



Montclair YMCA Dolphins stay on the hunt year-round



Members of the YMCA Dolphins swim team pose with coach Matt Garifo. From left: Olivia Beck, Tyna Davis, Kazuri Lateef, Garifo, Natalie Shaw and Caitlyn Tagliareni.

Courtesy Paolo Madeira

by **Andrew Garda**

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In mid-August, with the summer season done, YMCA swimming coach Paolo Madeira is finally able to take a break.

The YMCA Dolphins swim year round, and even though summer is normally a time when kids and families take off for vacation, Madeira's team was still in full swing.

"We just had two meets, [and] the biggest we had - in terms of the large participant number - was New Jersey Swimming's Silver-Bronze Championships," Madeira said. "That was a meet down at Rutgers and we had about 125 kids attend that meet. So that was kids as young as 8 years old all the way up to 18 years old competing."

During the school year, Madeira said the Dolphins have a roster of around 200 kids.

"Out of those 200, maybe 20 of those are little kids, 8 and under, who we don't expect to compete all year round," he explained. "We don't expect that kind of commitment from them. We have from six years old all the way up until about 18 years old. Occasionally we'll have some college swimmers who swam with us return to the program and swim with us for the summer while they're off from school. So that's great to see."

This past summer, the Dolphins took seven kids to the YMCA Nationals, a six-day competition in Maryland. One — 14-year-old Ela Habjan — came in seventh in the 50-meter backstroke, and 13th in the 100 backstroke.



YMCA Dolphin Ela Habjan holds up her seventh place award on the podium for the 50m backstroke at the YMCA Nationals in

*Maryland this summer.
Courtesy Paolo Madeira*

Every age swims in the same categories, so Habjan competed against a field of athletes who were aged 12 to 18 years old and made the podium by beating most of the field of over 60 swimmers.

“She’s someone you’ll see at the high school one day.”

According to Madeira, most of the younger kids are still exploring the sport. Swimming is a very big commitment, he said, so it takes a while for a boy or girl to decide they are willing to apply themselves. Once they get into middle school however, Madeira said the kids begin to get a sense of how seriously they want to take the sport.

“A lot of them will make a bigger commitment to the sport at 11, 12, 13 years old, so that when they get to high school they know exactly what they’re doing.”

Most of the serious swimmers don’t disappear from the Dolphins’ program once they join Montclair High School’s coach Ed Koenigsfest as a Mounties swimmer. In fact, Madeira said they’re in the YMCA pool as much as they’re swimming with MHS.

“Once they’re high school, they’re really committed and they’re here all the time, they’re competing, they’re training with us,” he said. “There’s a rule at the high school where they have to attend six mandatory practices with their high school, but they train with us even during the high school season.”

Madeira said if swimmers have intentions of taking the sport further — perhaps swimming in college — swimming with both the Dolphins and Mounties are a combination which gives them the best chance to succeed.

“They still compete with their high school and participate in their high school functions, but if a kid has aspirations to maybe get into a better school in terms of their swimming, they need to be here as often as they can and practicing as often as they can, really.”

Madeira knows the commitment needed for the sport. After first learning to swim in Portugal before moving to the East Side of Newark at 17, Madeira went on to swim for Montclair State University. At the same time, he worked at Montclair’s YMCA as a lifeguard and swim instructor before getting a chance to coach as an assistant and then moving on to Wayne’s YMCA as a head swim coach.

Eventually the same position opened in Montclair, and Madeira jumped at the chance to come back. He’s been here ever since, and see a lot of future MHS swimmers — including Koenigsfest — come through the program.

He’s also seen the positive impact swimming can have on the athletes he helps coach, from learning goal setting and time management skills, to plain old physical activity to burn energy and help relax.

The Dolphins will see a fresh batch of faces the week after Labor Day, when tryout clinics begin. The first session is on Tuesday, Sept. 3 and continues on Wednesday and Thursday.

“What we do is, we have all our coaches on the pool deck. Kids come in and are separated by ages. So, we teach them technique. We make corrections about their strokes and things. From there we pick the kids who will be on the team,” he said.

All members of the YMCA swim team have to be YMCA members, though families are not required to join.