

New wave at CMA

Women's water polo gears up for spring-season debut

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Water polo has long possessed a reputation as a brutal, rough-and-tumble sport in which punches are thrown and swimsuits grabbed on nearly every trip down the pool - all under water, of course, and out of sight of the referees.

So for a woman to handle the physical side of the game on a team full of men, you know she has to be tough. But nowadays, it's increasingly common to find one or more female players on a men's water polo roster, even on low- to mid-level college teams.

At Vallejo's Cal Maritime Academy, four women are among the 21 players on the Keelhaulers' squad, and interest in the sport has grown so much that the school's first women's water polo team will start play in the spring.

In the past, generating enough enthusiasm to support successful women's teams at Cal Maritime has never been a sure thing, given the seafaring and quasi-military aspects of the curriculum that tend to attract a mostly male student body. And although female enrollment numbers have gone up in recent years, according to athletic director Marv Christopher, the Keelhaulers are still drawing athletes from a student population that is 86 percent men. CMA's women's volleyball program was recently dropped, and its women's basketball team didn't win a game in its inaugural season last year. But if you ask the players and their coach, water polo will be different.

New teams at any college tend to struggle through their first year or two, but fourth-year men's coach Timm Torchiana, who will also lead the women's team, thinks the Keelhauler women may actually start out with a leg up on their opponents.

Freshman Megan Braun, who has played with the men's team this season, agrees.

"Guys' water polo is a much faster game, and just the fact that we're women playing it (helps)," Braun said. "The men that play it have a weight advantage that we have to keep in consideration."

While going through the same conditioning as the men's team and going up against bigger opponents (the Keelhaulers have nine players over six feet tall on their roster) should pay off for the Maritime women in the spring, having a full fall season of collegiate experience under their belts won't hurt either. And for some of them, in fact, the double season fits right in with their usual training pattern. Both Braun and fellow freshman Kristen Swader practiced year-round during their high school careers in Southern California, like many serious swimmers and water polo players.

But that's why a water polo team made particularly good sense at Cal Maritime.

The unique type of education offered there - ordinarily a recruiting handicap for most sports - actually works in the school's favor in this case. Because CMA students have an interest in the sea, a high percentage of them already have some type of background in swimming or other aquatic sports. Braun and Swader said they were able to entice a number of new players to join the team simply by asking around in their dorms and seeing who was interested.

"I know one of the questions is, 'How do you get a women's sport here to last at Cal Maritime?' " Christopher said, noting that there are approximately 130 women in CMA's student population. "One of the things that's good about the water polo team we're looking at is, most of the students that come here have a water background. They don't have a basketball or volleyball background, but they do have a swimming or sailing background. So therefore, it's easier to recruit women to it."

The responsibilities of managing two teams may take a little while to get used to for Torchiana himself, although he says he's prepared for the extra commitment. As a new club-level team, the Keelhaulers won't be in an official conference this year and will probably play 12-15 games in tournament settings. But if the sport sticks, it can move up to the "varsity-club" level next season, which will bring the opportunity of playing a full league schedule against other California schools.

"That's going to be a challenge for the first year or two, assuming we're able to move forward and make this a permanent thing," Torchiana said. "It's going to take a while to get used to the time commitment, compounded by the fact that everything's doubled: You're scheduling for two teams, you're ordering equipment for two teams, you're recruiting for two teams.

"The hardest part is just getting the critical mass of people involved to get this started. And that is really just with the students on campus, who are already excited about what they're doing and being involved in water polo, getting out and talking to other classmates and saying, 'Come on out and play.' You know, everything else is pretty easy."

As for the roughness of the game itself, it's something that any long-time water polo player is used to; Swader and Braun are no exception. Ironically, in the contests they've played with the men's team this season, they said they've taken the most punishment from other teams with women on their rosters.

"There are a couple of other teams with women on the team also, and you can tell the players with women on the teams are, a lot, still aggressive toward you (more) than the all-men's teams are," Swader explained. "That's because they know that we are about the same and they can do that with us, move us around. We get bumped around because we are smaller, and they'll take full advantage of that because they're playing the game to win."

After the initial novelty of competing against women wears off, though, even the all-male squads go back to their rough-and-tumble style of play. Said Braun: "I think once they

get past the fact that we're women and that we can play, that's when they start getting more aggressive."

"In water polo, all the growth is on the women's side. Whether it's high school or college or internationally, that's where all the growth is," Torchiana said. "At Maritime, we haven't had a structure for them to be able to participate on an equal playing field, so to speak, because while they participate with the men and for the most part do pretty well, it just seemed at this point it's time that there's enough interest to start a women's program."

For Braun and Swader, the opportunity to be in the pool is even sweeter because it's not just about the competition this year. This charter group of Keelhauler women's water polo players are also correct to call themselves pioneers of sorts.

"I'm very excited about getting a women's program started here at Cal Maritime. Water polo in general is definitely a growing sport," Swader said.

Added Braun: "It's definitely a good feeling, because we get to promote a sport that we both love, and get to share it with the other women on campus."