsters to “stick to it” “push through and it pays off.” And that he loves it and having friends and mentors makes it not as hard. About 2017 he says “when they won, it was like we all won.”

Quinn Woodhead urges teams to “savor every loss, every mistake, and every emotion, because those are what you are going to take with you.” Of Drake 2017, he says, “We learned from our losses and I’m glad to say we came out on top.”

Stef Venne tells younger kids to “put in the work and you’re gonna have a great time.” He is eager for “another JOs run with my teammates.” And for the Drake team next year, he knows that Swanny is already “bringing them in.” SHAQ winter season is the place to work hard with your team to prepare for what’s next.

As they go off in different directions for college and beyond, they see the parting as bittersweet. To a person they are excited about their own futures and the future of their teammates, and trust that the close and deep friendships will last a lifetime.

The complete 2017 Varsity A and B roster:

Logan Anderson
Brock Auchard
Nick Berry
Warren Brouwer
Tyler Brown
Connor Chambers
Ian Christie
Brendan Corr
Jayden Enclade
Sam Gaebe
Matieu Isanova
Spencer Hanson
Wyatt Hanson
Mishka Heath
Connor Moynihan
Ryan Osier
Danny Roland
Emerson Sullivan
Ollie White
Tivon Williams
Quinn Woodhead

Links for more about this team and water polo: sleepyhollowsealions.com, sleepyhollowaquatics.com, drakeathletics.org, and amazon.com to find Miracle at Sleepy Hollow.