

Girls Water Polo Thrives In the Pool—And on the Road

By Ken Belbin



BRIAN CROWLEY (2)

Faced with the prospect of a full season of games and no home pool, the girls water polo squad more than rose to the challenge, using the 60-mile round trip to a Manchester, NH, practice facility to focus on their sport and to bond as a team.

When is a home game not a home game?

Members of Exeter's girls water polo squad know the answer to this riddle all too well. Just before the start of the team's season, Exeter closed the 35-year-old Love Gym pool in order to begin work on a new, state-of-the-art swimming, diving and water polo facility that is scheduled to open in January 2006.

Faced with the prospect of a full season of games and no pool, head coach Lundy Smith and his charges knew they had a long road ahead of them. Just how long that road turned out to be can be measured in more than just wins and losses. It can be measured on a good, old-fashioned odometer.

Four days a week, the team made the 60-mile round trip between Exeter and Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester. They also played a handful of "home" matches there, including a quarterfinal victory over Andover in the New England tournament.

"It was definitely an experience," says Smith with a chuckle. Yet in spite of the team's nomadic spring and its relative youth (the girls spring water polo program was introduced in the late 1990s and became a varsity sport only in 2001), this is clearly a program on the rise. Under Smith's guidance, a team that was still "learning the basics" as recently as two years ago has matured into an experienced group of players who've begun to master the tactical side of their sport.

A collegiate water polo player at Pomona College, Smith joined the Exeter faculty in 2001 as an English instructor, and became girls water polo coach that same year. "In the beginning," he says, "I was looking for good swimmers to whom I could teach the fundamental physical skills you need to play this sport." But over time, as team members began developing those skills, Smith knew his program was taking a turn for the better. "We had

stronger athletes each year," he says. "We're at a much more sophisticated level now."

While the team has finished fourth at the New England championships each of the last three years, it has, according to Smith, improved each time. The squad posted a 10-9 mark this season and came within a whisker of stunning eventual champion Suffield in the semifinals, losing 6-5.

But the 2005 season will stand out in Smith's mind because of how the team rose to the challenge of no home games and plenty of long hours spent on vans and buses. In fact, Smith has come to regard all that commuting as an actual advantage, but one that could not be fully appreciated until the season was over.

"When you're on the road all season, you spend a lot of time with the same people," he says. "Because of that, we were far more prepared. Everyone was on time and ready to swim. There was a tremendous drop off in absenteeism.

"But more than that," he adds, "it brought the team closer than any I've ever seen."

Personality issues, the kind all teams face, had to be set aside. "It was hard at first," admits Erin Turmelle '06, a day student from Stratham, NH. "We had to strictly budget our time. But our core group grew so close. There was simply no room for egos. Sure, we got angry with each other some times, but on the ride to or from practice, we would talk it out. We couldn't stay angry. We just grew closer and closer as the season moved along."

Kendall Snyder '05 could be considered the program's first player/assistant coach. A California resident, Snyder was one of the only players to have previous experience in the sport before coming to Exeter, and she finished as the team leader in goals and points. According to Smith, she also emerged as a true teacher of the game, setting aside whatever time it took to help her teammates in the water. "She was naturally gifted," Smith says, "not only in playing the sport, but in teaching it."

"What set our team apart was that because of the situation we were in, everyone really wanted to be there," Snyder says. "We saw so much of each other, and we had to be truly focused. Our practices were actually a bit shorter than they would have been at home, but that still meant we spent three hours together each day."

It turned out to be time well spent. "For those three hours," Snyder says, "we could just let go of schoolwork and life back on campus and focus on each other. There's no doubt that made us better and drew us closer."

As for the future, Smith sees nothing but good things. "The new pool will be one of the finest in New England," he says, "and the core group we have returning is so close that I expect even more improvement next season." ●

Exeter's new pool received a recent boost from John Fisher '77, who hopes to inspire other alumni/ae, parents and friends to support the project.

Fisher will match gifts of \$25,000 or more, up to a total of \$1 million, to help reach the overall fund-raising goal of \$2 million. Interested parties should contact Will Davison in the office of alumni/ae affairs and development at (603) 777-3681; wdavison@exeter.edu.

Stepping Back, But Not Stepping Down

It may be the end of an era for the boys swimming and water polo programs at Exeter, but it certainly isn't the end for legendary coach Roger Nekton '69 (Hon.).

Nekton stepped down at the end of the academic year as head coach of these two outstanding programs, which he has guided since 1963 and 1971, respectively. But to hear him talk about the change, he's merely "stepping back, not stepping down."

"I'm not ready to retire yet, and I plan to stay very active," says Nekton. "I recently moved to part-time teaching status and I'll stay involved with the programs in a similar capacity."

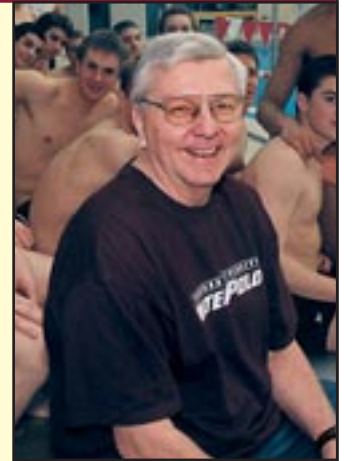
Nekton's teams have won more than 20 New England water polo championships as well as 13 of the last 14 swimming titles. "He's been an institution not only at our school, but all across New England," says Athletic Director Dave Hudson. "The true measure of his success has been the lives he has affected. I hear this often from former athletes and parents. He epitomizes what a successful coach and teacher is."

"Championships aside," says girls water polo coach Lundy Smith, "what has made him so good is that he is an excellent teacher. He always knows how to bring out the best talent in a student-athlete."

"Exeter kids are always enthusiastic, and they have great minds," Nekton notes. "I'm not ready to disconnect from them." He will stay on to oversee the boys JV swimming and water polo teams, and continue to teach in the physical education department. Don Mills, Nekton's assistant coach for the last two seasons, will take the reins as varsity head coach of both swimming and water polo.

Why now? "Things just fell into place," Nekton says. "We all naturally progress through our careers, and this move simply allows me to continue to do what I love but also to spend more time with my wife"—Kathy Nekton, Exeter's Vira I. Heinz Professor and a longtime physical education instructor and coach. —K.B.

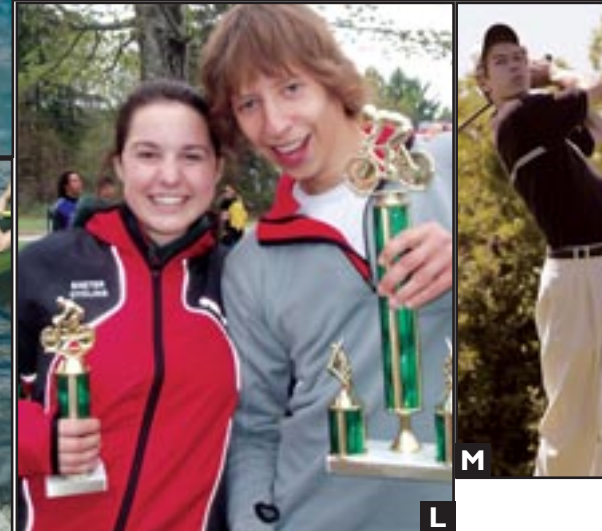
For more on Roger Nekton's coaching career, go to www.exeter.edu/publications/exeter/spring_02/splash.html



During his four-plus decades of coaching, Roger Nekton has become an institution not only at Exeter, but all across New England.



Spring Sports



(A) Baseball
Record: 12-4
New England Tournament Selection
 Dana J.P. Wingate Memorial Trophy,
 MVPs: Ryan Lapointe '06,
 Phil Negus '06
 Coach: Bill Dennehy
 Captain: Ryan Lapointe '06

(B) Softball
Record: 6-7
 MVP: Mairead Small Staid '06
 Coach: Bruce Pruitt
 Captains: Abby Abisinito '05,
 Lucy McKinstry '05

(C) Boys Lacrosse
Record: 15-4
 Joseph T. Gifford Memorial Trophy,
 MVP: Matthew Harrigan '05
 Class of '47 Robert W. Kesler '47
 (Hon.) Award: Kirk Bansak '05
 Coach: Eric Bergofsky
 Captain: Kirk Bansak '05

(D) Girls Lacrosse
Record: 6-8
 Holleran Family Award,
 MVP: Ashley Hines '05
 Class of '47 Robert W. Kesler '47
 (Hon.) Award: Kiele Raymond '05
 Coach: Kathy Nekton
 Captains: Ashley Hines '05,
 Kiele Raymond '05

(E) Boys Tennis
Record: 3-7
 Arthur H. Lockett Memorial Trophy,
 MVP: Nicholas Day '05
 Coach: Tony Greene
 Captains: Win Mixter '05,
 Nicholas Day '05

(F) Girls Tennis
Record: 3-2
 MVP: Casey Simchik '06
 Coach: Jean Chase Farnum
 Captain: Casey Simchik '06

(G) Girls Water Polo
Record: 10-9
New England Tournament Semifinalist
 MVP: Kendall Snyder '05
 Coach: Lundy Smith
 Captains: Kendall Snyder '05,
 Lillian Chen '05, Lily Zhou '05

(H) Boys Track & Field
Record: 4-0
New England Champions!
 Stephen Potter Memorial Trophy,
 MVP: Victor Martinez '05
 JV MVP: Zig Wronsky '08
 Coach: Hilary Coder
 Captains: Dominic Powell '05,
 Aaron Gadson '05, Arno Ferguson '05,
 Ben Brubaker '05

(I) Girls Track & Field
Record: 3-1
New England Champions!
 MVP: Jan Ng '05
 Prep MVP: Reny Colton '08
 Coach: Hilary Coder
 Captains: Jan Ng '05,
 Emma Hiza '05

(J) Boys Crew
Record: 3-7
 Charles M. Swift Coaches' Trophy:
 Andrew Collard '05
 Coaches: Lawrence Smith,
 David Swift
 Captain: Evan Daley '05

(K) Girls Crew
Record: 1-9
 E. Chandler Sanborn Trophy:
 Courtney Emerson '05
 Coaches: Chandra Glick,
 Becky Moore
 Captain: Courtney Emerson '05

(L) Cycling
Record: 8-0
New England Champions!
 Riders of the Year: Peteris Liepins '05,
 Jennifer Stebbins '05
 Coach: Don Mills
 Captains: Jennifer Stebbins '05,
 Peteris Liepins '05

(M) Golf
Record: 4-3
 Coach: George Mangan
 Captain: Michael Shore '05

PHILIP CURTIS GOODWIN '25
FOUR-YEAR AWARD
 FOR SPORTSMANSHIP
 & PARTICIPATION
BOYS
MATTHEW RUSSELL '05
GIRLS
ASHLEY HINES '05