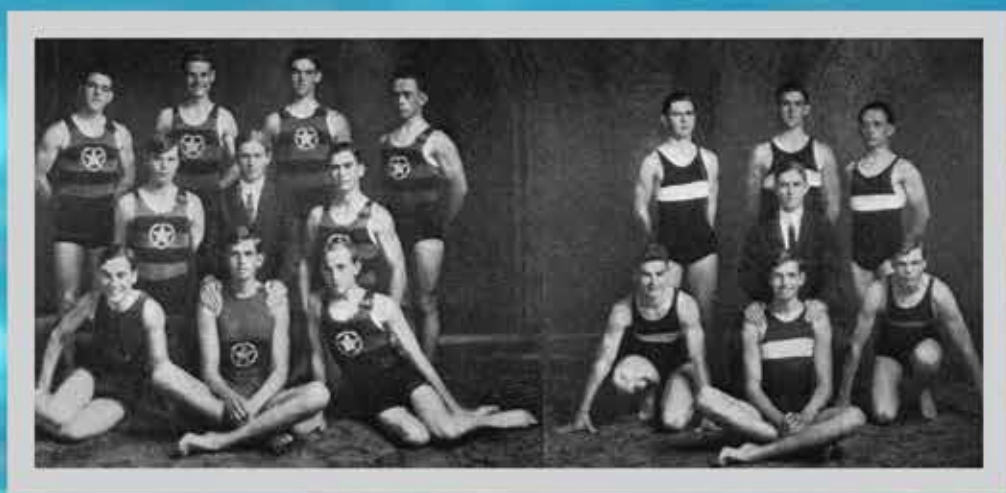


A NARRATIVE HISTORY OF CIF-SS BOYS WATER POLO

1912 - 2020

By William L. Prichard



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First Printing, August 2021
Revised Third Edition, March 2024

Cover and graphic design by Mike Miyamura

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DEDICATION

This narrative and the accompanying record book is dedicated to Bill Barnett (1942-2018), my Water Polo coach at Newport Harbor, where I learned lessons that helped me to be successful in the pool and, more importantly, successful in life.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1990, when the Ken Burns documentary on “The Civil War” first aired, I was struck by an observation made by one of the participants in those momentous years of American history. The narrator quoted this person as saying, “It seems like I have lived 10 years in just these last four.”

Time seemed compressed during the Civil War years because so many important things were happening so quickly. I think people tend to regard their high school years in the same way. It is part of why people still show up for their class reunions 50 years after graduation.

I also think this is why high school athletics is so interesting. You have athletes that are almost fully developed physically – in fact, many are at their peak. Between two well-coached teams, you will observe an outstanding athletic contest by any standard. Yet, the contestants are so young! For these athletes, participating in a championship tournament is the high point of these few-but-packed years. The important high school game is a fascinating drama, indeed.

This is especially true in Water Polo in Southern California. A major sport in Eastern Europe, and introduced into the United States in 1888, Southern California is this country’s Water Polo capital. When I was a high school player (I was a goalie at Newport Harbor from 1971-74), I had the privilege to spend more than an hour practicing one-on-one with Jim Kruse, later an Olympics Water Polo television commentator and then a player at UC Irvine, where he was the nation’s leading collegiate goal scorer. He was so good, he would tell me where he was going to put the ball – and even then I had slim odds of stopping it. I can remember thinking to myself that here I am playing against the very best player of my sport in the country. Very few athletes can ever say that.

Amazingly, four coaches have led the United States Olympics team while they were simultaneously leading local high school squads – Urho Saari of El Segundo (1952 and 1964), Bill Barnett of Newport Harbor (1988 and 1992), Richard Corso of Harvard (1996) and John Vargas of Corona del Mar (2000). You are going to see Water Polo played extremely well by high school athletes in the CIF-SS.

The historical narrative that follows is designed to serve two purposes. First, it functions as a companion to the statistical records that I maintain on CIF-SS Boys Water Polo (visit me at waterpolohistory.com). This includes the listing of champions going back to the very beginning, 1912, and the scores of every game played in every division since the advent of the playoff tournament in 1952. The second purpose of this narrative is to function as a standalone book on the subject of high school Water Polo in Southern California.

I have always loved history and always wanted to write a book. So, “naturally” I have devoted much time to studying this small (but to me important) corner of the history of the sport.

My interest was triggered in early 1981 by two things. First, Newport Harbor (my old team) had just won its fourth 4A title in a row (1977-80). It blew my mind. Four in a row! From this sense of pride, I became interested in finding out just how this achievement ranked in a historical context. Well, in fact, Long Beach Poly way back when managed to win nearly twice as many in a row (seven from 1916-22). However, by the time I found that out, I had been hooked by the magic of historical research. When you investigate the past, every time you find an answer to one question, that answer just leads to two new questions. Once started, you can't stop.

I pursued this interest, secondly, because I realized that here was a way I could stay involved in a game that I love. Water Polo isn't like basketball, where you can just pop down to an outdoor court on any Saturday morning and get yourself involved in a pick-up game. No, once out of high school or college, Water Polo for the former player is more like rowing for an outrigger canoe unit. It takes a lot of dedication if you're going to keep playing! This is my solution to the problem.

A total of 40 seasons have passed since I first started to maintain records on the CIF-SS Water Polo tournament. My son, in fact, finished his high school playing days in 2007 (Matt was also a goalie). With that thought in mind, I would like to ask the reader's patience for a moment while I stake my claim as to the originality of this work.

When I began this research, there was absolutely no roster of CIF-SS champions prior to Spring 1947. From that point, I traced the history of the high school game year by year back to its start in 1912, having no idea where the beginning was until I finally arrived there.

There was also no collection of all the games and scores that have taken place since the advent of the tournament in 1952. When I first started this process, I asked the CIF-SS office if these tournament records were already stored somewhere in their archives. I was told by the public information officer at the time that the games played in the 1950s and early 1960s were either not recorded or buried so deeply it was not practical to dig them up. As a public relations professional myself, I can completely appreciate the dilemma. Thus, it remained for me to compile these records entirely on my own, which I did by researching contemporary sources.

By "contemporary sources" I mean newspaper accounts of the time. I also traveled to many campuses to study the yearbooks and student newspapers of the schools that produced outstanding Water Polo teams. Among the visits that proved very interesting and useful were to Downey, Fullerton, Long Beach Poly, Los Angeles, Manual Arts and Whittier.

Whittier had a great student newspaper in the early 1950s and devoted extensive coverage to Water Polo. Tragically, the issues of this period are now lost. The 1987 Whittier-centered Earthquake caused structural damage to the school building in which

the back issues were kept. They were moved to a basement storage area where, during the El Nino rains of winter 1997-98, the old papers were destroyed in a flood. All that remains are the notes I took back in 1981. Friends, this is a perfect example of why all that's left of ancient Rome are a few ruins!

The written accounts were extremely important because, even though I had a chance to speak with many players and coaches that actually participated in these games, they could not recall the specifics that I needed to complete my research. These oral accounts of what happened, however, were certainly useful in pointing me in the right general direction. I'll be forever grateful to Frank Poucher for being the first one to tell me that Water Polo used to be played in the spring of every school year, rather than in the fall as is the case today! And, these conversations definitely rank among the most enjoyable aspects of the whole project. In completing this work, I had the honor to speak with coaching legends such as Jimmy Smith (six CIF-SS crowns at Fullerton); Heber Holloway (five at Whittier); Wanda Saari (wife of Urho Saari – 12 at El Segundo); Frank Poucher (two at Whittier); Jim Schultz and Pat Tyne (the coaching team that built Downey into a powerhouse); Bill Sexton (two at Downey); Ed Newland (one at Corona del Mar); Pete Cutino (his Oxnard team was the first north of Los Angeles County to enter the playoffs); Don Stoll (five at El Toro); Jim Brumm (two at Foothill); and, of course, Bill Barnett (10 at Newport Harbor).

The CIF-SS office did make one critical contribution to this history – the list of coaches for the championship teams. When I conducted my initial research, I simply wasn't that interested in tracking down the coaches' names. So, when I was done, I just turned over to the CIF-SS office the list of champions that I had found dating back to 1912. This list first appeared in 1985 in the 14th Edition of the CIF-SS Press Guide. Fortunately, someone at CIF-SS (I'm sorry to say I don't know who) cared enough to come along after me and do the important work of finding out who the coaches were in the pre-World War II years. (I did eventually do some fact checking on that list and I can take credit at least for correcting a few mistakes.) I am very happy that these important figures in the development of the high school game were not overlooked indefinitely and can now be remembered for as long as the records are maintained.

Expressions of appreciation also need to be extended to the many people who acted as my arms and legs – school librarians who read scores to me out of old yearbooks over the telephone, etc. Without their help, I clearly could not have covered a story spanning more than 100 seasons in this huge portion of this huge state. A specific thank you goes to my wife, Stephanie, and son, Matt, for their forbearance while I pursued what is simply a hobby.

I have rather grandly segmented the contents into three “books.” This is because they are in a way separate. I wrote the sections – books – at three different points in my life over these past 40 years. So, the reader may notice some style changes which I think become the most pronounced in “Book Three” (covering the years 1974-2020).

I did my research for 1974-1991 in 2000 – and then I mainly sat on the notes for 20 years. It was only the pandemic-related lockdowns of 2020 that led me to pull out those notes and write the narrative. I then researched and wrote 1992-2020 immediately following, completing the task in July 2021. The reader will find Book Three more densely packed with information than in the two preceding. With the incredible wealth of recent, Internet-accessible material, it was possible to capture the seasons in great detail and that’s what I decided to do. I must say, I owe this hobby a great debt in helping me get through the pandemic.

There are two final points before we begin our story. First, when we get to 1974 and CIF-SS Water Polo splits off into multi-division play, due to the vastness of the story, the focus will remain on 4A/Division I/Division 1. Therefore, all references throughout the book – the first “this” or the last “that” or the most of “whatever” – pertain to this premier level, unless specified otherwise.

Second, “official” Girls competition began in 1998. This history, however, is focused on the game played by the Boys. My personal history is with the “guys” and that is naturally my interest. I will leave it to a woman, perhaps playing the game right now in high school, to someday tell the story of her game’s past. But, perhaps I could give that person a clue as to where to begin. If the female Water Polo players of the late 1990s were pioneers, then what should we make of this story that appeared in the Los Angeles Times on Fri., Jan. 24, 1914:

Mermaids at Bimini

Water Nymphs Show Form As Polo Players

In a closely-contested match last night, the first of its kind ever held here, the Bimini girls Water Polo team defeated the picked team from the beaches by a score of 3 to 2. It is said to be the first game ever played in this country, participated exclusively by girls.

Women weren’t even allowed to vote for President of the United States for another six years! As I said, though, that’s someone else’s story to tell. So, let’s start my story by journeying back a few years even further and see what the boys were up to.

BOOK ONE:

The
Pre-Tournament Years
1912-1951

CHAPTER I

Getting Started, 1912-1915

The Long Beach Poly yearbook for 1912 has a team photo that I really like of the very first CIF-SS Water Polo champion. The six players pictured are wearing the heavy-looking, full-length swimsuits that were worn into the 1930s, covering them from the thighs to the shoulders. As you might expect of athletes forced to swim in such get-ups, they look very strong. The players surround an equally young looking man, attired in an Edwardian age business suit (King Edward VI of Great Britain having just died two years earlier, his mother Victoria nine years prior to that).

Everything about the picture suggests that these people are from a world completely different from our own – except for one thing. If you look closely at the faces of at least two of the players, you do not see smiles exactly but rather mischievous, teenager-type grins. Some things never change. The best high school Water Polo in Southern California has always been played by very good, very young athletes.

The first Water Polo team of any kind in the United States was organized at the Boston Athletic Association in 1888, a full 24 years before the game started to be played between Southern California high school teams. Two schools stand out as particularly important at the very beginning. The first is Los Angeles (the “Romans”) due to its proximity to the Los Angeles Athletic Club, the era’s most prominent athletic organization, and Bimini Baths. The LAAC (also getting its start in 1888) has been situated at 7th and Olive streets near the Civic Center since June 1912 (5th and Spring from 1896-1912). The high-rise that houses the club has always featured a pool on the sixth floor and (back then) a diving board accessible from the seventh! Bimini Baths, located at 3rd and Vermont from 1903-51, was the city’s large, multi-pool complex, the premier aquatics site of its day. In April 1908, both the LAAC and the regulars at Bimini Baths formed Water Polo teams to participate in a four-team club league, the first of its kind in Southern California, which quickly turned into annual competition. The second key “early implementer” of the sport was Long Beach Poly (the “Jackrabbits”). For more than 100 seasons it has been demonstrated time and again that Water Polo programs are helped immensely when they are located near a beach. As the largest of the “beach city schools,” Long Beach Poly not only had an ample student population, but one with a second-nature interest in the water. (And remember, in those days, that beach had waves crashing on it; the Long Beach Breakwater that now protects the Outer Harbor wasn’t completed until 1949).

Swimming teams, logically enough, preceded Water Polo teams onto the campuses of the two schools. Los Angeles High School’s Winter 1910 yearbook (for students graduating after the first semester of the 1910-11 school year), reported “Our swimming club was organized last spring when Howard Taylor...and several others interested in swimming began going out to Bimini to train. As soon as it was known that we had organized a swimming squad other schools, as Long Beach (Poly) and (Los Angeles)

Poly, signified their desire to join a league, but owing to the lateness of the term all of the meets were postponed until the next year.”

By the spring of 1911, Long Beach Poly had indeed formed their first swimming team. Thus, reports Los Angeles’ Summer 1911 yearbook, “On April 8 a dual meet was held between LAHS and Long Beach High School at Bimini Baths. This was the first dual meet ever held in Southern California, and results in a victory of 53 to 32 for the Blue and White (*LAHS*).” The yearbook concluded, “This year our ‘Hydro Hustlers’ have done a great deal toward placing swimming on an equal footing with some of the better known sports and next year it is hoped that Water Polo may be added to the list of swimming sports.”

At this point, the foundation and early development of both the game and that of the CIF-SS itself became intertwined. The huge CIF-SS, now composed of more than 500 schools, “can chart its initiation to the spring of 1912 and its first official athletic competition to 1913,” according to the 17th Edition of the organization’s Press Guide and Record Book.

In 1912, Los Angeles did form a Water Polo team, along with Long Beach Poly and a third school – Redondo. This South Bay city was a key swimming locale around this time. The “plunge” there was the site of several important early swimming events, including the So. Cal. Amateur Swimming Tournament in April 1911, the So. Cal. Interscholastic meet in May 1911, the Olympics team try-outs for the Pacific Coast in April and May 1912, and the So. Cal. Interscholastic meet in May 1912. The Redondo Beach Athletic Association, additionally, had formed a Water Polo team in 1908 and gave battle regularly in the annual club league that started up that year.

The schools, naturally, turned to each other for competition. This first “Southern California League” season did not really function like a true league with a set schedule, but rather the schools simply extended challenges to each other and arranged games at mutually convenient dates.

The very first interscholastic high school Water Polo game was played on Fri., April 5, 1912 at Bimini Baths between Long Beach Poly and Los Angeles high schools, and ended in a 2-2 tie. Long Beach Poly had already beaten a club team (Bimini Baths) on Fri., March 22 (3-1) and they would defeat Redondo (there) on Fri., April 19, 3-2. The tie with Los Angeles, however, left Long Beach Poly without a clear claim to the title. Thus, the two schools met again, this time in Long Beach, in the first-ever championship game, played on Tues., April 23.

The Long Beach Press reported the next day: “In a game that was fast and furious from start to finish, the local high school boys’ polo team demonstrated that its claim of superiority is based on solid grounds, by defeating the fast Los Angeles high team in the Bath House plunge, by a score of one goal to nothing. The game decides the championship of Southern California and adds another to the long string of championships salted by the Poly High teams. A large and enthusiastic crowd was in attendance. The high school band was out and the rooting section lined along the south side were very much in evidence.”

Here's how the game was decided: "On a long pass, (Long Beach Poly's Pete) Lenz received the ball in scoring distance and with three men on him, went under, got loose and shot up for a goal, which proved to be the only one of the game."

This first championship game was played a long time ago, folks. The Titanic had sunk just eight days earlier and both the Long Beach Press and Los Angeles Times had covered the disaster extensively in the days leading up to the game.

There is one other historical event that should be noted here. Four years earlier, in 1908, the Ford Motor Company started producing the Model T, which revolutionized transportation and ushered in – especially in Southern California – "the mobile society." Interscholastic competition could now take place more easily and involve schools located at greater distances than ever before.

CIF-SS was founded on May 15, 1913, and the movement towards better organization was reflected in the 1913 Water Polo season, which began to take on the attributes of a true league.

Again, only three schools fielded teams – Long Beach Poly, Los Angeles and, this time, Los Angeles Poly. This last named league entrant was another school located very close to the LAAC and Bimini Baths. Its campus is now the site of Los Angeles Trade-Tech College. The high school moved in 1957 to Sun Valley and is now known as John H. Francis Polytechnic High School.

Los Angeles Poly might have joined the original trio for competition in 1912 but for an odd rule that the school's administrators had in place at the time. The Los Angeles Times for April 17, 1912 ran a headline stating, "Poly Boys Strike." The story began, "A petition has been circulated among the students of Polytechnic High School asking the principal to allow interscholastic athletic competition. For the past three seasons Poly has been out of the running on account of faculty action, which forbids all athletic contests with outside schools and for a long time there has been a fire of indignation smoldering among the students."

The restriction was lifted in time for the 1913 Water Polo season.

Unlike the 1912 Water Polo season, competition proceeded on a set schedule, with clearly delineated "practice" and then "league" games. Long Beach Poly defeated Los Angeles Poly, 8-0, before the start of 1913's league play (a planned encounter with Los Angeles, however, failed to come off when "they did not show up," according the Long Beach Poly yearbook). The Jackrabbits then beat both Los Angeles and Los Angeles Poly in the league contests (6-3 and 8-3, respectively). Los Angeles Poly's yearbook reports that the "Pioneers" beat Los Angeles, 5-1, in the league match, following a 3-1 loss in the practice game, placing the school second in league.

With Long Beach Poly already “two for two” in league championships, they might have continued to win titles without interruption into the 1920s. However, then as now, good coaching can make all the difference. In charge of Los Angeles Poly was a fellow named Allan Campbell, who led the Pioneers to the 1914 title with final league standings:

1. Los Angeles Poly	3-0-1
2. Los Angeles	3-1-0
3. Long Beach Poly	2-1-1
4. Manual Arts	1-3-0
5. Huntington Park	0-4-0

Los Angeles Poly secured a 6-6 tie against Long Beach Poly on Fri., Jan. 9. The climatic game of the season was played on Thurs., Jan. 29, 1914, when Los Angeles Poly beat Los Angeles, 6-2, at Bimini Baths. Of note, Long Beach Poly’s defeat came at the hands of Los Angeles less than one week earlier, on Sat., Jan. 24. Long Beach Poly got beat, 5-4, for its only loss ever to a high school team until Los Angeles would repeat the feat in 1923.

The following year, 1915, Los Angeles Poly stormed to a second straight championship, going undefeated against league competition that included Huntington Park, Los Angeles, Manual Arts and Redondo. Long Beach Poly declined to participate that year “Because of unsatisfactory arrangements with the schools of the league,” according to their 1915 yearbook. Instead, the Jackrabbits limited themselves to playing two club teams. The yearbook added, “Had L.B.H.S. been in the league, as first planned, she would undoubtedly have been termed the winner.”

Coach Campbell left Los Angeles Poly at the end of the school year’s first semester and the school never again claimed another title. Just to note it while we are here, Los Angeles Poly’s success that year extended to swimming – on April 25, 1915, Los Angeles Poly (coached by Louis Murdock) won the CIF-SS championship meet by a score of Los Angeles Poly, 31; Redondo, 20; Los Angeles, 15; Long Beach Poly, 10; and Pasadena, 6. The relative strength of Los Angeles Poly’s swimming team compared to that of Long Beach Poly’s would suggest that the Los Angeles school would have won the Water Polo title even if the Long Beach school had participated in the league, the opinion of Long Beach Poly’s yearbook writer notwithstanding.

CHAPTER II

The Long Beach Super-Dreadnoughts, 1916-1922

What was it like for the “Early Implementers” playing the game of Water Polo back in these good old days? (See Appendix I for a complete list of schools fielding teams from 1912-1951.) That would require a very long answer, so I’ll stick with just a few interesting tidbits I have run across.

First, you’ll notice that the Water Polo season is taking place at an odd time of year by today’s standards. It was not until the 1947-48 school year that Water Polo became a Fall sport. From the 1911-12 to the 1946-47 school years, the high school Water Polo season would start anytime from December to February and run for less than two months. Then, everyone would hop immediately back into the pool for start of swimming season. As we will see, one year the Water Polo and swimming seasons were actually conducted simultaneously.

The fact that the Water Polo season often crossed over from the first semester and into the second frequently caused havoc in team line-ups. In those days, it was not uncommon for students to start school and/or graduate at mid-year, rendering star players suddenly ineligible or graduated in mid-season. Following Long Beach Poly’s 18-1 pounding of Los Angeles Poly on Jan. 23, 1920, for instance, the Long Beach Press reported an early example of eligibility rules coming into play: “(Tom) Schilling, sprint, (Fred) Richards, goal, and (Fred) Hunter, forward, of the Long Beach team, played their last game for the Green and Gold last night. They become ineligible from now on as a result of the 8-semester ruling of the CIF.”

Second, the game was not played with a nice, bright yellow rubber ball like today, but rather with a brown leather ball that usually featured splitting seams. Frank Poucher, a player (later a coach) at Whittier in the 1940s, recalled that these balls frequently became soggy and very heavy...and when you got hit in the face with one, they hurt!

Third, the water in which play was conducted was not always the clean, clear wet stuff we know and love today. Games (and practices, too, of course) were frequently held right in the ocean, or the pools themselves were filled with salt water.

By 1916, we enter an era of dominance by a single school that has never been equaled since and probably never will. A yearbook writer for Long Beach Poly dubbed the team “The Long Beach Super-Dreadnoughts” (a Dreadnought was a British battleship of World War I). This they surely were as Long Beach Poly remained unbeaten from 1916-22 and won the CIF-SS title a record seven years in a row. The only blemish on their record at all occurred in 1917 when Redondo managed a 2-2 tie. Three years later, the 1920 Long Beach Poly yearbook stated that “the citizens of that city are still bragging about it.”

Long Beach Poly and Redondo, representing two beach cities located immediately on either side of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, carried on the most intense rivalry of the era. The games between the two schools were always the most highly attended contests of the year, and Redondo would respond by nearly beating the Jackrabbits in 1918 (4-3) and 1922 (3-2), and giving Long Beach Poly their toughest game of the 1920 season (7-0). Aside from the 1917, 1918 and 1922 battles with Redondo, nobody came within a mile of the Jackrabbits during their seven year reign.

The main item of interest in this period is a cataclysmic world event that would disrupt the 1919 season. For the first time – but hardly for the last – the events of the outside world would impact “the new American water sport” (as Long Beach Poly’s 1916 yearbook called it).

Ironically, the terrible event was not World War I. This biggest war in all of history (unfortunately, though, only up to that point) began in earnest on Aug. 4, 1914 with the German invasion of Belgium, but it did not involve the United States officially until April 6, 1917. Water Polo’s 1917 season escaped unscathed, having ended nearly two months earlier. (This season turned out to be the most competitive of the era. Redondo had managed their tie with Long Beach Poly on Sat., Jan. 13, 1917, but they had been upset by Huntington Park, 5-4, exactly one week earlier. The Jackrabbits then clobbered Huntington Park, 9-0, on the last day of the season, Fri., Feb. 9, 1917, to win the league by one-half game.)

In spite of 10 months of U.S. involvement in the war, the 1918 season remained unaffected as well. In fact, an unusually large field of seven teams made up league competition that year.

Of course, to say that World War I did not have its impact on some people we have already met in this story would not be accurate. For instance, the Long Beach Press in its April 8, 1919 edition reported on an upcoming game between the LAAC and a Long Beach-based athletic club team, the Keel Club. The story carried a sentence on the captain of the first two CIF-SS championship teams: “Pete Lenz has sufficiently recovered from his wounds, received in France, to play the same star game which he did when in high school.”

Lenz, it hardly need be said, was among the “lucky” ones.

The war ended on Nov. 11, 1918, so everything should have been “returned to normalcy” for the 1919 season. However, by early fall 1918, the world was in the grip of one of the worst plagues of the 20th century – an influenza pandemic that would last at least through late spring 1919. According to the Illustrated World Encyclopedia, “Influenza (‘the flu’) itself is seldom serious but a person who has had it is likely to get a more dangerous disease, such as pneumonia, while he is recovering. The pandemic of 1918 and 1919 was one of the worst in the history of the world. Twenty million people died of influenza and its complications in just a few months, and it is estimated that

fifty times as many persons had the disease – or a billion people in all.” In the United States alone, the epidemic claimed 548,000 lives.

In a front-page story on the effects of the pandemic on the insurance industry, the April 19, 1919 edition of the Long Beach Press reported: “The influenza epidemic was really more serious than the war, both as to mortality records and to the insurance world. More died from influenza in October, November and December, 1918, than soldiers killed in action, died from wounds, accidents or disease in the entire United States Army.”

Society’s nervousness about this killer disease can be easily detected in this attempt at helpfulness that appeared in the April 25, 1919 edition of the Long Beach Press. Under the headline “Before Or After Influenza,” the good Dr. M. Cook writes: “The cool fighter always wins and so there is no need to become panic-stricken. Avoid fear and crowds, exercise in the fresh air and practice the three C’s: a Clean Mouth, a Clean Skin and Clean Bowels. To carry off the poisons that accumulate within the body and to ward off an attack of the Influenza Bacillus, take a good liver regulator to move the bowels, such as Castor Oil or a pill made up of May-apple, leaves of aloe and root of jalap, to be had at any drug store, and called Dr. Pierce’s Pleasant Pellets.”

While we can look back and laugh at the medicine show-quality of this advice, what was happening was deadly serious. High school Water Polo in Southern California, in fact, would be hit tragically and very close to home, perhaps more than any other sport.

This headline appeared in a brief story in the Long Beach Press on March 29, 1919: “Swimming Teacher Is Seriously Ill In San Diego Hospital.” The first paragraph reads: “George Freeth, well known as a swimming instructor along the Southern Pacific coast, is seriously ill in a hospital at San Diego, according to word brought here today by Carl Klindt, of the Southern City. Freeth for a time was located in Redondo Beach.”

Freeth would die nine days later, on April 7, 1919, at the age of only 35. Though a young man, he was a highly influential figure in aquatic sports in these early days. “George was instrumental in developing and introducing the game of Water Polo to the west coast,” said Arthur C. Verge, professor of history at El Camino Community College in Torrance. “Taking up the game in 1907, he became the premier player of his day and, as a coach, he was like a missionary for the sport, providing introductory lessons up and down the Pacific Coast. He was a particularly effective teacher of young people and he seems to have enjoyed coaching them most of all.”

From October 1913 to February 1915, before he moved to San Diego, Freeth held the key post of swimming instructor at the LAAC, where Los Angeles and Los Angeles Poly high schools frequently held workouts and games. As the article from the Long Beach Press indicates, he lived in Redondo Beach, where he additionally played a role in forming ocean lifeguard services for both the communities of Redondo Beach and Venice. From those early days of ocean lifesaving emanates today’s modern L.A. County Lifeguard Service. Freeth, therefore, was in a position to help teach the game to at least three of the first four high school Water Polo teams in Southern California.

Freeth was no doubt a familiar face to the players of Long Beach Poly, as well, due to their frequent visits to the LAAC to play high school and club competition.

Highly regarded in his day, the citizens of Redondo still claim him proudly, as evidenced by a bust of Freeth positioned at the south entrance of the Redondo Beach pier. Reporting on its 1912 game against Redondo, Long Beach Poly's yearbook paid its rival an unusual compliment – "The Redondo boys treated us better than any other team. They are true sportsmen and play a clean and fair game." The praise may well have been directed in equal parts towards the team's likely mentor.

In addition to taking Freeth's life, the epidemic led to the dissolution of Water Polo's Southern California League. The 1919 season, in fact, resembled the first season of Water Polo (1912) in that a league did not really exist and a series of challenge matches actually took its place. As everybody was sick that year, Long Beach Poly's yearbook said flatly "The hardest part of all was not winning of the games, but the scheduling of games."

Water Polo, of course, was not the only sport to be affected by the epidemic. Football's 1918 season would not see its championship game played until Feb. 10, 1919 due to influenza-related delays (Fullerton defeated Coronado, 18-0, at Fullerton). Basketball cancelled its playoffs for the 1918-19 season entirely. Even the traditionally late-starting baseball season was affected. This sport's championship game was not played until the first day of Summer Break, Sat., June 21, when Fullerton defeated Pasadena, 11-9, at Pomona Community College.

Consequently, the 1919 Water Polo season got started very late, requiring the Water Polo and swimming seasons to run concurrently. It was not unusual to have two competing squads play a Water Polo game and then proceed to swimming competition, or vice versa, on the same afternoon. Long Beach Poly played five high school opponents from March 28-June 16, 1919, giving this season the distinction of being the latest to wrap up in history (and it is also the only year in which Water Polo's final game was actually played after swimming's final meet). By comparison, in the previous year, Long Beach Poly packed six games in from Jan. 12-Feb. 2, 1918 and the following year, the school again played six opponents from Jan. 9-Feb. 20, 1920.

Long Beach Poly's 1919 season, as indicated above, began with a Fri., March 28 victory over Los Angeles Poly, winning 6-0. The Jackrabbits then had to wait more than six weeks before playing their next game – a practice game played on Sat., May 10 against the Keel Club, made up entirely of Mr. Lenz and other former Long Beach Poly star players. The high school team won 7-4, with the yearbook crowing, "It was simply a matter of 'Youth is supreme.'"

A "league season" finally began to gain some momentum when the Long Beach Press reported on Wed., May 14, 1919 that a game would be played in two days between Long Beach Poly and Hollywood, which had fielded its first Water Polo team the previous year. The Press's story said, "Poly high has what is considered an exceptionally strong team, as indicated by the defeat of the Keel Club team last week."

The game played on Fri., May 16, in fact, was such a rout that an accurate score was not even recorded (“All to 0,” was how the Long Beach Press phrased it the next day). The complete story contained the gory details of the game and the swim meet that followed:

“Poly high school mermen overwhelmed the Hollywood high school Water Polo and swimming teams in the local bath house plunge last night. The polo game was hardly a fast workout for the locals, who overran the visiting tank artists almost at will and emerged with an all to 0 win over the foothillers. In the swim meet that followed the Water Polo contest Long Beach took points so fast that they were not even scored. Hollywood failed to secure one first place in the meet.”

The carnage continued on Wed., May 28 when Long Beach Poly defeated Huntington Park, 16-0, and then on Fri., June 6, Long Beach Poly recorded a fourth shutout, this time blanking Manual Arts, 12-0.

The 1919 Water Polo season was the most difficult year in which interscholastic competition was ever played. Its backdrop was one of former players returning from Europe fortunate to be alive, and widespread illness and even death at home. It is all the more bizarre, then, that this difficult season should end on a note of hilarious anti-climax.

Strangely enough, in the midst of the influenza epidemic, Southern Californians were having no qualms about taking a 26-mile open-ocean boat ride over to Santa Catalina Island for a little relaxation. The City of Avalon was fast becoming a major resort destination in 1919, with the Long Beach Press running at least one story noting record visitor attendance to the island for the spring season. This was due to the fact that in February 1919 chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. became majority owner of the Catalina Island Company, who then invested millions in infrastructure and attractions to preserve and promote the island getaway.

At the invitation of the Catalina Island Company, CIF-SS authorized (at its May 21, 1919, business meeting) both the Water Polo and swimming championships to be decided at what Long Beach Poly’s yearbook called “The Catalina Water Carnival.” The contestants for the Water Polo crown were Long Beach Poly and Los Angeles Poly. This event was scheduled for Sat., June 14 and the “pool” was Avalon Harbor! The high school aquatic championships were just part of an array of sporting events taking place during this last weekend of spring. For the promoters, no doubt, this orgy of sports would serve as a kickoff to a busy summer of entertaining dollar-laden tourists.

The Los Angeles Times in its Fri., June 13, 1919 issue ran the headline “Gala Days At Santa Catalina,” with a subhead stating “Tennis, Golf, Water Polo And Swimming To Prevail.” The first paragraph of the story read:

“Saturday and Sunday will be two gala days at Santa Catalina Island for about everything big in the way of sports has been scheduled for these days. An invitation

tennis tournament, a golf match and the Southern California Water Polo championship and swimming meet will all be going full blast on these two days and the sport following in any or all of these lines of athletic endeavor will truly be in their element.”

For Long Beach Poly, this “championship” game was a bit of double jeopardy seeing as how they had already defeated Los Angeles Poly once during the year and they hadn’t looked vulnerable against anybody to say the least. Still, by June 14, more than 11 weeks had passed since that “false-start” to the season on March 28 when the two teams first met. And, Los Angeles Poly had given the Jackrabbits by far their toughest game of the year. So, everybody set sail for Catalina.

The swim meet portion of the “Catalina Water Carnival” was won by San Diego High School. In an identical wire-service (or press release) announcement that ran in both the Los Angeles Times and Long Beach Press on Mon., June 16, it was reported: “The dope was rather upset as San Diego was not figured to win or even near it.”

The Catalina Islander, Avalon’s four-page weekly newspaper, ran the most complete story of the event in its Tues., June 17, 1919 issue under the headline “San Diego ‘High’ Upsets Figuring.” The story reported:

“Coach ‘Cy’ Tipton’s human fish captured six first places in the Southern California high school swimming championships held last Saturday in front of the Hotel St. Catherine before several thousand spectators. The day was ‘just right’ for the aquatic sports, and the high school boys took advantage of the clear water, smooth as a millpond.”

First-place San Diego finished with 35 points that day to second-place Pasadena, with 17 points, and third-place Venice, with 14 points. Pasadena managed second largely on the strength of finishing one-two in an event called “Plunge For Distance.” You dived into the water and glided face down for 60 seconds. The event vanished by the mid-1920s, as it was highly boring and not an athletic contest at all!

This was, indeed, the biggest swim meet in CIF-SS history to-date, with 13 schools participating, including Chaffey, Hollywood, Huntington Park, Inglewood, Lincoln, Long Beach Poly, Los Angeles, Los Angeles Poly, Manual Arts, Pasadena, Redondo, San Diego and Venice.

Now, what about the Water Polo game?

The incredible truth of what happened was reported on Mon., June 16, 1919 in the Long Beach Daily Telegram – its bigger rival, the Long Beach Press, having for once blown the story:

“NO BALL AT THE ISLAND”
 “So No Water Polo; L. B. 5th in Races”

“(First paragraph) Polytechnic high school’s Water Polo and swimming teams had a sad day at Catalina Island Saturday. The swimming team finished in fifth place and

the Water Polo tournament was postponed. (*Third paragraph*) While Los Angeles Poly and Long Beach were prepared to play for the Southern California championship in Water Polo, it was found that officials of the meet had failed to take a Water Polo ball to the island. The game was postponed.”

It should be noted that the swim meet also did not come off completely free of mishaps. In the same Catalina Islander story, the coverage noted: “Too much preliminary practice on the springboard caused it to split before this ever-pleasing event could be finished, necessitating the lads to dive from the pier, much to the displeasure of a majority of the 17 entrants to this event.”

Between no Water Polo ball and a broken diving board, could these be the reasons why the championship events for these two sports have never again taken place on Catalina Island?

Fortunately, the Jackrabbits and the Pioneers barely needed to get back onto the mainland before the canceled match was rescheduled for Mon., June 16, 1919 – just three days away from Long Beach Poly’s Graduation Day.

The Long Beach Daily Telegram, in its Wed., June 18, 1919 issue, again did the reporting:

“By defeating Los Angeles Polytechnic in a Water Polo game Monday afternoon, Long Beach Poly took the Southern California championship. The score of the contest was 13-3. The game was played in the Huntington Park high school plunge. Long Beach’s team scored at will thruout the contest and only after several substitutes had entered the tank in the last half, did Los Angeles make a score. The 1919 championship is the sixth consecutive (*actually sixth total since 1912*) Southern California title Long Beach has taken.”

It’s strange that the Long Beach Press should miss these stories, especially since they had just the previous week created their first-ever separate sports section. They called it “Sport News And Gossip,” which would seem an apt title for the sports sections of today!

Long Beach Poly never had much to worry about from being in “double jeopardy.” The writer of their yearbook seemed to know that. As the book was “going to press” before the game took place, the writer noted “The only question in our minds is the size of the score.”

The Jackrabbits truly seemed unbeatable. From 1912 through 1922, their record against high school competition was a combined 47-1-3.

What was it like to play in the good old days? A “Catalina Water Carnival” sounds like fun to me – and if you played at Long Beach Poly in that era, it must have been especially so!

CHAPTER III

The First Golden Age, 1923-1933

The 1920s have been called “The Golden Age of Sports” and with excellent reason.

These were the heydays of sports legends. There was baseball’s George “Babe” Ruth, “The Bambino,” who hit 60 home runs in 1927 while a New York Yankees outfielder. Football had Harold “Red” Grange, “The Galloping Ghost,” who took the college game into the stratosphere when he was a running back with the University of Illinois. Grange joined the Chicago Bears in 1925, bringing legitimacy to those unsavory professionals in the five-year-old National Football League. Boxing’s William Harrison “Jack” Dempsey, “The Manassa Mauler,” was heavyweight champion from 1919-26. And tennis boasted Bill Tilden, U. S. Men’s Singles Champion from 1920-25 and again in 1929, and still considered by many to be the game’s greatest player. (You’ll notice in the case of Ruth, Grange and Dempsey, these guys were so big they didn’t have one nickname, but two!)

In this decade, sports first became what they are today – A Big Organization, Big Money, Big Deal.

It didn’t become the National Pastime, but high school Water Polo in Southern California came into its own after 11 years of feeling its way. In terms of stability, competitiveness and popularity, the game too enjoyed a first Golden Age that would not be seen again until the 1960s.

The stability part of the equation was largely a product of a new innovation for Water Polo – teams that were led by career coaches who were full time members of the school faculty. Up to this point, among the first 11 championship teams, only Allan Campbell (1914-15, who taught “commerce”) and R.D. Elliott (1913 and 1916, “science”) had been faculty members, and neither stayed at their coaching posts for very long. The rest of the time, it could be said that the “lunatics ran the asylum.” Stephen Long (1912) had been the student manager for Long Beach Poly. The team graciously credited Long as their coach, though the real instruction came from the captain, Pete Lenz, who was the only person around who knew anything about the game! Tom Schilling (1917-21) played his freshman year for R.D. Elliott in 1916, then doubled as player and coach under the supervision of a “faculty representative” until his graduation at mid-term of the 1919-20 school year. Schilling continued as a “walk-on” coach in 1921, as was Roy Miller (1922), another former Long Beach Poly player who had only graduated the year before.

Complementing the CIF-SS office’s governance of interscholastic competition, these new full-time coaches added much needed dedicated attention to Water Polo. They helped ensure the quality of their game in much the same manner as CIF-SS Competition Committees, composed of coaches within individual sports, do today.

(By the end of the 1920s, CIF-SS supervised competition in at least eight other sports besides Water Polo and swimming; the Venice Evening Vanguard in its March 31, 1926 issue refers to a Fred Johnson, “CIF Water Polo Manager.”)

These career men did not need to learn the game along with their players, as was the case in the past. They quickly became Past Masters of Water Polo, bringing professional creativity and skill to long-term issues affecting the game. For instance, Clyde Swendsen, whose Hollywood teams would win one title and a share of another, was instrumental along with Jimmy Smith (at Fullerton starting in 1933) in developing the rubber ball that would finally be adopted for competition in 1949.

Four coaches emerged in the second half of the 1920s as particularly fine examples of this new breed. Hollywood’s Swendsen was a national diving champion during the 19-teens before turning his attention to Water Polo. He would eventually move on to the college ranks and from there, Swendsen coached the United States Water Polo team at the 1936 Olympics. Elmer Crumly, Los Angeles’ swimming team coach from at least 1926 and, soon thereafter, the Water Polo team coach as well, would remain at his post all the way through the 1942 season and perhaps beyond. Wallace Detrick, who took over Long Beach Poly’s program in 1927, would continue producing fine swimming teams there long after the school had dropped out of Water Polo competition. Detrick’s swimming teams won CIF-SS titles in 1937 and 1938, and finished second in 1939. Finally, there was Al Dowden, who founded the Fullerton program in 1927, moved into the college ranks after the 1932 season (he coached Cal-Berkeley’s Water Polo and swimming teams from 1933-35) and finished his career by founding a second legendary program – Downey in 1947.

Dowden’s career arc, in fact, provides a rather interesting example of how an innovator to one generation can appear to be a little stodgy to the next. In 1951, a feature story appearing in the Downey High School student newspaper, the Norseman, compared Dowden’s coaching with the then-present coach, Jim Schultz. In the Nov. 21, 1951 issue, the student journalist wrote:

“Al Dowden being an older man of approximately 65, naturally taught the old school of Water Polo, but something new had been added in Coach Jim Schultz. He is a younger man of about 25, and his methods of coaching were as far from Coach Dowden’s methods as Downey is from Hong Kong. Now at this point don’t get the idea that your reporter is trying to say that one method or the other is better, as there are good and bad points of each.”

In spite of the disclaimer, I think that kid liked the new method better!

But, in the 1920s, Dowden himself was among the young lions. With superior coaching in more than one location, league competition was fierce and the championship changed hands every year from 1923 through 1931.

Los Angeles went undefeated in 1923 to claim their first championship (their narrowest contest was a 3-1 win over Hollywood). Long Beach Poly’s long string

of championships came to a crashing end. Again coached by the walk-on and recent graduate, Roy Miller, the Jackrabbits lost to Los Angeles (5-1) in their first game, and also to Pasadena (4-2). Thus, in the space of a few weeks, Long Beach Poly lost more games than they had in all of the preceding 11 years. (And, the loss to Los Angeles ended a 42-game unbeaten streak – which includes one tie – going back to their last game of 1914.) After the season, Miller would “get a life” and relinquish his coaching duties.

Los Angeles was coached in 1923 by Fred Cady, who represents a link between the young walk-ons and the career coaches. Cady was one of George Freeth’s successors as swimming instructor at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. As such, the high school hired him as their Water Polo coach. So, he was a walk-on, but he was also fully professional. He continued with Los Angeles long enough to coach the “tri-championship” team of 1926.

Venice produced its own undefeated season in 1924, clinching the title with a crucial late season victory against Pasadena (5-0 on April 10, 1924). Venice only played Water Polo for 10 years (from 1922 to 1932 with a break in 1923), yet the school managed to win two championships and a share of a third in that short span. This planned community’s famously unsuccessful attempt to model itself after the canal city in Italy did, nevertheless, succeed in generating a passion for water sports. The Venice Athletic Club had been among the original four teams in the first Water Polo club league back in 1908 and the high school’s swimming team won five CIF-SS championships in a row from 1920-24. Venice’s high school Water Polo teams of the 1920s would also nurture at least five players who went on to play on the 1932 and 1936 U.S. Olympics team.

This already powerful combination of community involvement and talent in water sports was aided tremendously by one of the greatest “home pool” advantages ever enjoyed by a high school Water Polo team. The Venice plunge, which allowed you to literally step away from the building and onto the beach, was filled with salt water! Chlorinated pool water by the mid-1920s was the near-universal norm. Other teams hated playing there and Venice seemed to realize full well that it had a not-so-secret weapon. Two games played in 1926 against Hollywood offer a perfect example of the transforming effect the pool had on the Venice team. In a practice game “at home” on Feb. 2, 1926, Venice beat Hollywood 9-2. However, in the league game played on March 18, 1926 in Hollywood’s “fresh water” pool, Venice was beaten 3-2.

These favorable factors helped make up for some musical chairs in the coaching duties at Venice where, contrary to the growing trend, no one coached for more than three years. Each of the three Venice championship teams had a different coach and, judging from their pictures in the high school yearbooks, each man is a little bit of a story in himself.

The 1924 team was coached by C.S. (Courtney Stuyvesant) Overin, a history teacher. Overin was a very heavy-set gentleman and he must have felt more at home

among the lineman on the Varsity football team, which he also coached, as opposed to his wiry swimmers. Overin had also coached the 1923 and 1924 swimming teams and he returned as coach of both sports in 1925. In the 1925-26 school year, however, Venice was annexed into the Los Angeles Unified School District, which led to confusion in Water Polo and disaster for Venice's great swimming team. Regarding the latter, the sports columnist for the Venice Evening Vanguard reported on April 9, 1926:

“And, now, after all these years of Southern California and state championship victories, the Venice high school swim team faces the possibility of being disbanded. Since annexation to the thriving Angel City, Venice's coaching staff has been reduced to a wartime minimum. According to C.S. Weismann, head of the local school's physical training department, the present arrangement does not provide a faculty representative for the swim squad. With no faculty representative, there can be no swim representation. The only way to swim out of the difficulty is to induce the board of education to enlarge the coaching squad here, something that Coach Weismann has been trying futilely to do for several months. If you paddlers would paddle, chirp up and pronto.”

There was insufficient chirping, apparently, as no swim team was fielded in 1926. As to Water Polo, Charles Walters, manager of the Venice pool, took on the coaching duties (the yearbook doesn't say so specifically, but he is pictured with the 1926, 1927 and 1928 teams). Walters no doubt had help during at least the 1926 season from a Mr. Yuille (first name unknown). Yuille coached the 1926 Venice Athletic Club team and also assisted Overin in 1924. Weismann himself, the athletic director, was probably the “faculty representative” who handled the scheduling of 1926 league games (as coach of Venice 1922's swimming and Water Polo teams, Weismann introduced the latter to the school). Coach Walters must have been a character – he's shown in the 1927 yearbook's team picture looking gravely serious and holding a half-consumed cigar in his left hand!

By the time of Venice's last CIF-SS title in 1930, the school was being coached by a handsome young Boys' Phys. Ed. teacher named Alva Noggle, whose enthusiasm for a great workout is obvious by his posing for the team picture in a swimsuit right along with his players.

If the L.A. Unified was guilty of “messing things up” at Venice starting in 1926, it actually would succeed in doing so for the sport of Water Polo in general for a period of three years starting one year earlier, in 1925. The source of the trouble was a quirk in the district's rules governing athletic competition that would complicate the crowning of a league champion. Just as Notre Dame for many years would not allow its legendary football team to play in post-season bowl games, the L.A. Unified would not permit its member schools to engage in playoff games. Your league wants to resolve a first place tie? Tough, no game. You have received a challenge from the champion of another league to establish the best team in the entire CIF-SS? Too bad! In leagues that had a mix of L.A. Unified and other districts' schools, the second place team (if they were outside of L.A., of course) would often be sent to compete against other league

champions in post-season play. Again, an analogy with college football can be drawn – the Big Ten used to send second place teams to the Rose Bowl rather than allow the same school to go twice in a row.

The year 1925 saw the popularity of the game in this first Golden Age beginning to emerge powerfully, judging from expanding news accounts of this hotly-contested season and reports of large fan turnouts for the games. The Los Angeles Times, in fact, on Feb. 19, 1925 ran a thoroughly modern-day “season preview”-type of article. The article offered excellent analysis of that year’s competitive landscape – “There is no outstanding pre-season favorite, although several squads are expected to comprise the customary weak sisters of the circuit;” it provided historical context – “Until recently, Long Beach (Poly) dominated the high school Water Polo league. The Long Beach school at one time proudly boasted of a series of six (*actually seven*) successive championships. That was before Los Angeles and Venice came to the fore;” and it was very perceptive – “Considerable interest attends the start of Water Polo activities, with most of the teams promised good student body support. Compared to other sports, prep Water Polo is still in its infancy.”

In addition to Los Angeles and Venice, one other school would compete for the 1925 title – Pasadena. This school (coached by Harold Novis) had been in the league since 1920, but it hadn’t really been in the hunt until challenging Venice the previous year. As it turned out, Venice had a disappointing year, losing to Hollywood, Huntington Park and Los Angeles (7-0), but managing to beat Long Beach Poly and, most importantly, Pasadena (4-3). Thus, Pasadena and Los Angeles met on March 19, 1925 in the final game of the season with Pasadena saddled with one loss and Los Angeles entering the game undefeated. If Pasadena won, that would only leave the teams in a first place tie. However, as Los Angeles was forbidden from playing-off ties in the standings, the game would have to function as the Southern California championship match. That is how both teams saw it and, as the Pasadena Star-News reported the next day, “By scoring a 7 to 1 victory over Los Angeles High School, the Pasadena High School Water Polo team won the Southern California Water Polo League title. The championship affair was played in the Los Angeles Athletic Club pool yesterday afternoon.” This would be a year of historic success for the “Bulldogs” as they also won their only CIF-SS swimming championship a few months later.

With Pasadena attempting to defend its title, the 1926 season was plagued by logistical snafus. According to the Venice Evening Vanguard, the basic league schedule issued at the beginning of the season contained several errors. The fall out included visiting teams showing up at their opponents’ doorsteps unexpectedly, or home teams waiting around for visitors that never showed. For Venice, nearly three weeks separated their first league game (a 9-2 win over Huntington Park on Thurs., Feb. 25) and their second (they beat Long Beach Poly, 3-2, on Tues., March 16). In the end, the six league participants just barely got the season finished before the early arrival of Spring Break, but to do so they had to play four of their five games in the space of just two weeks (the weeks of March 15 and March 22). Predictably, then, nobody played consistently well and the league lead ended in a three way tie – Hollywood beat Venice, 3-2 on Thurs.,

March 18; Los Angeles beat Hollywood, 5-1 on Mon., March 22; and Venice beat Los Angeles, 7-2 on Tues., March 23. As all three teams were members of L.A. Unified, there was no way to unknot things, so Hollywood, Los Angeles and Venice were declared “tri-champions.”

The following year was one of those seasons that, in retrospect, stand out as very important because it established a pattern for the next several years. With the Southern California League “swelling” to eight teams as the 1927 season approached, league officials decided to split competition into two circuits. For a brief period extending through 1933, then, there were actually two leagues – dubbed the Coast League and the Bay League.

In this first season of dual circuit competition, each league was composed of four teams, who played each other twice for a total of six league games. The Coast League was composed of Hollywood, Long Beach Poly, Los Angeles and Pasadena. The Bay League included Fullerton, Huntington Park, Inglewood and Venice. According to the Long Beach Press of Jan. 19, 1927, “After the two schedules of the Bay and Coast Leagues are completed, the winners of the respective loops will tangle for the Southern California championship.”

Venice had little trouble going undefeated against its Bay League competition, but in the Coast League, Hollywood and Long Beach Poly battled each other fiercely.

The March 11, 1927 issue of the Long Beach Press noted that the second-round game between Long Beach Poly and Hollywood played the previous day “nearly ended in a riot.” Here’s the account of the closing moments of the game, and note how Coaches Detrick of Long Beach Poly and Swendsen of Hollywood – two fast emerging “Past Masters” – received their educations:

“Following a Poly comeback, officials, coaches, players and fans engaged in a merry discussion as to what the real final count was. Long Beach stubbornly claimed to a 4 to 4 count and Hollywood claimed a 5 to 4 victory. The referee held a long conference and announced the score as a 4 to 4 deadlock. Further complications arose over the rules and regulations concerning the playoffs of tie games, and after Coach Detrick had sent his men to the showers, the Hollywood coach dug up some official reading matter to the effect that all ties had to be played off by a three minute overtime period. The Polyites, although clad in their street clothes, were eager to play and after a few more minutes of waiting play resumed. With 30 seconds to play, Clapp, the Hollywood Center Half, slipped one past the local Goal Guard, and after that Hollywood stalled around enough to take the game and knot the loop leadership.”

Long Beach Poly played its last league game on Mon., March 20, 1927, when they beat Pasadena, while Hollywood finished its season the previous week with a victory over Los Angeles. This left the two schools in a first place tie with 5-1 records. For the next three weeks, Long Beach Poly tried to set up a round of playoff games that would not only resolve their tie with Hollywood, but also provide for a face-off with the Bay

League champion (Venice). Finally, with classes letting out for the week-long Spring Break, the Long Beach Press reported on Sun., April 10, 1927:

“POLY’S WATER POLO TEAM TAKES TITLE”

“Poly High School’s 1926-1927 sport campaign had another championship added to its fast growing list, when Coach Wallace Detrick’s powerful Jackrabbit Water Polo artists were awarded the Coast League and Southern California titles, as Hollywood, Venice and Inglewood High Schools forfeited the remaining playoff tilts to the Seaside. This is the first time since the eleven (*actually nine*) State Championships were won from 1912 to 1922 inclusive that a Long Beach team has won the Southland title, and as the Northern Prep Schools do not participate in this activity, Long Beach’s water dogs can successfully lay claim to the state crown.

“Losing only one out of ten games was the remarkable record set up by the local squad, and 8 to 0 and 11 to 0 shutouts over Pasadena High, Poly’s keenest athletic rival, made the season one of the most successful ever staged. Hollywood High was beaten 5 to 0 in the local tank (*played Feb. 17*), but in the return game at Hollywood, the locals were beaten 5 to 4 in an overtime tilt. This ended the Coast Loop up in a tie, as the City League officials would not permit Hollywood to play off the tie in the standings, as it is against the City League rulings.

“This gave the Jackrabbits the Coast league title, and Venice, winner of the Bay Loop, is also in Los Angeles’ city limits, so that school was also declared out of the championship running. Inglewood, second in the Bay League, would not play the locals, as they had previously taken an 11 to 0 beating. So the championship came to Long Beach, and now that this aquatic sport is finished, Coach Wallace Detrick will use most of the team on the swimming squad after vacation is over.”

Long Beach Poly, it should be noted, had also soundly beaten Venice in a pre-season game played on Feb. 3, 1927, winning 8-2.

The 1927 Long Beach Poly yearbook reported the CIF-SS formally awarding the title shortly after classes resumed, stating “Eleven men won letters and were awarded life passes at an assembly April 26, when the team was presented with a plaque by Harry J. Moore representing the C.I.F.” (Moore went on to become Long Beach Wilson’s second principal, holding the post from 1933-47, and it is he whom the powerful Long Beach-area Moore League is named after.)

A final footnote on the season concerns Coach Detrick, who had a very interesting spring of 1927. Not only did his Water Polo team win a CIF-SS title that year, but he also coached Long Beach Poly’s swimming team to a CIF-SS championship as well. Even more amazingly, that same spring he coached the school’s wrestling team – and they finished third that year behind Whittier and Long Beach Wilson!

In 1928, the L.A. Unified finally relented and started to allow its member schools to participate in playoff games. Thus, 25 seasons before the founding in 1952 of the

modern post-season championship tournament, a title game became a regular part of the Water Polo schedule. Hollywood and Venice emerged as the winners of the Coast and Bay leagues, respectively. What followed the regular season is the single best idea (I think) in the history of CIF-SS Water Polo championship competition.

The 1928 championship was not decided by a single match, but by a best of three series. The Hollywood “Sheiks” beat the Venice “Gondoliers” (love those names!) two games to one:

Game 1. Tues., Mar. 27, 1928	Hollywood (Coast) ..10	Venice (Bay).....3	(at Hollywood)
Game 2. Thurs., Mar. 29, 1928	Venice (Bay).....4	Hollywood (Coast) ..3	(at Venice)
Game 3. Fri., Mar. 30, 1928	Hollywood (Coast)....4	Venice (Bay).....1	(at Inglewood)

League officials retreated from this innovative formula after the first year, however, opting instead for what we now view as a traditional single championship game. The results of these championship contests in subsequent years were as follows:

1929	Thurs., April 4	Long Beach Poly (Coast) ... 2	Inglewood (Bay)..... 1
1930	Wed., March 26	Venice (Bay)..... 3	Long Beach Poly (Coast) 1
1931	Thurs., March 26	Fullerton (Coast) 5	Venice (Bay).....2
1932	Fri., March 18	Fullerton (Coast) 10	Huntington Park (Bay) 5
1933	Mon., March 27	Fullerton (Coast) 11	Long Beach Wilson (Bay)..... 3

For Hollywood in 1928, Long Beach Poly in 1929 and Venice in 1930, it would be the last Water Polo championship for all three schools, signaling the near-end of an era, while Fullerton’s (the “Indians”) first title in 1931 hinted at a new one. Even though Long Beach Poly’s day was now finally passing, its 11 CIF-SS championships still rates a tie (with Long Beach Wilson) for third best among all schools that have ever played the game in Southern California.

The steadily improving Indians came close to representing the Coast League in the 1930 championship match. They had split the two regular season games with the Jackrabbits (winning the first game, 3-2, losing the second, 4-3) before falling in a playoff game, 4-0. When Fullerton broke through in 1931, their victory in the championship game was considered an upset. Venice’s yearbook was amazingly hard on its own team – “The Gondoliers met their Waterloo at the hands of the same team which they had utterly ripped to pieces on two occasions earlier in the season.” The Indians followed-up with an undefeated season in 1932.

One name of special interest to crop up in the rundown of championship games is Long Beach Wilson. Founded in 1926, the school entered league play in 1932 and, impressive though it may have been to make the final game in only their second year,

it would not be until 1981 that they would finally win their first CIF-SS championship. This full 50-season wait is the longest in history for any championship school to-date. Their name – the “Bruins” – comes from a feeling of kindred spirit with UCLA. The university was the off-spring of the original UC school, Cal-Berkeley (the “Bears”), while the high school is the off-spring of the original Long Beach school, Polytechnic.

As previously mentioned, CIF-SS inaugurated the modern post-season championship tournament in 1952. Since that single game between Whittier and Downey, more than 100 schools (a record 164 in 2017) now qualify annually for the post-season playoffs – and, of course, many more teams call it a season only after playing 20-plus tournament, non-league and league games.

If high school Water Polo existed in a vacuum, impervious to the events of the outside world, such a pattern of growth might have started 20 years earlier. Everything was in place, including a foundational championship game that was already six years old.

But, the only water sport played with a ball did not exist like an island. It was connected to the world. In truth, by 1933 the championship game was living on borrowed time. Water Polo was about to enter an era when catastrophes already being endured – and others still to come – would erase virtually all of the gains of this first Golden Age.

CHAPTER IV

Setback and Survival, 1934-1946

Oct. 29, 1929 is arguably the single most important day in the entire 20th Century. On that date, the stock market crashed, quickly sending the entire world into a deep economic depression – for Europe, it was the worst economic conditions since the Dark Ages; certainly, for the United States, there was no precedent whatsoever.

It is difficult for us today to understand just how awful these times were, with our modern social safety nets. Back then, unemployment exceeded 19 percent at one point in 1932. People who managed to keep working were doing so for less money than a few years before and often at a subsistence level. Who knew how long you'd have even that kind of work or where you'd have to travel to find the next job? All the while, the only "dole" was a soup kitchen.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theory of motivation known as "The Hierarchy of Needs," in which more basic needs must first be met before higher order needs come into play. Certainly, high school Water Polo didn't rate too highly on very many people's priority lists during these years, and several schools suspended the sport due to lack of funds and interest.

However, the Great Depression was actually only one of two catastrophes that were to strike at the game before the final Coast League-Bay League championship match in 1933. Just 17 days prior, on March 10, 1933, a disastrous magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck, centered in Long Beach. The earthquake killed 115 people and ruined structures throughout the city – including swimming facilities. Earlier in the season, Long Beach Wilson had actually managed to win one of three games against Fullerton (the scores were Fullerton winning, 13-2; losing, 9-7, and winning, 8-2). But with their city in ruins, Long Beach Wilson held just two practices between the earthquake and championship game. The Bruins were additionally handicapped by the absence of their team captain, Dave Nave, due to earthquake-related reasons. Nave was not a fatality, but he may well have been injured or perhaps his family was forced to temporarily relocate out of the area.

Both Long Beach Poly and Long Beach Wilson bravely carried on until the 1935 season, but the Earthquake inflicted long-term damage to aquatic programs throughout the city. After 1935, the schools did not field Water Polo teams again until 1950.

Other set-backs to the development of the game quickly followed. The 1934 season saw the return of our old friend influenza, which had broken out again in epidemic proportions. By the late spring it was serious enough to force the cancellation of the 1934 championship meet for swimming, something not even World War II succeeded in doing.

Finally, beginning with Fall 1934 sports schedules (and 1935 Water Polo season), the nation's largest school district, Los Angeles Unified, pulled out of CIF-SS and formed their own section – CIF-Los Angeles City Section. This section, absorbed with the unique problems of a Big City, ignored the game, though district schools still interested in Water Polo were permitted to continue in league competition with CIF-SS schools. Basically, that meant just Los Angeles and Huntington Park (and the latter took a three year break from the game from 1934-36). The great Hollywood and Venice teams were no more, the former having dropped out after 1931.

Truly, for anyone interested in aquatic sports, these were hard times!

Competition had reached a high-water mark during the 1929-31 seasons, when 10 schools put teams into the Coast and Bay Leagues. In 1932 the total slipped to nine and by 1933 the two leagues were just shells of their former selves with only three teams in each division.

With this as the backdrop, the years 1934-46 in Water Polo history can actually be broken down into three smaller segments, all reflecting a continual decline in fortunes –

1. 1934-38, competition is reduced from two leagues with a championship contest to just one league with no mechanism for even resolving a first place tie.
2. 1939-42, competition is reduced from extended league play to scheduling of a few “league” contests, which really just served as warm-up matches for a season ending “Southern California Invitational” tournament to determine the champion.
3. 1943-46, competition is reduced from any league play at all to just inter-squad games and to the rare, unofficial match with another high school or even college team (thanks to yet another catastrophe – World War II, but we'll talk about that later).

That the game continued to be played at all during these years is a tribute, once again, to a critical few men who chose the new profession of Water Polo coach as a career. Chief among these were Elmer Crumly of Los Angeles, “the elder statesman” among high school coaches at this point; the newly arrived Jimmy Smith of Fullerton; and, later, Heber Holloway of Whittier.

Coach Smith (1904-86) is of special interest for a couple of reasons. First, he is possibly the first ex-high school Water Polo player in Southern California to choose coaching as a career. The game had suddenly been played for that long. Smith played at Long Beach Poly through 1923, stuck around as their assistant coach in 1924, moved on to Fullerton in 1930 to assist the school's first great coach, Al Dowden (titles in 1931 and 1932), and finally succeeded him as head coach in 1933.

Smith was a busy man in the 1930s. Not only was he the Water Polo and swimming coach at Fullerton High School but, this being the Great Depression, he also performed the same duties at Fullerton Community College, located right across the street from

the high school. As a further testimony to how thinly everything was stretched back then, he was the Frosh-Soph (“C”) and Junior Varsity (“B”) football coach at Fullerton High School as well. (Remember, Water Polo and swimming were conducted in the spring, football in the fall, so he had plenty of time!)

Coach Smith was instrumental to the game’s survival during these years. The “Southern California Invitational” was hosted all four years by Fullerton, with Smith primarily responsible for pulling it together. His departure in 1942 for military service in the Navy was among the key “last straws” that led to the dissolving of league play for four years. A real visionary of the era, Smith published a book entitled “Playing and Coaching Water Polo” in 1936 that became an instructional standard, and his “The World Encyclopedia of Water Polo,” not published until 1990, four years after his death, presents a complete global history of the game.

Turning our attention finally to the 1934 season itself, little remains to be said except that seven schools managed to muster teams for the single-league competition and Fullerton convincingly beat all of them. A 7-4 verdict over Inglewood on Fri., March 9, 1934, was the toughest league game of the year for the Indians. (Fullerton did receive two blemishes on its record from Los Angeles in non-league contests – a 3-3 tie on Fri., Jan. 12, and a 5-4 loss on Fri., Jan. 19. The Indians took care of the Romans in the league match, 10-6, on Fri., Feb. 9.)

Fullerton was the first great Orange County-based Water Polo team, showing the way for Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Sunny Hills and many others. In 1934, Fullerton was in the midst of a string of six straight league championships that remains exceeded only by Long Beach Poly’s 1916-22 run of seven. And, like the Jackrabbits, Fullerton was essentially unbeatable. Fullerton’s 1934 yearbook reports: “Pronounced one of the best teams ever produced in a high school by Water Polo experts of Southern California, the Indian Varsity has swept through four successive seasons....They have won 33 consecutive league contests during this time and for the past two years have outscored every opponent two to one (*the cumulative total of Fullerton versus opponents*).”

The school would eventually push its league winning streak to 52 games, according to the Fullerton News-Tribune of March 2, 1937, before finally getting beat on that date by Los Angeles. During that streak, however, Long Beach Poly recorded a 3-3 tie in a league game on March 8, 1935. You can find three of the Varsity (“A”) championship trophies awarded to the school by CIF-SS for its Water Polo successes during this period in a display case in the foyer of Fullerton’s gym. The trophies for the 1934, 1935 and 1936 seasons represent the oldest of the readily accessible “artifacts” I have found while visiting the campuses of early powerhouse schools. (Trophies for “B” and “C” champions are also displayed, along with one missing a metal plate identifying the year and level.)

The 1935 and 1936 seasons were more difficult for Fullerton, but they remained undefeated. In 1935, there was that tie against Long Beach Poly, and a one-goal win over Inglewood, 5-4, on Fri., Feb. 15. In 1936, Los Angeles gave the Indians a battle before losing, 7-6, on Fri., Feb. 28.

Things were finally different in 1937, when a still unbeaten Fullerton faced off with Los Angeles on Tues., March 2. Taking no chances with such a dangerous foe, Los Angeles won decisively, 8-1. They completed their own undefeated season on Thurs., March 11, with a 7-1 win over Inglewood, enabling the Coach Crumly-led Romans to claim their first title in 11 years. (Thus, Los Angeles ended both of the two longest championship streaks in CIF-SS history – succeeding Long Beach Poly as champion in 1923 and Fullerton in 1937.)

Inglewood (the “Sentinels”) had first participated in league competition way back in 1916 before becoming a regular contestant at the beginning of the first Golden Age in 1923. Still, with the exception of a near miss against Long Beach Poly in the 1929 championship game, they really hadn’t ever been a contender. In 1938, they finally climbed to the top – though they had to share the view with Los Angeles. The Romans had beaten Inglewood, but lost to Fullerton, while the Indians had to settle for third after losing to both Inglewood and Huntington Beach.

As reported in the Fullerton News-Tribune on Feb. 2, 1938: “Water Polo season is over as far as high school games are concerned. . . . At the same time, Los Angeles High School is also tied with Inglewood for the Varsity Water Polo title. There will be no playoffs. This was so decided at a huddle of interested officials when it was found no convenient date or pools were available and Los Angeles High School was graduating most of its Water Polo team at mid-year.”

It would be Inglewood’s first and only title (Ivan Carey coached), though the school would continue sending Water Polo teams to the CIF-SS playoffs until 1962. It was the final title for Los Angeles as well, and one that bears noting. With Los Angeles winning a CIF-SS title a full four years after its school district created its own CIF section, Water Polo has the distinction among all sports as having the last CIF-SS champion to hail from the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Perhaps to alleviate the unsatisfactory taste in every red-blooded American’s mouth over a tied championship, league officials then tried to devise a league schedule that would produce a season-ending championship game. What resulted instead was the worst planned season in 20 years.

For the 1939 season, the league was divided into a “Western Circuit” comprising Huntington Park, Inglewood, Leuzinger and Los Angeles; and an “Eastern Circuit” that included Fullerton, Huntington Beach and Whittier. Each team played the other teams within its own circuit twice. Fullerton breezed through its circuit schedule, while Los Angeles and Inglewood tied for leadership in the West. After Los Angeles defeated Inglewood, 7-2, in a playoff game, a Southern California championship match was arranged for Jan. 26, 1939 at Compton Community College.

However, a complication then arose, probably springing from good intentions. With only four league games and five non-league games to call a season, Smith apparently wanted to give his team a chance to get in a few more games. Thus, by early January, he had organized the “Fullerton Invitational” to be held between the end of the league season and the championship match.

Complete results of this 1939 tournament are as follows (all games played at Fullerton):

Quarter-Finals, Jan. 19, 1939 –			
Inglewood	7	Whittier	1
Huntington Beach	5	Huntington Park	1
Fullerton–bye			
Los Angeles–bye			
Semi-Finals, Jan. 20, 1939 –			
Fullerton	6	Inglewood	1
Los Angeles	7	Huntington Beach	6
Finals, Jan. 21, 1939 –			
Fullerton	11	Los Angeles	5

When the two best teams around finally meet each other in the last match of a post-season tournament, you generally call that the championship, right? Not in this case. Unsurprisingly, Fullerton and Los Angeles had wound up playing for the championship of the Fullerton Invitational just five days before they were scheduled to face-off in the championship match that really mattered!

As it turned out, Fullerton managed rather easily the difficult feat of beating a good team twice in a row, defeating Los Angeles for the Southern California championship, 8-4.

And, perhaps, this absent-minded scheduling wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

First, Coach Smith seems to have figured his team wasn’t going to get beaten by anyone that year (they finished 12-0). Prior to the event, the Fullerton News-Tribune asked him for a ranking and thumbnail sketch of all six teams at the Fullerton Invitational, and he responded by putting Fullerton number one and commenting, “Never better in entire life.”

Second, Water Polo could stand the publicity of having two “championship” matches within five days of each other. The two games did rate stories in Southern

California's largest newspaper, the Los Angeles Times, which was not paying much attention to the sport at this point.

Not many people were. Continuing economic hardships at home and the ominous developments in Europe – Adolf Hitler was Time Magazine's "Man of the Year" for 1938 – caused interest in Water Polo to continue to sag badly. Thus, the "Fullerton Invitational" became known as the "Southern California Invitational," it was moved firmly to the end of the league season and for the next three years it served as the championship determiner.

For 1940, complete tournament results are as follows (all games held at Fullerton):

Quarter-Finals, Jan. 25, 1940 –

Huntington Beach	9	Whittier	1
Fullerton	4	Huntington Park	2
Los Angeles–bye			
Inglewood–bye			

Semi-Finals, Jan. 26, 1940 –

Fullerton	4	Los Angeles	3
Inglewood	3	Huntington Beach	1

Finals, Jan. 27, 1940 –

Fullerton	6	Inglewood	3
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For 1941, complete tournament results are as follows (all games held at Fullerton):

Qualifying Round, Jan. 22, 1941 –

Huntington Beach	7	Compton	3
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Quarter-Finals, Jan. 23, 1941 –

Fullerton	2	Inglewood	1
Huntington Beach–bye			
Whittier–bye			
Los Angeles–bye			

Semi-Finals, Jan. 24, 1941 –

Whittier	5	Huntington Beach	1
Los Angeles	5	Fullerton	3

Finals, Jan. 25, 1941 –

Whittier	8	Los Angeles	2
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For 1942, complete tournament results are as follows (all games held at Fullerton):

Quarter-Finals, Jan. 28, 1942 –	
Fullerton.....8	Inglewood.....1
Huntington Beach–bye	
Whittier–bye	
Los Angeles–bye	
Semi-Finals, Jan. 29, 1942 –	
Whittier.....5	Los Angeles.....3
Huntington Beach.....7	Fullerton.....6
Finals, Jan. 30, 1942 –	
Whittier.....6	Huntington Beach.....4

The 1941 and 1942 seasons are interesting for a couple of reasons. First, they mark the initial championship years for Whittier (the “Cardinals”) under the leadership of the last great coach of this era, Heber Holloway. We were discussing the “Past Masters” that first emerged in the 1920s and Coach Holloway surely qualifies as one. He brought Whittier into the league in 1936 and Holloway would eventually lead the team in 1952 to the first championship game of the modern CIF-SS post-season tournament against Downey. In a letter written to me, Downey’s coach at the time, Jim Schultz, noted that even then “Heber Holloway was way ahead of his time in strategy.”

Secondly, of course, by Jan. 30, 1942, Japanese bombs had been dropped over Pearl Harbor some eight weeks earlier and the United States was finally in a war it had tried to stay out of for more than two years. Everyone suddenly had more serious things on their minds and the 1942 season was little more than a hurried after-thought. Fullerton’s “regular season” that year consisted of just five games played between Jan. 8-27 before giving way to the Invitational.

With so many men “gone to war” – including such key figures as Smith and Holloway – and with strict rationing of all sorts (such as rubber tires!), conducting league competition after 1942 was simply impossible. Even with a war on, though, the teenage high school Water Polo players of that era had mixed feelings about the suspension of league play. Frank Poucher, who as a junior played on Coach Holloway’s 1942 Whittier team, recalled for me with some regret in his voice even in 1981 that they had a very strong team ready to go for the 1943 season. Had there been league competition, he said, Whittier would have emerged the champion.

Swimming fared much better than Water Polo against wartime shortages, with the traditional pre-season relay race meet, dual meets (on a limited but regular basis) and the season-ending final meet all continuing to be held. In 1943, the final meet was held at Occidental College on May 22 and attracted at least 14 schools, including Beverly Hills, first; Whittier, second, and Fullerton, third.

Water Polo, however, remained in demand among our young heroes on a few campuses, where the sport continued to be pursued mainly through inter-squad games for the next four years.

The continuous thread of high school Water Polo from 1912 to the present was largely maintained from 1943-46 by Whittier, which was the only school to field a team for all four of the “war years.” The school’s 1943 yearbook states that the team played just two games that season and those probably were inter-squad games (seniors vs. sophomores, juniors vs. freshmen, then a second set of games between winners and losers). Fullerton, which also had a team that year, held such a tournament on Dec. 10 and Dec. 16, 1942. Their 1943 yearbook then pictured the senior team holding a ball with the highly misleading inscription “Champs 1943.” Whittier’s 1944 and 1945 yearbooks are silent as to the school’s specific activities, other than to demonstrate through sparse words and action photos that they did indeed have a team those years. The Cardinals’ 1946 season will be covered in the next chapter. From 1943-45, Whittier was coached by two faculty members who were not called into military service, while Holloway returned to the helm in 1946.

The third and final noteworthy thing about the 1941 and 1942 seasons is that they marked the final appearances of the Los Angeles school district teams in CIF-SS Water Polo competition. Huntington Park offered a team through 1941, though it didn’t send a representative to the Southern California Invitational. Los Angeles, however, was a different story – they were competitive right up to the end. The Romans, in fact, participated in more seasons than any other school during the first 31 years of high school Water Polo – missing only the 1916, 1919 and 1921 seasons. Unfortunately, they disappeared after 1942.

Following World War II, Los Angeles High School, located on Olympic Blvd. between Crenshaw and La Brea in the Mid-City area, increasingly became an inner-city school without the resources or interest to pursue Water Polo. Yet, this chapter in Water Polo history is a story of amazing dedication by a few key people who kept the game alive under the most trying conditions of the 20th Century. Happily, a similar dedication by Water Polo enthusiasts of the early 21st Century has led to a resurrection of the “Roman Empire.” In Spring 2008, CIF-Los Angeles City Section sanctioned its first ever Water Polo playoff tournament, 66 years after Los Angeles High School disappeared from the scene. A single-division, 16-team tournament has been conducted since Fall 2008. The Romans advanced to the quarter-finals in 2009, losing to another back-from-the-dead program – none other than Venice, 17-12.

CHAPTER V

Start of the Modern Era, 1947-1951

The Fullerton News-Tribune on Jan. 23, 1946 filed the following story: “Fullerton High School Water Polo teams (*meaning the Varsity and an underclass squad*) will meet here tomorrow afternoon at 3 o’clock in the first home game of the season. The Indians, who have been working out since football season ended, have had only two games, and both of those against college competition (*UCLA*). Whittier (*their opponent*) boasts a strong team, having played during the fall when an abundance of Water Polo competition was available.”

The story is slightly inaccurate in that Fullerton actually played and lost to Whittier the previous week, 11-4. However, the paper’s follow-up story of Jan. 25, 1946 contained a nice surprise for the hometown readers: “Fullerton High School Varsity Water Polo team wound up an abbreviated season with a win yesterday, defeating Whittier High School, 8-5.”

Whittier’s pre-Winter Break matches included an impressive four wins over college competition (three against UCLA and one against Cal. Tech. of Pasadena) and two games against Inglewood, which fielded the only other prep team that school year. Inglewood lost to Whittier both times, 8-2 and 7-5, and then folded their unit before Fullerton got a shot at them.

Nobody was referring to any kind of league, but Water Polo on the high school level was beginning to come out of hibernation.

The 1946 season suffered from a time lag between the end of the war and actual demobilization. With millions still in uniform and war time rationing still in place, official league play was not only delayed, but put off entirely until the next school year.

When league competition finally resumed in 1947, there were six schools involved, including Anaheim, Compton, El Segundo, Fullerton, Inglewood and Whittier. El Segundo, founded in 1927, took up the game immediately and played in the league every year from 1928-32, but it was never a serious contender. The program certainly gave no hint that eventually and for many years it would hold more CIF-SS titles than anyone.

The aquatics coach at El Segundo was Urho Saari who, as we shall see, would become the first Water Polo coach to achieve an international reputation while continuing to carry out his duties at a high school in Southern California. Saari settled in El Segundo just before entering wartime military service that included a spell in India. It was here, of all places and times, that he took up a serious interest in Water Polo, though contrary to legend he had been exposed to the game prior to the war. (Saari lived throughout the years that followed in a modest home within walking distance of the campus and the indoor swimming complex that now bears his name. I

happen to know this because the local paper, the El Segundo Herald, reported his home address along with his full name upon first reference in many stories. Can you imagine such a thing nowadays!)

With El Segundo competitive right away, and Whittier and Inglewood resuming their winning ways, the race for the league's top spot was a heated one. The league season started on Dec. 6, 1946, and came to a head on Jan. 23, 1947, when El Segundo beat Inglewood, 6-4, to create a three way tie for first with Whittier. Rather than leave things knotted up as in 1926, however, league officials devised one of their more interesting solutions to resolve the matter.

The league awarded a bye to Inglewood and required El Segundo and Whittier to play each other for the right to proceed to a championship match. A series of coin flips or drawing straws must have determined who got the bye – there are no reports of any formula concocted on the basis of comparative records. In any case, the bye didn't help Inglewood. They watched Whittier beat El Segundo, 8-2, on Jan. 29, 1947 and the next day Whittier defeated Inglewood, 6-4, to claim the last CIF-SS Water Polo title played in the "Spring" of the school year.

While 1952, the year the playoff tournament started, is an excellent choice for the designation "start of the modern era," 1947 might actually be a better choice. For it was in this year that CIF-SS and league officials made the fateful decision to move Water Polo firmly into the Fall line-up of high school athletic competition.

It was a very wise move, even though the game may always finish a distant second to football in the race for everyone's attention. As with that bye awarded to Inglewood, I do not know the specific thinking of the principals involved. However, they probably had seized on the obvious years before – there was no way this sport was ever going to amount to anything when it was crammed into a seven or eight week season, and then brushed aside to get on with swimming.

Water Polo was generally thought of as a "swimming sport," meaning it was perceived then like the sport of diving still is today – hardly differentiated in the minds of the general public from swimming's Butterfly or Individual Medley events. Now Water Polo would stand on its own.

Water Polo would also have the time to stretch out to today's 20-plus game season and a multi-round playoff. Equally important, the season was now connected to the Summer Break, so teams that had been practicing during these months would enter fall competition highly-tuned. The quality of play would improve dramatically.

Obvious though all of this may have been, things still take time. With the war ended, however, it was truly a moment of starting over for the game, so the decisive shift to the fall was finally made.

El Segundo (the "Eagles") seemed to like the change better than anyone. During this inaugural Fall season, the school won its first title ever and the first of four in

a row. Though this streak would end short of Long Beach Poly's and Fullerton's previous runs, it would be 30 years before another school would equal the feat of four consecutive titles (Newport Harbor, 1977-80).

El Segundo wrapped up its season on Dec. 11, 1947. The Fullerton News-Tribune reported the following day: "The Fullerton Indians closed their 1947 Water Polo season when they dropped a 19-0 verdict to the CIF champions, El Segundo." (Note the date. "Spring 1947" champ and "Fall 1947" champ doesn't sound like much time in between. In fact, nearly a full year separated them – ten and one-half months.)

That pounding the once mighty Fullerton took is also worth noting because El Segundo, in fact, pretty much ran away from everybody during their four-year reign as champions. The one exception was the 1948 season, which proceeded as follows:

League Standings After First Round		League Standings After Second Round	
1. Whittier	4 - 0	1. Whittier	8 - 1
2. El Segundo	3 - 1	2. El Segundo	8 - 1
3. Inglewood	2 - 2	3. Inglewood	4 - 5
4. Downey	1 - 3	4. Downey	3 - 6
5. Fullerton	0 - 4	5. Fullerton	2 - 7
		6. Leuzinger	0 - 5

Leuzinger joined the league at mid-season – I guess no one was very concerned that, being better rested, they might sneak away with the title. As far as that first place tie at the end of the second round goes, you know who they each lost to don't you?

Thus, the league had its second chance in three seasons to experiment with a playoff system. In a championship match played on Dec. 21, 1948, El Segundo beat Whittier, 8-6.

With El Segundo winning four titles in a row, we now arrive at the 1951 season which ushered in a new (and, so far, permanent) era of multi-league play. Suddenly, for the first time in 20 years, 10 teams would enter league competition. It was also the year of the "disputed championship" that led to the start of the current annual playoff tournament.

The story of the important 1951 Water Polo season actually begins one year earlier with the supplying of that most basic of all needs for the sport – a swimming pool.

Post-war prosperity was helping to fuel growing interest in Water Polo, as people once again had the time and money to pour into exercise and organized sports. This resurgence was particularly active in the Long Beach area. In 1950, the Long Beach schools built a district pool on the campus of Long Beach Poly – literally a landmark in high school Water Polo history (this classy indoor, 50-meter pool still stands and is often used by film crews as a backdrop for commercials and movies). A building

program was also announced that would add new pools on the campuses of Long Beach Wilson and Long Beach Jordan within the year.

Wilson, Poly and Jordan of Long Beach all formed teams for the 1950 season. These schools played a few non-conference games with that year's Southern California League contestants and conducted their own "All-City Championship," which Long Beach Wilson won.

From the championships earned by Long Beach Poly in 1912 to Long Beach Wilson in 2005, this long history of success bears witness to the fact that the "Queen City" has always been one of the essential hubs of the game in the United States. Now, the Long Beach area was taking up Water Polo again in a big way, after abandoning it 15 years earlier following the 1933 earthquake.

For the 1951 season, the Long Beach-area Coast League (soon to be renamed "Moore League") created a new Water Polo circuit for its member schools. These schools included Compton, and Poly, Wilson and Jordan of Long Beach. Compton, who had been playing off and on in the Southern California League, jumped over to the "new" circuit, where all of their better-established sports teams (football, etc.) already played.

There was one other school that made the jump – Downey, which did so literally at the last minute. The Sept. 26, 1951, issue of Downey's student newspaper, the *Norseman*, reported: "Downey's mermen have been unanimously voted into the Coast League, and will have Water Polo competition in that league, Coach Jim Schultz told his team at practice Thursday." This was on Sept. 20, six school days before the first league contest! Though the school was not a member of the Coast League, it wanted to be. Presently a member of the San Gabriel Valley League, Downey would move all of its athletic teams over to the Coast League the following school year.

For Downey, which had originally planned to again play in the Southern California League, the move to the Coast League was a gift from the gods. In the five previous seasons, El Segundo had been kicking in everyone's teeth, then Whittier would come along and slap 'em for mumbling (in fact, they would keep right on doing this through 1960). Now, Downey would be able to do some slapping around of their own against four very new and/or very weak programs (Compton didn't even offer a "C" team that year, playing only on the Varsity and "B" levels).

Downey (the "Vikings") was automatically the class of the league, with a fairly new (starting in the Fall 1947 season) but quickly improving program now under the leadership of second-year Coach Jim Schultz (later of Long Beach State) and Assistant Coach Pat Tyne (later of Cerritos Community College). Schultz had replaced the founder of Downey's Water Polo program, the same Al Dowden who had founded Fullerton's program some 20 years earlier.

The only team that could have challenged Downey in 1951 was Long Beach Wilson. They played the Vikings tough in two league games, losing 6-4 and 4-2, but had a disappointing season otherwise, a loss to last-place Compton being Long Beach Wilson's most embarrassing moment. Thus, Downey laughed their way to the title, with the final standings:

1. Downey	8 - 0
2. Long Beach Wilson	4 - 4
3. Long Beach Jordan	4 - 4
4. Long Beach Poly.....	3 - 5
5. Compton	1 - 7

Long Beach Jordan's season provides an example of the emerging character of the sport. On Wed., Oct. 31, the school's Varsity and "B" teams picked up a non-league game against Chaffey of Ontario. Chaffey was typical of the few independent programs that were semi-active around this time. Their "season" consisted of exactly the one game against Long Beach Jordan (they lost, 8-3), and two games against Chaffey Community College (they won!). Chaffey was the only high school offering a Water Polo team in 1951 besides those competing in the two leagues.

From the beginning, Downey's Coach Schultz had hoped to arrange a season-ending playoff game between the two league champions. In the same Sept. 26 Norseman article cited earlier, Schultz is quoted as saying "As far as I know now there will be a playoff between the winners of the (Southern California League) teams and the Coast League."

However, the idea of a playoff game that year was doomed from the start.

With suddenly two leagues in operation, there was a fatal flaw in the schedule. Both leagues had five teams, both had their teams play each other twice for a total of eight league games and both leagues had all their teams playing their first league games during the weeks of Sept. 24 and Oct 1. The big "however" here is that the Coast League's schedule moved at a methodical one game per week – with four teams engaged in combat and the fifth taking a bye every Friday for 10 weeks in a row. The Southern California League teams generally played their games on Wednesday, but in the second half of the season the pace quickened to two games per week.

As a result, Downey would not complete its league season until a final 9-3 clobbering of Long Beach Poly on Fri., Nov. 30. The Southern California League, on the other hand, had wrapped up its season a full two weeks earlier.

This lack of coordination between the two leagues expressed itself in an additional way that proved fatal to the playoff game idea. In those days, the underclass "B" and "C" teams received quite a bit of attention. The scores of these games were reported in the newspapers right along with the Varsity scores and schools often tracked their

win-loss records by combining the results from all three squads. For instance, Downey maintained they had a 30-4 record at season's end – a 9-3 Varsity record, an 11-1 "B" record and a 10-0 "C" record. Whittier's record was 23-2, based on a 7-1 Varsity season, an 8-1 "B" season and an 8-0 "C" season. Indeed, an interesting feature of the CIF-SS playoff tournament from 1952-60 was that post-season play was conducted for the "Bs" and "Cs" right along with the Varsity. So, it wasn't just a matter of arranging one playoff game between two schools; the task was to schedule three games with (theoretically) as many as six different schools involved. Finding an acceptable date and location for a playoff "game" would clearly have to be a full-member decision for both leagues, and the job simply did not get done.

Competitively, the Southern California League was the exact opposite of the Coast League, producing what El Segundo's 1951-52 yearbook called "One of the most closely-contested seasons in league history." Whittier was the pre-season favorite to win the league that year, with El Segundo down a bit due to the graduation of 10 lettermen from its championship team of the previous year. Still, the four-time champs would be laying down for no one. Competition was further heightened by a stubborn Fullerton team, which would manage victories over both Whittier and El Segundo before the season's end. Rounding-out 1951's tough league was Inglewood and Huntington Beach, which had just resumed its Water Polo program the previous year (though not as a league member).

Whittier won the title by two games, but it was much more of a struggle than that would indicate. First, they squeaked by El Segundo twice (5-3 and 2-1), the win in the initial round ending a 34 game unbeaten streak for the Eagles that extended all the way back to the hotly contested 1948 season. Second, Fullerton had beaten Whittier (4-3) in the initial round of league games. It would have been a hollow league title if they had gone 0-2 against anybody. So, on the last day of the season, Fri., Nov. 16, Whittier was finally able to avenge their only loss of the year, 5-4, pushing Fullerton back into third place and leaving El Segundo alone in second.

Whittier's school newspaper, the Cardinal & White, dated Wed., Nov. 21, 1951, reported "Under the watchful eye of Coaches Heber Holloway and Hap Waer, Whittier High's Varsity Water Poloists captured an eight (*actually seven*) win, one loss record and the league championship in the past 1951 season. The end of the Water Polo season marks the beginning of the swimming schedule, which has already begun."

The final standings for the Southern California League were:

1. Whittier	7 - 1
2. El Segundo	5 - 3
3. Fullerton	4 - 4
4. Huntington Beach	3 - 5
5. Inglewood	1 - 7

As Whittier was the title favorite from the beginning, Coach Schultz of Downey did not pursue scheduling a non-league game with the Cardinals. He chose not to for an important strategic reason – his young team would certainly lose an early-to-mid-season contest with the more experienced Whittier team. This would kill any justification for a season-ending playoff game where his team, battle-hardened after two months of competition, might have a better chance.

Instead, Downey kept busy by arranging 12 games total for the year, a very full schedule by the standards of 1951 (their non-league competition included losses to Inglewood, 5-1, and Huntington Beach, 9-0, and two games against Fullerton, first losing 4-2, then winning, 5-4). For Whittier's part, there were few "gluttons for punishment" willing to play them unless required. The school did not play a single non-league game all year.

On Mon., Nov. 19 Whittier's "B" team won a playoff game against El Segundo to resolve a first place tie, giving them league championships in all three divisions. Downey had clinched its Varsity league title on Nov. 9 and the "B" and "C" titles were locked up no later than Nov. 16. Suddenly, the playoff picture was very simple – Whittier vs. Downey in all three divisions. So, shortly after Whittier's triumph, Coach Schultz took matters into his own hands and tried to arrange a title match. In a letter Schultz wrote to me in 1981, he said "(Downey's) young and inexperienced players improved so greatly, I felt they deserved a playoff shot with Whittier. I petitioned the CIF executives with my team's record and personal reasoning that without a playoff, Whittier could claim to be CIF Water Polo champions and Downey could lay claim to the same title."

Schultz didn't have a very strong case on the Varsity level. Whittier had a 5-1 record against common opponents while Downey's record was only 1-3. Still, they had managed to beat Fullerton once in two tries, just like Whittier. Schultz actually had a much better argument on behalf of his undefeated "C" team (Whittier's "C" team was also undefeated) and his once-beaten "B" team (they had lost one of two games against Fullerton; Whittier's "B" team also had just one defeat, losing one of three meetings with El Segundo).

After Schultz made his case, the Downey Norseman newspaper for Wed., Dec. 5, 1951 reported what happened next:

"The local boys never had a crack at Whittier, as it was Coach Schultz's strategy to let things coast along and to try to surprise the Cards at the Southern California playoff. There was but one trouble with this. That is the fact that Whittier disbanded its teams right after taking its league competition. The Cardinals claim to be the Southern California champs, or at least that claim is made by the school paper, Cardinal & White, but they are just champs of their own league, the same as Downey."

Downey's yearbook for the 1951-52 school year commented further: "Competing in the Coast League, Downey swept the championships in all three divisions – Varsity, BEE and CEE; and the boys were disappointed when they found they could not play Whittier for the CIF Crown."

Coach Schultz's arguments were sound enough, but not enough to convince Coach Holloway or any other coach in his position.

First, his Whittier team had just had the great satisfaction of ending El Segundo's four-year reign as champions, not to mention evening the score with Fullerton after they had blemished their otherwise perfect season. Now, he's being asked to sit around idle for two or more weeks just so Downey can have the opportunity to send his players home for Winter Break with a bad taste in their mouths about the whole season!

Second, as any coach of a champion will tell you, that team can lose its fine precision in two days let alone two weeks – and, don't forget, this idle period incorporated the long Thanksgiving weekend (Thanksgiving Day was on its earliest possible date this year, Nov. 22). Whittier's players probably came back on Mon., Nov. 26 floating two inches deeper in the water than one week before.

Third, it was a fact – Whittier had disbanded its team. Charles Holloway, the coach's son and then a sophomore alternating between the Varsity and "B" teams, told me in 1999 that the school's Winter sports schedules had kicked in and the Water Polo team lost several key players to the basketball team. "The real reason is we had broken off training as a team, so the idea of a championship game was totally implausible," the younger Holloway said.

There may have been a fourth reason as well. Downey had apparently jumped to the Coast League after the Southern California League had already arranged its schedule with the Vikings included. This cost at least one league team some games – El Segundo had originally planned to play Downey twice that year, on Oct. 24 and Nov. 14. However, neither game took place after Downey made its move. It may well have been that Whittier, representing the Southern California League, would have found it awkward to play Downey under the circumstances.

The politically correct view of this situation would be to agree with Coach Schultz and declare Whittier and Downey co-champions for the 1951 season. However, Whittier had the better team and everybody knew it.

So, it quickly went down in the CIF-SS's official listings of All-Time Water Polo Champions as Whittier "Champion" for 1951 (having won the senior circuit) and Downey "Runner-Up" (having won the junior circuit). Of course, this ultimately created confusion among historians (well, me) who wondered why no score was reported alongside Whittier's and Downey's names, the way scores were reported between finalists for every other year that followed. It wasn't until I tracked down Pat Tyne at Cerritos Community College that I received the great revelation – no championship game was played that year.

Discovering this, I reported my findings to the CIF-SS office, which then changed the official roster of champions to eliminate this confusion. Since the publication in 1985 of the 14th Edition of the CIF-SS Press Guide, the champion for 1951 is credited simply and accurately to the best team for that year: "Whittier, Winner of Southern California League."

With a year of play under their belts as separate leagues, it is probable that the first playoff game between the two league champions would have taken place the following year even without Coach Schultz's November 1951 petitioning for a match right here, right now. However, a little controversy never hurts to get things moving along. To the extent that any one person deserves the title, then, perhaps Coach Schultz should be recognized as "The Father of the CIF-SS Water Polo Playoffs" that we look forward to so much today.

One final observation about the 1951 season. This against-all-odds bid for a playoff match is very much in keeping with the fun, unpredictable and very good style of play that Downey would bring to the high school game for the next 23 years, when they would advance to at least the semi-finals in all but six tourneys during this period. As a goalie, I hated playing Downey. Their offense seemed to specialize in a sort of poor-percentage-shooting-as-brilliant-strategy approach. They took terrible shots, but they took so many of them that a few were bound to go in! Besides, the shots came from anywhere, so you knew you were going to look bad a couple times during a game just on account of mounting fatigue or attention lapses.

When Downey was involved in a game, it was always exciting. And, they put everyone on notice in 1951 of what was to come now that the modern era was really under way.

BOOK TWO:

The
Tournament Years
1952-1973

CHAPTER VI

Birth of the Second Season, 1952-1960

The 1950s have passed into the popular culture's understanding of history as a tranquil, complacent age, where people mainly drove around in gas-guzzlers with outrageous tailfins and first became hypnotized by the boob tube. In fact, it was what one historian has called a "Troubled Feast" of unprecedented widespread affluence on the one hand, but general foreboding on the other. For every nation that mattered now seemed equipped with that latest must-have among civilized people – the nuclear bomb. America, free-market and democratic, was engaged in a new kind of war – a war of nerves – with the other military superpower to emerge from World War II, the communistic and totalitarian Soviet Union.

As commented on twice before, in connection with the late 19-teens and early 1930s, the sport of Water Polo does not exist somehow separate from the world. Events that shake the world in general also shake the game specifically. This "Cold War" would play a most interesting role in the growing prestige and popularity of the sport before the decade was out.

High school Water Polo in Southern California during the 1950s was also basically a story of two competing superpowers – El Segundo and Whittier. El Segundo had a down year in 1953 (due at least partially to "Olympics hangover") and Whittier had a below-standard season in 1954 (a transition year in more ways than one), but beyond that it was pretty much all Eagles and Cardinals.

El Segundo and Whittier, both founded in the 1920s, have picturesque campuses that are sort of idealized, Hollywood visions of what a high school should look like. Whittier now has iron fences around the perimeter, giving the campus a somewhat caged in look. El Segundo, however, still gets my vote for the most beautiful campus in Southern California, with its well-groomed front lawn and large red brick main buildings.

El Segundo was in the 1950s – and is today – a small school of only about 400 students. The town itself has always struck me as a perfect island. It stands happily alone from the rest of the crowded Los Angeles area, blocked off by Los Angeles International Airport to the North, the Pacific Ocean to the West, the huge Chevron refinery to the South (this second refinery to the one in Carson is the source of the city's name) and the 405 freeway to the East.

That this small high school and its small town once stood at the center of the American Water Polo world is due to the talents and hard work of its busy coach. Urho Saari not only coached El Segundo, but also El Camino Community College's team (located in neighboring Torrance) from 1948-54. (Saari succeeded Ivan Carey, who founded the program there in 1946 while continuing his coaching duties at Inglewood.) More importantly, Saari additionally coached an outstanding "club team," the

El Segundo Swim Club, which he helped form in the summer of 1947. This squad would train annually in the spring and summer for Amateur Athletic Union-sponsored (AAU) national championships, which would soon lead to competition on an international level.

Whittier continued to be coached by Heber Holloway through the 1952 season. The following year, however, he left Whittier to become the first principal of newly created California High School (also in Whittier). In 1953, Whittier was coached by Holloway's able assistant, Albert "Hap" Waer, who departed for the new school himself after only one year. Another Holloway assistant, Frank Poucher, then stepping up to head coaching duties in 1954. However, two coaching changes in two years took its toll (not to mention a relatively weak senior class and a depletion of underclassmen due to the splitting of the school district). But after one year of reorganizing things, Poucher continued the school's winning tradition. It is small wonder that Poucher turned out to be a great coach as he had wonderful mentors. He played high school ball for Holloway and then went to Fullerton Community College following World War II and played for Jimmy Smith.

El Segundo and Whittier remained in the Southern California League together through the 1956 season, placing first and second to each other in 1952, 1955 and 1956. Whittier took the league and CIF-SS crowns in 1952 and 1953, while El Segundo did so in 1954 and 1956; in 1955, El Segundo took first place in the league, but by then the playoffs were admitting two teams from each league and second-place Whittier upset El Segundo in the CIF-SS finals. When the Southern California League was disbanded in 1957 and the two schools went separate ways, their non-league contests were still the most closely watched games of the season (the El Segundo Herald was already referring to the Eagles vs. Cardinals as a "classic rivalry"). And, they continued to face each other in the season finale. In fact, the two schools met in the playoff finals for a record six years in a row from 1955-60. El Segundo won it in 1956 (8-6), 1957 (5-4), 1958 (10-5) and 1960 (8-7); Whittier won it in 1955 (10-8) and 1959 (5-2). Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills faced each other in the CIF-SS finals five out of six years from 1975-80, but it seems unlikely that any two teams will ever come as close again to matching this incredible string of El Segundo and Whittier.

One of the questions that first launched me on this interest in high school Water Polo history was the matter of who El Segundo and Whittier played beside themselves during these years. Surely there were other teams around and some of them must have been pretty good! Well, there were some other good teams. Huntington Beach finished second in the Southern California League two years in a row, in front of third place El Segundo in 1953 and Whittier in 1954; and they won the first ever Sunset League title in 1955. California (thanks to Coach Waer) had outstanding semi-finalist teams in both 1959 and 1960. In the latter tourney, California went into the fourth quarter of the semi-final game against El Segundo with a 4-1 lead, but the Eagles came back to tie them 5-5 in regulation and California eventually lost in overtime, 7-6. Roy Saari, the coach's elder son, regarded the final game against Whittier (also decided by just one point) as an anti-climax. (California went on to claim the 1961 CIF-SS swimming championship in the following spring.)

The only team to consistently challenge El Segundo and Whittier during these years, however, was Downey. They headed a weak league (the Coast League through 1956 and renamed Moore League in 1957), but by 1953 they were legitimate contenders for the CIF-SS title. In 1953's final game, they played Whittier to a scoreless tie through the first half, before finally giving way, 4-0. The following year, Downey was again involved in a tied final game at half-time (1-1), before El Segundo put them away, 3-1, with a goal in the third and one in the fourth. The Vikings qualified for at least the semi-finals every year but once (1958) during this era, additionally giving Whittier an especially difficult semi-final game in 1956 (losing 8-6).

For everyone else, there was only satisfaction in building for the future (and there were now lots of new programs popping up everywhere!) or there was frustrating might-have-beens. Fullerton's 1959 season is an example of the latter. Coach Lee Arth, in the "Remarks" section of the "Athletic Record Card" his school required him to fill out annually, wrote "12 experienced seniors gave excellent depth. Capable of winning CIF except for one handicap – pool was not heated during first 2 months of season necessitating short workouts. Team was not in proper condition. Necessary drills had to be left out."

The first year (1952) of this era in Water Polo history truly led things off with a bang. At least three very significant events took place within five months, from July through November.

First, there is the advent of the playoff tournament itself. After the confusion of the previous year, the Coast League and Southern California League winners (again Downey and Whittier, respectively) did meet for a title game to determine the CIF-SS champion.

The game was held on Wed., Nov. 26, 1952, the day before Thanksgiving, at Long Beach Wilson's spanking new indoor pool. The site was chosen by Jim Schultz of Downey, having won a coin toss for the right to make the selection. In spite of this apparent disadvantage, Whittier won easily, 8-2. Heber Holloway's son Charles, who scored a goal in this game, recalled for me that naturally enough for a 16-year-old, he did not attach a lot of historical significance to participating in this first championship game of the modern tournament. However, "It was exciting to have a championship game," he said. "The game attracted a lot of student interest on campus and helped us to start attracting more players to the team and fans to the games. We definitely felt like we were trailblazers at the time."

Of course, this first "tournament" was really nothing of the kind, but simply a championship game between the winners of the two existent leagues. And so it would remain through 1954.

The sites for these early championship finals provide an interesting footnote. In 1953, the right to choose the game site alternated to the Southern California League champion, and Coach Waer (still at Whittier) wasted no time in choosing his own pool for the honors (the only time the final game was held outdoors until 2007). Waer's

choice was not exceptionally selfish – the Cardinals’ “B” team was playing Long Beach Wilson in that underclass division’s championship game, which for him must have ruled out a return to the Bruins’ pool. Besides, the original idea was to trade-off home sites between the two conference champions, much as the NFL was doing at the time. Downey would have made the same choice in 1952 except their facility was totally inadequate to the occasion. The pool itself is very narrow and has a shallow end that takes up half the playing field, while seating along poolside is limited. Among the wonders of the Downey program is how well it did for so many years with such a lousy tank.

In 1954, the chosen spot settled down to Long Beach Wilson, where the finals were played every year through 1967, except for 1959 (El Segundo), 1962 (Lakewood), and 1964, 1966 and 1967 (Long Beach Millikan). In 1968, the championship game arrived at massive Belmont Plaza in Long Beach, where it was held every year through 2006 except from 1973-77, when the finals took place at East Los Angeles Community College. In 2007, the championship site became the William Woollett Jr. Aquatics Center, adjacent to Irvine High School, with the finals played outdoors for the first time in 54 years. (One last exception – in the later era of multi-division Varsity play, the Division IV finals were held from 1994-2000 and 2003-05 outdoors at UC Santa Barbara.)

The year 1952 was significant for a second reason in that it marked the adoption of rules for that year’s Summer Olympics that turned Water Polo into a “moving game.” While some or all of these rules were often already in use in various nations and on various levels of competition, the prestige of the Olympics marked their universal acceptance. (Before I engage in a discussion of the rules, have I mentioned yet that the game is played in the water between two teams of seven players each, the object of which is to put the ball into the goal of the opposing team?)

Water Polo had traditionally been modeled after soccer, with teams moving up and retreating back as a rather static unit, with individual players remaining within a specific position. The result, compared to today, was a slow moving game of six separate contests of strength (team positions were comprised of three “forwards” and three “backs” or “guards,” while the goalie waited for action to move in his direction). The main rule that locked teams into this style of play was known as the “no-drift” rule, which prohibited player movement after the referee had called a foul. Of course, anyone who has seen a game lately knows that today there is an absolute frenzy of movement during these few seconds of “dead time,” when the fouled player is permitted a free pass.

“The 1952 Olympics was the first time the moving game was played, giving smaller players a chance,” Urho Saari is quoted as saying in “Aquathletics,” a one-issue magazine circulated at the 1971 finals. “It was the turning point in Water Polo. From then on the sport was not just looked at as a rough wrestling match.”

Simply put, the game became more entertaining for both players and spectators, immeasurably contributing to the popularity of the sport. Jimmy Smith, now working full time at Fullerton Community College, and Coach Saari from Southern California's El Segundo High School, were at the forefront of U.S. proponents of these seminal changes.

The new rules, in fact, had a very American inspiration. In the same magazine article, Saari said, "What we did was apply basketball fundamentals to make a much faster game, requiring better swimming skills." Specialization of players in particular positions disappeared almost instantly. "Forwards" and "Guards" simply became "Field Players," expected to hustle up and down the pool, taking equal responsibility for offensive and defensive duties as permitted by individual opportunity and team game plan. (The one position that didn't change, though, was the poor goalie, who continued as before to tread water between the goal posts and try to stop balls thrown by very fit young men with cannons for arms.)

This likening of the game of Water Polo to that of basketball would reach its logical extreme during the 1955 and 1956 high school seasons. During these two years, the rules called for the awarding of two points for goals scored from the field and one point for four-meter penalty shots, which accounts for the outrageously high scores you will find reported during this time.

A persistent story about the early days of Water Polo is that the game was so violent that school districts across Southern California rose up in righteous indignation and "banned the game." Frankly, I can find no evidence of this from any contemporary source that I have studied. In fact, every time I read this type of statement, the source is third-hand and decades removed from the supposed events. In other words, the story is like a legend of old, being passed down and embellished through the generations by oral tradition.

The game was definitely "rougier" prior to 1952 than it is today (but no more physically demanding!). Saari's use of the wrestling analogy – spoken by someone who was there – certainly must be accurate. But the problems of any contact sport – namely injuries and unsportsman-like conduct (fighting and acting like a jerk) – do not seem to have been exceptional in Water Polo's case. No, there are a number of better reasons to account for the stunned growth of the game during the 1930s and 1940s – namely the Great Depression, the Long Beach Earthquake and World War II.

If Saari was instrumental in the movement to adopt the new rules for the 1952 Olympics, he had an excellent vantage point to then see how things turned out. He was the Water Polo coach for the United States' Olympics team. As stated in the introduction, but it is worth repeating here, the amazing fact is that four coaches of Southern California high school Water Polo programs have simultaneously coached the Olympics team. The third reason 1952 is so important to our story is because Urho Saari became the first to do so.

Saari won the job via the success of his El Segundo Swim Club, composed of college players and beyond. These club teams are formed to this day to keep players sharp in the off-season and to train for a national “Outdoor Championship” held every summer. Back then this tournament was conducted under the auspices of the AAU; in 1978, USA Water Polo became the governing body. All the way through 1968, during Olympics years, these club teams would additionally vie in an “Olympics Tryout” tournament for the right to represent the United States at the games. Under this far from perfect system, America’s Olympics Water Polo team would be composed of the seven starters from the tourney’s winning club team; in addition, four “substitutes” would be selected by the winning coach from among the best players on vanquished teams.

In 1952, Saari’s El Segundo Swim Club won the Olympics trials. The tournament was held July 1-3 at Astoria Park in the New York City borough of Queens. The El Segundo squad placed first, defeating the New York Athletic Club, 5-2, for the championship. Amazingly, all seven of the El Segundo Swim Club starters (and now, thus, Olympics team members) had played for Saari’s high school team during its 1947-50 championship run (four were from the Class of 1948, one from 1949 and two from 1951).

A few weeks later, July 25-Aug. 2, Saari’s U.S. team placed fourth at the Olympics, held that year in Helsinki, Finland. The team compiled a 4-3 record and finished behind Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy. The team’s surprisingly strong showing was produced in spite of the many distractions that always accompany the Olympics carnival, but also some unique to the sport’s venue, Harbor Bath. In Jim and Lynne Norris’ biography, “Urho Saari: Olympian,” team member Marvin Burns recalled “We had a hard time concentrating on our workout when we went to that seaside outdoor pool and noticed – when we peered out of the makeshift locker room at the end of the pier – that on the opposite side from us were at least 300 or more nude women of all stripes and ages. (Saari) never did allow us to swim over to the other side – much to our disappointment.”

The emotional energy and sheer time commitment of the 1952 Olympics must have contributed to El Segundo’s lackluster 1953 high school season. (This was one of only two times from Spring 1947 to 1965 – the other being 1962 – when the Eagles were not one of the two best teams in Southern California.) Saari’s parents, on top of everything else, were born in Finland and he spoke the language fluently. The El Segundo Herald in its Nov. 20, 1952, issue reports on a slide show on the games that Saari presented the previous week to the hometown folks. A very small commitment of time there, it’s true, but perhaps it’s a good indication of where his heart and mind was after returning from this career peak.

Now, before leaving the subject of the Olympics, we need to first talk about the 1956 games. For in Melbourne, Australia on Dec. 6, 1956, there took place the most famous Water Polo game ever played. This game also served as one of the best-remembered battlefields of the Cold War. On that date, Hungary met the Soviet Union

in what would be the deciding match of the Olympics tournament. However, just two weeks earlier, Soviet tanks had rolled into Hungary to crush a rebellion that had overthrown that country's puppet communist regime. As the two teams took to the pool, Hungarian workers were protesting the invasion through a nationwide general strike.

The New York Times of Dec. 6 reported:

“(First paragraph) Fists flew and blood flowed in the tension-packed Olympic pool today as a crowd of 5,500 cheered undefeated Hungary to a 4-0 victory over the lustily booed Russian team in the final round of Water Polo. (Second paragraph) Fighting occurred all through the match...

“(Fifth paragraph) After Bolvari tallied the fourth Hungarian goal, the players forgot all about Water Polo and battered away at each other, above and below the water line. When (Russia's) Prokopov and (Hungary's) Zador went at it at the end of the pool opposite from the play, police had to run to the pool side to prevent what for a few minutes almost developed into a riot.”

Hungary won the game and the tournament, Russia falling back to third behind Yugoslavia.

Truly, it does not seem possible that there will ever be as crucial a Water Polo game again. The Hungarian Uprising was one of the most important events of the entire 44-year Cold War, equal in rank to the Berlin Airlift, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the USSR's similar invasion of Czechoslovakia. Water Polo was (and is) the national sport of Hungary. The USSR had the power to stamp out freedom in their country, but these Hungarian Water Polo players knew it was in their power at the very same moment to deny Russia supremacy in their national game. They did so, and in a fashion that perfectly expressed the outrage of literally billions of free people around the world over the functional enslavement of a proud nation.

As a result of the Hungarian's actions, the profile of Water Polo itself in the world of sports was instantly raised to a degree that otherwise may have never been achieved even to this day.

Back in Southern California on the high school level, this growth in prestige was helping to inspire more teams to take up the game, form more leagues and comprise a post-season tournament that now truly deserved the name.

In 1955, the rapid development of Orange County's suburban communities led to the creation of a third Water Polo conference, the Sunset League. This league was originally composed of five schools, including Anaheim, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Huntington Beach and La Habra, and it was probably the most consistently competitive league of the era. Fullerton won the most titles with four (1956, 1957, 1959 and 1960), got to the playoffs as a second place entry in 1955 and advanced to the semi-finals in 1956 and 1957. Huntington Beach was league champion in 1955 and made the playoffs three additional times (1956, 1957 and 1958). La Habra won the 1958 title (then joined Huntington Beach in the semi-finals) and earned a second place playoff berth in 1959.

The first real tournament, then, was conducted in 1955 and admitted six teams to the playoffs, two from each league, with the two best conference champions earning byes in the quarter-finals (first round). This structure remained in place for the following year.

One of the benefits that all sports seem to enjoy is that when there is one excellent program in a specific area, other programs (both good and bad) tend to spring up in a cluster around it. Such was the case with El Segundo and the South Bay area, and Whittier and the San Gabriel Valley area. In 1957, the accumulation of Water Polo programs in these regions enabled the CIF-SS to break up the venerable old Southern California League and create two new Water Polo leagues.

In the South Bay, two academic (or “football”) leagues combined to create a single Water Polo league – the Bay/Pioneer League. El Segundo, of course, dominated this league until 1960, when the continued growth of the sport enabled the combined league to separate under their normal headings. From 1957-59, El Segundo finished first each year while Inglewood (in 1957) and Morningside (in 1958 and 1959) entered the playoffs as second place teams. In 1960, Inglewood won the Bay League and El Segundo championed the Pioneer League.

Such a combined league formula should have been the case in the Whittier area, too, but for some reason the two local leagues didn’t cooperate. California, El Rancho, Montebello, Santa Fe and Whittier – all very close together and most in the same school district – should have made a nice set of five. However, the first four were all members of the San Gabriel Valley League, while Whittier alone hailed from the Pacific League. Whittier either declined the pleasure of the others’ company or the others voted to keep Whittier out (perhaps they used a convenient rule such as maximum student enrollment to ensure a spot for themselves in the playoffs). In any case, the San Gabriel Valley League started playing Water Polo in 1957 with a tight membership of four teams, while Whittier played out the remainder of this era as an independent.

California won the San Gabriel Valley League in 1957, 1959 and 1960, while El Rancho captured the title in 1958. El Rancho’s entry is worth noting because the team featured two people in formative stages of their Water Polo careers who will figure prominently in the next era of the sport’s history. The team was coached by Bill Sexton, who would find his way back to his alma mater (Downey) for the 1961 season. Among the players was a junior named Bill Barnett.

For its part, Whittier had little trouble demonstrating that its record continued to warrant a playoff berth. The 1960 season provides a good example, when at season’s end (before the playoffs), the school had a 15-2 record. Both losses were to El Segundo, but otherwise they went 8-0 vs. the Sunset League; 4-0 vs. San Gabriel Valley; 2-0 vs. Moore, and 1-0 vs. Bay. This record included victories over the champions of all four leagues mentioned.

Over in the Moore League, things remained pretty dull during this time from a competitive standpoint. Downey stomped on everybody, with the exception of one down year (1958) when Long Beach Wilson won the title (the Vikings still got to the playoffs as the second place finisher). The league did increase its numbers, however, with Lynwood joining in 1955 and Long Beach Millikan and Lakewood joining in 1957. Millikan (1959), Poly (1956, 1957 and 1960) and Wilson (1955) of Long Beach all made it into the playoffs as second place teams. Long Beach Wilson (in 1955) was the only other Moore League team besides Downey to make it as far as the semi-finals.

So, with four leagues and a highly competitive independent playing by 1957, the playoff tournament was expanded to eight teams. Through 1960, the league champions automatically earned berths, while At-Large (Whittier that is) and second place teams filled out the card.

In 1959, a fifth league was added (remember, the Bay/Pioneer League was not divided until 1960). For this circuit's first year, the name Southern California League was revived, and it truly earned its title. Because the sport was growing so rapidly, this league comprised teams that were literally thrown together from three different counties, San Bernardino (Upland), Orange (Buena Park) and Los Angeles (Bell Gardens, La Puente, Pioneer and Sierra). In 1960, this circuit was renamed the Valley League and Pasadena was added to its roster. Upland went undefeated in league play both years, though for an interesting reason that we will cover in a minute, they could not use their playoff spot in 1959. The following year, however, Upland earned the distinction of becoming the first school from outside of either Los Angeles or Orange Counties to make it into the Water Polo playoffs. (Of course, their auspicious debut was then squashed in the first round by top seeded and undefeated El Segundo, who won 25-2, making it the worst playoff beating of the era.)

With only three rounds at most to these early tournaments, the playoffs were concentrated, short-burst affairs. In 1953 and 1954, the single round "tournament" was moved back one week from the inaugural year and held on the Wednesday following Thanksgiving (Dec. 2, 1953 and Dec. 1, 1954). In 1955 and 1956, the first three round tourneys were held over eight days on Friday-Tuesday-Friday (Dec. 2-9, 1955 and Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 1956). From 1957-60, the games were crowded into a five-day period just before Thanksgiving. Game days were Friday-Monday-Tuesday (Nov. 22-26, 1957, Nov. 21-25, 1958, Nov. 20-24, 1959 and Nov. 18-22, 1960).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the unique characteristics of the infant years of "The Second Season" was the playing of underclass "B" and "C" tourneys, which were configured exactly the same as the Varsity playoffs.

The underclass tourneys are kind of fun to remember because on these levels, it wasn't all El Segundo and Whittier. In fact, El Segundo's underclassmen never did that well, but the kids who grew up in that program obviously learned the game by the time they were seniors! Whittier, on the other hand, usually competed for the titles. In 1955 and 1959, they won the championship in all three divisions, doing twice what

no other school even managed once. However, you also see some names crop up that you are not used to seeing. Long Beach Jordan, for instance. The school has fielded a team every year since 1950, but they have never qualified for even the first round in the Varsity playoffs. Yet, in 1953 they challenged Whittier for the “C” championship and in 1954, as this class got one year older, Long Beach Jordan again faced Whittier in the “B” final game.

Final game results for these underclass tourneys are as follows:

1952 “B” Downey (Coast)	5	Whittier (Southern California).....	3
“C” Long Beach Wilson (Coast).....	8	Whittier (Southern California).....	7
1953 “B” Long Beach Wilson (Coast).....	4	Whittier (Southern California).....	2
“C” Whittier (Southern California).....	9	Long Beach Jordan (Coast)	3
1954 “B” Whittier (Southern California).....	2	Long Beach Jordan (Coast)	1
“C” Long Beach Poly (Coast).....	3	El Segundo (Southern California)	1
1955 “B” Whittier (Southern California).....	26	Huntington Beach (Sunset).....	8
“C” Whittier (Southern California).....	18	Long Beach Poly (Coast).....	10
1956 “B” Downey (Coast)	10	El Segundo (Southern California)	7
“C” Whittier (Southern California).....	10	Long Beach Poly (Coast).....	6
1957 “B” Whittier (At-Large).....	5	El Segundo (Bay/Pioneer)	4
“C” Whittier (At-Large).....	5	Downey (Moore)	3
1958 “B” Downey (Moore).....	4	Inglewood (Bay/Pioneer).....	1
“C” Whittier (At-Large).....	6	Downey (Moore)	5
1959 “B” Whittier (At-Large).....	3	Downey (Moore)	2
“C” Whittier (At-Large).....	6	Santa Fe (San Gabriel Valley)	4
1960 “B” Whittier (At-Large).....	5	Downey (Moore)	3
“C” Downey (Moore).....	5	Santa Fe (San Gabriel Valley).....	3

These final games were played on the same day and same location as the Varsity finals, as a prelude to the big game. The only exception is the “B” final game in 1955, which was played three days before the Varsity and “C” final games and held at Long Beach Poly, the only time a CIF-SS final game has ever been held at this historic pool.

More than just fun, though, these “lightweight” tournaments are worth studying for at least two reasons. First, they served as a tip off to future powerhouse programs. Many schools started programs in the late 1950s and they built themselves up from the freshman class. These schools may, indeed, have had Varsity squads, but in the first year or two of the program, they basically just functioned as a means of getting into a league and getting onto the schedules of older programs.

My case in point is Newport Harbor, which was founded way back in 1931 but did not form a Water Polo team until 1959. The school immediately entered the Sunset League, where the Varsity finished third that first year, fourth in 1960, with mediocre 4-3 league records both times. But the “B” and “C” teams qualified for the playoffs in 1960, where both lost in the first round to Downey’s counterparts. These underclassmen would eventually take Newport Harbor’s Varsity into its first playoff tournament in 1962.

(It is very important to recognize Newport Harbor’s coach at this point, Ted Newland, who remained there through the 1961 season. In 1962, when the Newport-Mesa School District created Corona del Mar, Newland transferred “across the bay” intent on starting up the program at the new school. Thus, Newland helped found two of the most successful Water Polo programs in the history of the tournament, with Newport Harbor holding 12 titles and Corona del Mar gaining nine.)

The second reason the underclass tournaments are worth studying is because they telegraph the expanding geographical world of CIF-SS Water Polo. In 1961, Oxnard’s Varsity became the first school from north of Los Angeles (Ventura County) to qualify for the playoffs. However, both their “B” and their “C” teams qualified for the 1959 and 1960 playoffs.

Oxnard founded its program in 1957 under the direction of Pete Cutino, who would later move on to Cal-Berkeley and produce eight national collegiate champions from 1973-88. During these years, this lonely northern outpost for Water Polo had to compete in the Bay/Pioneer League. Oxnard would make the drive of well over 60 miles on L.A. freeways to play the South Bay schools that primarily populated the league’s membership, which just goes to show you that the game’s heroes were not all members of the CIF-SS champion. (And, yes, adding injury to injury, they had to follow El Segundo into the Pioneer League in 1960.)

Upland also fits this category, as their “B” team entered the playoffs one year ahead of the Varsity. And, therein lies one story as to why the underclass tourneys were abandoned after 1960.

Upland’s Varsity had won the Southern California League title in 1959 with a 5-0 record, Sierra had finished second at 4-1 and La Puente came in third with a 3-2 record. Upland had automatically earned a berth in the playoffs. End of story.

No, not quite. On the “B” level, Upland, Sierra and La Puente had all finished in a first place tie with identical 4-1 records. To unknot the tie, Upland was forced to play Sierra on Mon., Nov. 16, whom they beat 7-3, and then La Puente the next day, whom they also beat by the same score. The problem was Upland really, really wanted to qualify its “B” team for the playoffs. So, they added some of their juniors and sophomores, who had been playing Varsity, to their “B” team’s line-up. CIF-SS eligibility rules did not permit a student to play on more than one level in a single week. The playoff tournament for all levels, however, was due to start just three days after the Upland-La Puente “B” game, on Fri., Nov. 20.

As a result, Upland no longer had a Varsity team! And the Southern California League couldn't send second-place Sierra or third-place La Puente, because they had done the same thing! The next candidate in line was fourth-place Bell Gardens, with a 2-3 league record, and it would have been simply unmerciful to throw them in against number one seed Whittier! So, the Southern California League went unrepresented on the Varsity level in 1959. But, hey, Upland's "Bs" made it to the playoffs – where Whittier's counterpart killed them, 12-3, in the first round.

The problem with the underclass tourneys is that Upland was not the only school thinking that way – especially the ones with newer programs. Upland knew they were taking themselves out of the Varsity tournament, but where were they going to go when Whittier and El Segundo were ruling that level with an iron fist? Better to look good on one of the lower levels than to have the Varsity team – and the school and community at large – embarrassed.

The tournament was getting bigger. There were now sensitive, time-consuming issues to deal with, such as which second place teams went to the playoffs and which ones were told to call it a season. No one had the time to straighten out the sort of silliness that the underclass tourneys were creating. So, after 1960, these tournaments were retired.

The first year of the new decade marked the end of an era for Water Polo, but it also marked an ending of one for the CIF-SS as a whole. Following an organizing meeting of San Diego County schools in October 1959, the CIF-San Diego Section was incorporated in August 1960 and began governing interscholastic competition within county borders as a separate section.

During their years in the CIF-SS, San Diego County schools had their moments in swimming competition. San Diego High School won CIF-SS swimming championships in 1919 (ahead of Pasadena) and 1930 (ahead of Hollywood), while the school finished second in 1924 (behind Venice) and 1929 (behind Long Beach Poly). San Diego High School, in fact, entered competitors in swimming's final meet right up until the end, in 1960.

However, one has to be reminded that San Diego County even existed when it came to Water Polo. During both the "Pre-Tournament Years" (1912-51) and in the years that featured an annual playoff tournament with San Diego still in CIF-SS (1952-59), San Diego-based schools simply did not participate in Water Polo competition at all.

There are at least two reasons for this.

First, showing up for a single final meet is a lot easier for a San Diego school than trying to compete in Water Polo league play with schools as far away as Los Angeles. A ridiculous idea now, it was not even in the realm of thinking about back then. The one or two aquatic programs that might have had a thought of forming a team simply had no one within a practical distance to play.

Second, “home grown” leagues of San Diego-based Water Polo teams were just plain slower in developing compared to the game’s epicenter of Los Angeles and Orange counties, where there were lots of people located very close to lots of swimming pools and beaches.

In studying the history of Water Polo, it’s diverting to find the names of schools from out-lying areas popping up once in a while. San Bernardino County contributed Redlands (in 1949) and Chaffey (in 1921, 1936 and 1950) to the old Southern California League. As noted a moment ago, Upland (San Bernardino County) and Oxnard (Ventura County) also started up programs in the late 1950s. Why, even Bakersfield (Kern County) paid at least Fullerton and Inglewood visits for non-league games in both the 1939 and 1940 seasons.

Yet, in all the sources I have examined, I have never, ever run across a report of a single Water Polo game pitting a San Diego-based high school against anybody. If Water Polo was being played down there at all during those years, it probably resembled what took place at Los Angeles- and Orange County-based schools during World War II – inter-squad games, mainly, and the rare match with another high school or even a college team. (Considering the Navy’s huge presence in San Diego, perhaps some brave high school even played an armed forces team or two.)

Indeed, it would not be until seven years after the separation of the two CIF sections that San Diego set up its own championship competition. The first playoff tournament was held in 1967. The final game featured Vista, located about 40 miles north of downtown San Diego, and Army-Navy Academy, an all-boys military prep school in Carlsbad. Steady growth has attended the sport since then, with the Water Polo playoff tourney comprising four Varsity divisions since 2014. (In 2019, the four CIF-SDS tournaments featured 44 teams total, 12 each in the three lower divisions and eight in the premier “Open Division,” compared with 153 teams in seven divisions in CIF-SS.)

All in all, the ‘50s were truly fabulous for CIF-SS Water Polo. The sport had emerged red hot from the darkest days of the Cold War. The number of participating schools had more than tripled, from 11 teams representing two counties and two leagues in 1952, to 37 teams (counting Whittier) from four counties and six leagues in 1960. The total rises to 39 when two new independents are counted, both of whom started up their programs in the last year of this era – Fontana, located even further out than Upland in San Bernardino County; and Santa Maria, located even further up than Oxnard, along Highway 101 almost as far north as San Luis Obispo.

Significantly, 23 of the 28 new teams had begun play during the four years following the 1956 Olympics, when the Hungarian Water Polo team had made such an impression on the world. Throughout the era, though, it had basically been all up, because every school playing in 1952 was represented again in 1960. In addition, very few programs were fading in and out, as in the past. Once a school started a program, they seemed committed to the long haul. (See Appendix II for a complete list of schools fielding teams in 1952 and 1960, segmented according to league.)

Still, with all of this to the plus side, it must be noted that even in 1960, the world of high school Water Polo in Southern California remained primarily confined to an odd-shaped box within Los Angeles County. The points of that box could be drawn from El Segundo to Long Beach to Fullerton (just across the border in Orange County) to Whittier and back to El Segundo.

However, those boundaries were about to be exploded.

CHAPTER VII

The Second Golden Age, 1961-1973

There are a number of reasons why this 13-year period covering mainly the 1960s can be labeled “The Second Golden Age.” Only one of them has to do with the fact that I spent most of my own playing days in this era.

In fact, the wellspring for the next chapter in Water Polo history can be traced to something very important that happened in September 1961, when Southern California high schools opened their doors for the new school year. As always, 14- and 15-year-olds walked onto the campuses for the first time to begin their freshman year (or sophomore year, if it was a three-year school). The difference this year, however, was that there were a lot of them. Lots of them.

After an advance guard arrived the previous year, the Baby Boomers entered their high school years in force this year.

This explosion in the birth rate, along with the seemingly endless flood of people moving to California from points east, would make the Golden State the largest state in the union by the end of the decade. It would also turn education into a huge growth industry, especially in the Southern part of the state where the population increase was advancing most rapidly.

As a result, high school Water Polo would grow at least as fast. In 1961, only six leagues existed. That total grew to 16 by 1967 and 20 by 1971. Before 1961, you could count the number of schools starting up programs at an average rate of about one per year. In this era, more than one league per year was formed, containing anywhere from five to eight schools each. (See Appendix III for a comparison of league alignment and playoff entrants in 1961 and 1971.)

1961

In some ways, the 1961 season was similar to 1960 in that there were still only six leagues active and El Segundo won the title for the second year in a row. But there were, in fact, a number of important differences from the previous year.

First, the competition committee that guided Water Polo was thinking ahead. In a single year, they doubled the number of teams eligible for the playoffs, from eight to 16 teams. They did so for 1961 by accepting all first and second place teams from each league, and providing four “At-Large” slots. Thus, the Bay League sent Mira Costa and Inglewood; Moore sent Downey and Long Beach Millikan; Pioneer sent El Segundo and Oxnard; San Gabriel Valley sent Santa Fe and California; Sunset sent La Habra and Anaheim; and Valley sent Sierra and Upland (first and second place teams in each case). The At-Large entrants included Whittier, still playing as an independent, and three third place teams, including Lakewood (Moore), Hoover of Glendale (Pioneer)

and Fullerton (Sunset). The first round games took place Tues., Nov. 28, right after the Thanksgiving weekend.

Second, Downey finally ended the monotonous string of El Segundo-Whittier final games dating back to 1955. The Vikings defeated Whittier 6-3 in their semi-final contest, played Tues., Dec. 5. This weakened Whittier outfit barely made it to the semis; they had trailed Fullerton 7-3 at half-time of their Fri., Dec. 1 quarter-final game, before finally pulling it out, 9-8. At first glance, this revolution was a limited one, for the 1961 final match was merely a replay of the 1954 El Segundo-Downey tilt. Still, Downey's accomplishment ushered in a highly competitive 13-year era in which no school would win the championship more than three times.

Downey and El Segundo faced each three times in the regular season. The Vikings won a home game, 8-6, accounting for the Eagles' only loss; El Segundo won the other two, 11-3 and 11-7. In the finals, played Fri., Dec. 8, the defending champs won handily. The Eagles jumped out to a 6-0 advantage, led 12-3 early in the fourth quarter, before coasting to a 12-9 win. Player of the Year Roy Saari scored four goals, which was actually only second best to the six goals compiled by teammate Ken Benfield. (The Player of the Year award was instituted in 1958 with George Merritt of El Segundo as the first honoree; and Frank Harlan of Whittier won it the following year. In 1961, Saari became the first player to win it twice.)

The third important event of 1961 preceded the final game by 90 minutes. Like the NCAA basketball tournaments of the time, CIF-SS Water Polo now featured a third place game involving the losing teams from the semi-finals. And, like those NCAA games, nobody wanted to play in these "Losers' Bowls." But somebody thought up the idea, so they played them anyway.

La Habra beat Whittier, 4-3, in the first third place game, in what would be La Habra's best finish ever in the playoffs. Third place games continued to be a feature of the playoffs through 1973, with Fullerton winding up with the distinction of getting stuck in these affairs the most times – five. Downey was second with four, while Whittier and Corona del Mar each played three games. As one might expect, teams condemned to play these dumb games a lot generally didn't do very well. Fullerton (2-3), Downey (1-3) and Whittier (1-2) all had losing records. Corona del Mar, though, grouped their games in a six year period from 1968-73 and completed a perfect 3-0 mark to secure the record for most wins. The third place games, at least, more than filled the void left by the discontinuance of the "B" and "C" final games and, more significantly, helped lay a platform for ever larger playoff structures in the future.

The fourth development that began to emerge at this stage of high school Water Polo history was something very important indeed. It was simply this – from now on, to succeed in this sport, extreme dedication in terms of time and training was required of both coaches and players. Today we live in an age of specialization where year-round athletic programs are quite commonplace. But Water Polo was way ahead of the pack in this regard. In part, this was perfectly natural – with the sports of Water Polo and

swimming so closely related it is hardly surprising that aquatic athletes wound up in the pool 52 weeks per year. In part, it was a function of design – with the rule changes that ushered in the new “moving game,” athletes now had to be in extraordinarily good condition to play this sport. Mainly, however, it was the fact that the universe of U.S. Water Polo now revolved around the well-advertised sun of Southern California. Urho Saari had been producing Olympics team members at El Segundo since the late 1940s. In this climate of excellence, there was only one thing you could do if you wanted to win – adopt highly intensive training measures of your own. And, the ante would rise throughout this era with each new successful program.

One case from 1961 illustrates this trend. Garden Grove had finished third in the Sunset League and was scheduled to take part in the playoffs. However, it was discovered that in violation of competition rules the team had been practicing regularly against a community college team. Thus, they had to forfeit their league games and were removed from the tournament (Anaheim went instead, with the forfeits allowing them to leapfrog Fullerton and enter as the second place team). Putting the incident in its best light – that the coach operated in simple ignorance of the law – it still illustrates the lengths coaches now felt they had to go to be competitive.

While Water Polo moved to the beat of its own unique drummer, it also moved with the times. So, one additional factor contributed to the hard new set of competitive assumptions.

This was the era of The Cult of Lombardi. In the early 2000s, many looked to unlock the secret of winning by reading the touchy-feely books of Phil Jackson, coach of the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers (“Sacred Hoops”), and Joe Torre, manager of the New York Yankees (“Ground Rules for Winners”). But in the 1960s, everyone sought rough diamonds of wisdom from Green Bay Packers Coach Vince Lombardi, who won five NFL titles in seven years. Lombardi earned his first title on Sun., Dec. 31, when the Packers defeated the New York Giants, 37-0, in a game held just over three weeks after El Segundo won the first title in this new era of high school Water Polo.

Lombardi preached a gospel of earnest dedication to team goals, with only God and family ranking above; a rigorous code of personal integrity (Lombardi’s actions during star halfback Paul Horning’s one-year suspension in 1963 for gambling on league games was perhaps his finest moment); punctuality (his players ran on “Lombardi Time:” arrive 15 minutes early to team meetings); long, long hours of training, with particular emphasis on conditioning; and a love-hate relationship with opponents (love because they were putting themselves through the same things you were putting yourself through; hate because they sought to deny you the prize).

These teachings sound very much like the values I learned while playing at Newport Harbor and, indeed, Coach Bill Barnett identified Lombardi as the person he most admired when asked by the writers of the school’s 1972 yearbook.

1962

The 1962 season continued the break-up of the old El Segundo-Whittier dominance – again, in a small way, as Whittier joined Downey in the finals that year.

Downey ended years of frustration with a perfect confluence of trends that simply made it their dream year. First, they were loaded, with 12 returning lettermen, four of whom were First Team All-CIF-SS selections the previous year. These returnees included Dean Willeford, the eventual Player of the Year, and who would go on to join the U.S. Olympics team in Mexico City in 1968.

Second, for El Segundo 1962 was like 1951. After a string of championships, they graduated a large group of star players and found themselves in a rebuilding year. Specifically, they were between Saari brothers – older brother Roy having graduated and younger brother Bob only a freshman in 1962. Thus, El Segundo missed the finals for the first time since 1953, when Whittier beat their old rival in the quarter-finals, 10-9.

Third, though Whittier was the other pre-season favorite, by the time of the Fri., Nov. 30 final match, Downey was heavily favored, having beaten Whittier 9-1 earlier in the year. Whittier held Downey to a season-low of five goals, but still lost 5-2, enabling Downey to cap a perfect 26-0 season, one in which no opponent came closer than two goals in a final score. This undefeated season marked the fourth since the foundation of the tournament, with El Segundo completing the achievement in 1960, and Whittier in 1952 and 1953. A testament to the growth of the sport, Downey played three more games in 1962 than Whittier did in their combined undefeated years.

Downey was coached by Bill Sexton, who had played at the high school as a senior in 1952, so he avenged that loss to Whittier back in the very first tournament final. This first title for Downey was sweet, indeed, having gone the previous 10 years finishing second four times, in the semi-finals five times and the quarter-finals once. For Whittier, it was the last hurrah – their final appearance in the finals.

Whittier would be pushed out by an influx of Orange County schools that would come to dominate this era – and for many years beyond. The 1962 season would be the last that did not feature an Orange County school in the finals for 36 years, and Orange County teams have only been excluded three times since (1998, 2001 and 2003).

The season is significant additionally in that it marked the first playoff appearance of Newport Harbor. This school, which would eventually hold the runaway lead in all-time playoff wins, won their very first playoff game on Tues., Nov. 20, in the California High School pool, 9-5. They did not have much of a chance to enjoy it, however, as they lost in the quarter-finals the next day to Garden Grove, 8-6. For Newport Harbor, the shame of it was that they had a good team that might have been great were it not for the fact that several strong members of the sophomore class transferred to Corona del Mar, which opened that fall. Corona del Mar did not field a team and talent that might have made a difference at Newport Harbor sat idle.

But, with the invasion of the Baby Boomers now in full swing, Newport Harbor was hardly the only school that found itself having to share talent with a newly-opened neighboring school. Indeed, the decline of Whittier after 1965 is directly attributable to the founding of Sierra (1957), La Serna (1960) and Monte Vista (1964), all in the same city limits.

1963

Orange County had been sending teams to the playoffs every year since 1955, but took its first formal step towards future dominance in 1963 when Fullerton became the first school to break into the final game. Of course, it was a case of “Everything Old is New Again” as Fullerton had won eight CIF-SS championships in the pre-tournament era. On Wed., Nov. 27, the Indians found themselves for the first time since Jan. 27, 1940 with a chance to win a championship match. Fullerton was in fact the number one seed, and held a slight edge against El Segundo in record against common opponents (5-1 vs. 5-2, respectively). Both teams were 1-1 against defending champ Downey; and, against Oxnard, Fullerton was 1-0 while El Segundo was 1-1 (the Eagles would win third meetings against both of these teams – eliminating Oxnard, 8-7, in the quarter-finals, and Downey, 10-5, in the semis). The two finalists, however, hadn’t played each other all year and Fullerton must have felt like the underdog considering El Segundo’s dominance since the end of World War II on a local high school and even international level. And, Bob Saari was playing Varsity now. He would end up co-Player of the Year with Fullerton’s Torrey Webb, and win it outright the next two years, one of only two players to ever receive the award three times. Sure enough, Saari scored four of El Segundo’s five goals that night, the decisive one at 2:08 left in the fourth quarter to give the Eagles a two goal lead. A final Fullerton tally at the buzzer made it close at 5-4, but El Segundo had claimed its seventh tournament title in 10 years.

Another El Segundo title might have suggested a rather dull playoff tournament. But it was anything but; indeed, it was tragic on a scale surpassing even the season played during and after the 1918-19 influenza pandemic. On Fri., Nov. 22, 1963, Baby Boomers experienced their own Pearl Harbor – and the turbulent 60’s can be said to have begun – with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, who was declared dead at 11 a.m. Pacific time that day. All four quarter-final games were scheduled for that afternoon, and somewhat surprisingly, three of them were in fact played just hours after Kennedy’s death. (The 14-team NFL played their full seven-game schedule that Sunday, a national day of mourning for the slain 35th President, in a move Commissioner Pete Rozelle ever after described as his biggest mistake.) The Whittier-La Habra quarter-final was cancelled, and it was not played until the afternoon of Tues., Nov. 26, where Whittier won 8-7. Having won, Whittier had to play their semi-final game that same night, where they lost to Fullerton, 9-6.

Along with Fullerton’s breakthrough into the finals, Orange County’s emergence was in evidence through the first playoff appearance of Corona del Mar. On Tues., Nov. 19, the Sea Kings lost their first round game to another new school making only its second appearance, La Serna, 8-7.

Before it was four full years old, Corona del Mar would become the first Orange County school to win a tournament championship, and its impressively fast ascent might have been even faster if it wasn't for some oddities that attended its formation. Ted Newland, coaching at Newport Harbor, stayed within the Newport-Mesa School District, but went over to Corona del Mar in 1962. According to Bill Leach, a senior in 1963, the school did not field a team its first year because they did not have a pool. Newland actually tried organizing workouts in Newport Bay for a while, but the water was too cold for this to be a practical solution. So, the team spent the fall of 1962 lifting weights – a key training innovation of Newland's – or trying their hands at other sports, cross-country in the case of one player.

By the spring of 1963, Corona del Mar had a pool on campus and a swimming team that competed against other schools, with Newland at the helm. However, the Principal at the time (Leon Meeks) had a philosophy that no single individual could coach more than one sport. According to Leach, the thinking was Meeks wanted to avoid a situation where the same person coached both football and baseball and, thus, would dominate the athletic department. Newland had to choose between swimming and Water Polo, and he chose the former. As a result, a fellow named Don Treadway wound up coaching the 1963 Water Polo team. Unfortunately, he knew nothing about the game! Before long, Leach says, Newland was functioning as “assistant coach,” but in fact ran the workouts. At last the charade was ended – Newland was permitted an exception due to the uniquely symbiotic nature of swimming and Water Polo, and he became head coach in name as well as in fact in 1964.

1964

I've called this chapter in Water Polo history “The Second Golden Age,” and like all ages with such titles, they are rich in myth and lore. The 1964 season marked the last year in which El Segundo would win the championship, making eight tournament victories in 11 years, and 12 CIF-SS championships in 18 years – still tied for first all-time. The myth of 1964 is that El Segundo claimed its final title when the masterful Urho Saari led an underdog team to an upset, outfoxing an upstart but favored Newport Harbor, 6-4, on Fri., Dec. 4. There is no doubt that El Segundo executed a superior game plan that night, but it was really not much of an upset. El Segundo dominated, leading 3-0 at half; 4-1 after three quarters, and Newport Harbor only closed to 6-4 after a final goal with just six seconds remaining in the game. Bob Saari scored four of El Segundo's six goals.

The upset myth has its basis in the fact that Newport Harbor had beaten El Segundo convincingly twice earlier in the season – 11-3 on Sat., Sept. 26, at the Corona del Mar Water Polo Tournament, and 9-2 on Sat., Oct. 10, at the Inglewood Water Polo Tournament. The “myth” part lies in the fact that neither Bob nor Urho Saari was present at either game. The amazing thing is that Urho was coaching the U.S. Olympics team for a second time in the 1964 games, and even more amazingly, 16-year-old Bob was a member of the team. (As in 1952, the El Segundo Swim Club had won the Olympics Tryout tournament – the second to last time a U.S. Olympics team was

selected in this manner. The event was held Aug. 25-30, once again in Astoria Park, New York City – but this time as part of the World’s Fair, also going on simultaneously in Queens.)

On Sept. 26, the Saari’s were present at a 9 a.m. tournament game against Corona del Mar, winning 8-2. (The Orange Coast Daily Pilot noted the previous day that Corona del Mar would be going up against “the title favorite” but that “Bob Saari...is on the Olympic team and may not appear with El Segundo for the tourney.”) But, both Saari’s had left for an Olympics team workout by that afternoon, when Newport Harbor “highlighted the tournament by dumping favorite El Segundo High School, 11-3,” according to the Daily Pilot. On Oct. 10, the Saari’s were not even in the country as the Tokyo Olympics tourney was played Oct. 11-18 (the U.S. had a 1-2 record and were eliminated in the first round).

Newport Harbor had not even finished first in their league that year. They placed second to Fullerton in the Freeway League, and the Indians were awarded the playoff tournament’s top seed. Fullerton’s loss to El Segundo in the semi-finals was also regarded as an upset, but they actually had not played each other at all during the regular season. Nonetheless, it was a game for the ages, with the Indians leading 5-2 early in the third quarter, before El Segundo finally won it in overtime, 9-8. Saari scored six goals in the contest. And all of this myth-busting does not take away from a remarkable achievement by El Segundo that year – they survived a tough quarter-final match against Sierra, 6-5, so they won their final three matches by a grand total of only four goals, a feat equaled only twice (in 1983 and 1990) and surpassed only once (in 1974) since then.

Of additional interest, 1964 marked the first time Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar – the top two schools in terms of total playoff wins – ever played each other. Newport Harbor won the game, 6-2, on Wed., Sept. 30, played at the Sailors’ old pool on the Irvine Ave. side of campus.

1965

The end of El Segundo’s dominance of the sport – prematurely anticipated in 1964 – would finally come to pass in 1965. And, Orange County’s emergence would finally become complete.

Having made it to the quarter-finals the previous year, Corona del Mar now entered the final game as second-seed with a record of 21-1. The Sea Kings’ only loss was to Fullerton, 6-5, at the Indians’ pool on Fri., Oct. 29. They took their revenge in the semi-finals, played Tues., Nov. 30, beating the Indians soundly, 6-1. Corona del Mar played superb defense, not allowing Fullerton’s lone goal until 2:59 left in the fourth period. El Segundo returned to the finals again, entering the game first-seed and undefeated at 20-0. The Eagles got there by beating Whittier one last time in high level competition, 9-5 in the semis. As was the case in 1963, the two finalists had not played each other all year. The game took place on Fri., Dec. 3, and turned out to be a great one. Corona

del Mar established a 5-3 lead at half-time and stayed ahead until the Eagles finally tied it, 7-7, with 2:50 remaining. Fine goalie play on both sides kept things even, until Pat McClellan scored on a lob shot with just eight seconds left to give the Sea Kings an 8-7 win over the Eagles.

Corona del Mar had apparently unlocked the secret to beating El Segundo, as Coach Newland told the Daily Pilot afterwards, “The kids did a great job, especially on defense. (Bob) Saari got his five goals, but the rest of them didn’t get very many. We also used our superior speed to overcome their zone defense.” (Of course, McClellan scored five goals of his own.)

Newland parlayed this first CIF-SS championship for an Orange County school into a distinguished career as an NCAA coach. The next year he began coaching Water Polo at University of California, Irvine, founded in the fall of 1965. From there he would win NCAA National championships in 1970, 1982 and 1989, and remained as head coach through the 2004 season, when he finally stepped down at the age of 77. However, not before this extremely influential coach on both high school and college levels notched a record of 714-345-5 at UCI (.673 winning percentage).

Hidden in the lower reaches of the playoffs was the third and final great Orange County team to emerge in this era. Sunny Hills of Fullerton made its post-season debut on Tues., Nov. 23, losing to Downey in the first round, 9-7. From 1965 through 1989, Corona del Mar, Newport Harbor or Sunny Hills would win all but two tourneys. Though Orange County was now fully ascendant, El Segundo would remain in the top shelf for two more years, finishing in the semis in 1966 and 1967.

1966

If Newland’s success was partially due to emphasis on strength and conditioning, then in keeping with the era’s trend, two new and soon-to-be-legendary head coaches arrived on the scene in 1966 to take dedicated, rigorous training to the next level. Indeed, they may have succeeded in taking it to its logical extreme.

Cliff Hooper replaced Newland as coach at Corona del Mar in 1966. He first coached Water Polo for one year at Glendale High School in 1961, before eventually joining the Sea Kings as assistant coach in 1964. The “Aquathletics” magazine of 1971 – just five years later – wrote of Hooper, “His two hour early morning practices are legendary in Orange County circles.” The magazine went on to describe a day in the life of a typical Corona del Mar Water Polo player:

“Practice begins at 5:45 a.m. The players get in about a two-hour workout, stressing calisthenics, weight training, playing other active sports and running. They then go to class until lunchtime. They eat together while watching water polo films. The team returns to the pool at 1:45 p.m. and practices until 5:30 p.m.”

Across the Newport Bay, Newland (in a delayed sense) was also being replaced at Newport Harbor. Jack Fullerton coached the school from 1962-64, before departing for

Orange Coast College, where he would win state community college championships in 1968 and 1972. In 1965, a fellow named Eric Hanauer coached the team. Bill Barnett took over the reins in 1966, arriving on campus at the age of 23 after graduating from Long Beach State. Barnett, too, prescribed long hours and hard work for Water Polo success. As one of his players in the early 1970s, I used to describe it to family and friends as “5, 6 and 50:” Five hours a day, six days a week, 50 weeks a year. Athletes of other sports would just shake their heads when I related this regimen to them.

The two coaches were different on the sidelines – one stoic (Hooper), the other animated (Barnett) – and produced different teams in the pool that seemed to mirror their personalities.

Corona del Mar had a slow, ultra-methodical offense that really hasn’t been seen since Hooper left coaching. He emphasized short passes, moving from one side to the other on the outside, then down the side and then into the hole. No lob shots – nothing but high percentage shooting. When the Sea Kings had an off-year, this was rather easy to defend. When they were good – which were most years – they would pound and grind opponents down, and at the very least take opponents out of their own game, making them play in the same sort of slow motion. As Hooper himself put it in a 2001 story in the Daily Pilot, “Maybe others know more about Water Polo, but you never got (my players) tired and you couldn’t tire them out, so I did know how to do that.”

Barnett, on the other hand, was very much an heir to the Jimmy Smith and Urho Saari style of play – unsurprisingly, since Barnett played for Smith at Fullerton Community College. Newport Harbor’s style emphasized speed and crisp passing, constant fast breaking, balanced team-oriented front court offenses and stingy defense. In the coming years, Barnett would demonstrate “the amazing ability to coach players at any level, better than anyone I’ve ever seen,” said Ed White, the goalie for Newport Harbor’s 1970 championship team, and assistant coach for another championship team in 1977. This trait was soon recognized by those who made decisions on an international level for Water Polo in the U.S. He would coach the Olympics team in 1988 and 1992, winning a Silver medal in the former. In 1997-98 he would write two coaching manuals to create a unified system of play on all USA Water Polo levels in the country. Perhaps most remarkably for a man a 1985 Los Angeles Times article dubbed “Old Yeller,” Barnett coached the Newport Harbor Girls Water Polo team to five CIF-SS championships from 1999-2012. His durability was equally remarkable – in 2012 he was named Girls Water Polo Coach of the Year by the Orange County Register, before finally retiring after taking his Girls team to another finals appearance in 2015.

What Hooper and Barnett had in common was a highly disciplined approach that put them among the best teams of the era – and it’s been that way at the two schools ever since.

In 1966, Corona del Mar and Newport Harbor were in the same league – the seven-team Irvine League, and only the first place team would go to the playoffs. Newport Harbor finished second behind the Sea Kings, losing the league matchup, 9-2, at home on Tues., Nov. 1.

The defending champs entered the CIF-SS playoffs 19-0, and heavily favored to repeat. Their great defense had recorded four shutouts during the season and had beaten number two seed Downey three times, albeit by narrow margins, 7-5, 6-4 and 7-3 (the first two being the closest games of the year). The playoffs, however, turned out to be the challenge they are intended to be as both semi-final games and the final game were determined in overtime. In the semis, played Tues., Nov. 29, Corona del Mar finally pulled away from Fullerton 5-2, in what Hooper described as “one of our poorest efforts of the season.” Downey needed sudden death overtime to defeat El Segundo, 9-8, in a victory Coach Sexton called “My sweetest win in six years of coaching – including the 5-2 victory over Whittier in the 1962 title game.” Nobody had grown tired of beating El Segundo just yet!

(Joe Shanahan, a junior and backup goalie for Downey, has an amusing story about that semi-final game against El Segundo. The only way Downey could keep El Segundo’s hole man Paul Bezchahazy from scoring was to foul him. Throughout the game, Downey players kept fouling out – 10 in all. When the game reached overtime, Shanahan says he was next in line to go in and start fouling. He hadn’t played the field all year, so you can just imagine what was going through his mind. It didn’t come to that, however, and he stayed on the bench. Perhaps as a result of this game, the competition committee instituted a rule change in 1967 calling for a penalty shot after eight team fouls, then 10 by 1970. This would have a key influence on play in the coming years.)

It remained for Corona del Mar to complete the task of beating a good team not three times in a row, but four. Hooper summed up the problem in Lombardi-esque fashion to the Daily Pilot: “Our kids are getting to know their players and its harder to be mean and go into the game under a full head of steam – something I believe is vital to winning in athletics.” (Sexton, for his part, marveled that Corona del Mar had “the finest physical team I’ve ever seen – and I’ve followed prep Water Polo for 17 years.”) The final game, held Thurs., Dec. 1, was a terrific back-and-forth affair with the Sea Kings jumping out to a 2-0 first quarter lead. A wild fourth quarter saw Downey go ahead briefly at 6-5, before having to come from behind again to tie it 7-7 at the end of regulation. In the first overtime period, it was Downey that jumped out to a quick two goal lead, and Corona del Mar closing to within one by the end of the three minute period. Corona del Mar then took control of the second overtime period, tying the game at 9-9 with 1:20 left to play. With 48 seconds left, the previous year’s hero, Pat McClellan, converted a penalty throw to make the final score, 10-9.

For McClellan, after scoring the winning goal in the final match with seconds left two years in a row (and again scoring five goals for the game), he would win a well-deserved Player of the Year award. For Corona del Mar, they recorded the first undefeated season since 1962. And for Hooper, it would be the first of three CIF-SS championships.

1967

As the 1960s rolled on so did the growth of Water Polo, leading in 1967 to the expansion of the playoffs from 16 to 24 teams. As part of the realignment, Newport Harbor moved out of the Irvine league and into the Sunset league, with Corona del Mar remaining in the former, enabling both teams to enter the tournament as league champions.

The enlarged tournament also allowed smaller schools to participate, including Lausen, a Roman Catholic school for boys located in San Pedro. Founded in 1962, Lausen became the first private school to make the playoffs, paving the way for the great private school teams of the future, such as Mater Dei of Santa Ana, Harvard of Studio City and Loyola, downtown Los Angeles. Lausen is an obscure but true pioneer as no private school would win a CIF-SS playoff game until Harvard burst on the scene in 1992 and made it all the way to the finals. A private school would not win a championship until Mater Dei did it well into the next century (2010). As for Lausen itself, they lost their one and only playoff game ever on Mon., Nov. 13, to Mira Costa, 15-5 (defending champ Corona del Mar would also be felled by Mira Costa, 15-14, in the second round). Lausen closed its doors in 1971 and today they stick out in my statistical records as a little bit of a ghost!

With two significant firsts (24 teams and a private school), 1967 also marked a significant and merciful last – the last time a final game would be played in a high school pool. For the third time in four years, the finals were held at Long Beach Millikan. The final game between Newport Harbor and Fullerton attracted “an overflow throng of 1,500 jammed into the crowded confines,” according to the Daily Pilot. For anyone familiar with the pool, that figure is amazing as it is hard to believe that more than a few hundred people could fit in there. The crammed, hot, chaotic and incredibly noisy environment must have played a role in a famous officiating snafu that night.

After a 12-6 record in 1966, Newport Harbor marched into the finals with a 21-1 record. The Sailors had beaten Downey, 8-2, early in the season, but then lost their only game to the host Vikings, 6-4, on Sat., Oct. 28. The rubber match between the teams took place nearly three weeks later in the playoff semi-finals on Fri., Nov. 17. Downey had a 7-5 lead late in the third period, but Newport Harbor got one back at the :50 mark to trail only 7-6 at the quarter's end. The Sailors tied it 7-7 with 4:15 left in the fourth, then won it on a lob shot by Jim McDonald with exactly 1:00 remaining. The Sailors advanced on a thriller, 8-7.

As with Corona del Mar the previous year, all that remained for Newport Harbor to do was the daunting task of beating a good team for the fourth time a row. For the second and last time, the Indians of Fullerton got to the finals, beating El Segundo, 7-6, in the semis. Led by eventual Player of the Year Rick Massimino, Fullerton entered the finals with a 17-4 record. They had lost to Anaheim, 6-3 in overtime, but avenged that defeat in the quarter-finals, 12-5. And, they had lost three times to Newport Harbor, though in progressively tougher contests, 9-4, 7-5 and 6-4 (the last game held at Fullerton on Tues., Oct. 31).

On Tues., Nov. 21, Newport Harbor and Fullerton faced off in a tough defensive struggle through early into the third period. With the Sailors leading 2-1, the Daily Pilot recounted the odd chain of events in a story headlined “53 Decisive Seconds And Newport Is CIF Champ”:

“Then the Indians of coach Gary Reed were charged with their eighth team foul which meant Newport was due for a penalty shot at goal under new rules. The buzzer (actually a horn) was sounded and officials took the ball out of play. However, they were apparently not sure why the horn had been touched off and put the ball back in play. Reed’s forces were relaxed, waiting for the free throw at their goal. However, officials Jim Hennessey and Frank Kanerek tossed the ball back to the Tars to put in play instead of taking a penalty toss. The alert Sailors capitalized on the error and (Dirk) Muntean dutifully blasted in a shot from the wing to make it 3-1. When officials were informed what had happened they then ruled the goal would count even though they had made a mistake. So the Tars got the free throw, too. McDonald fired it in to make it 4-1 while Reed protested. He later said, ‘you just can’t believe an error like that could take place in the CIF finals.’ Before the stunned Indians could recover from the devastating turn of events, Newport had regained possession and Eric Lindroth had shoved in a shot to make it 5-1. That all happened in a span of 53 seconds. Fullerton was never a contender after that.”

Newport Harbor spent the last 10 minutes of the game playing defense, winning 5-3. The victory capped a remarkably fast ascent for the Sailors under their second year coach. It was the first time since 1955 that a team that had not even qualified for the tournament the previous year ended up winning it the next – and the last time it would happen until 1992. And, it marked one more first in 1967 – the first of 10 CIF-SS championships for Barnett, which in 1978 he would tell the Daily Pilot remained the sweetest.

1968

The next year, 1968, was an epic one in the United States, from the launching of the Tet Offensive by the People’s Army of Vietnam on Jan. 31; and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy on April 4 and June 6, respectively; to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Aug. 26-29; and the election of Richard M. Nixon as President on Tues., Nov. 5. Yet normal life goes on, and our high school Water Polo players once again took to the pool as they had every year since 1912. On Election Day, Newport Harbor beat host Anaheim, 7-5.

This was one of those years in which the title was decided in the semi-finals. As in the previous year, top-ranked Newport Harbor entered the finals with a 21-1 record. Once again they played Downey in the semi-finals. Once again the two teams had split two earlier meetings – Newport Harbor first won, 8-6, then lost the second contest in Downey’s pool, 6-4. And, once again, the Sailors won the rubber match in the semis by one goal. The game nearly went into overtime when a sloppy pass by Newport Harbor was deflected and almost rebounded into the Sailors’ goal with just :02 remaining. But, Newport Harbor hung on for the win, 7-6.

Third-seed Corona del Mar entered the other semi-final with only two one-point overtime losses all year (to Newport Harbor, 4-3, and Downey, 5-4). The Sea Kings faced Lakewood, which had never done anything in the playoffs previously except lose in the first round three years in a row starting in 1961. And, Corona del Mar had beaten Lakewood handily in two early season meetings, 7-2 and 12-0. But Lakewood kept getting better. In their second-to-last game before the playoffs, they gave Newport Harbor a tough game, losing 5-3, and then beat Downey 4-3 to capture the Moore League title (avenging a non-league 8-3 loss). When Lakewood defeated Corona del Mar in the semis, it was considered an upset, even though Lakewood was actually second seed. The Daily Pilot wrote, "Lakewood simply outplayed the heavily favored Corona del Mar seven." The score was tied, 4-4, entering the fourth quarter. Lakewood went ahead with a little over three minutes to play, 5-4, then sealed it on a converted penalty shot with :22 left. Corona del Mar got their own penalty shot with just :03 remaining, making the final score, 6-5. The outcome was also equal parts proof that it really is difficult to beat a good team three times in a row. So, Lakewood entered the finals with a 20-4 record and hoping to be the second straight team to win the tournament without even qualifying the previous year – a testimony to an era in which new programs rose to excellence fast.

That is not what happened. As the Daily Pilot reported, "In a cakewalk, the Tars swamped Lakewood, 9-3.... Tuesday night the Tars blew 'em out of the pool. 'It was by far the best game we played all year,' (Barnett) said." Newport Harbor's six-goal victory margin equaled the (at the time) final game record set by Whittier in 1952. Perhaps it's a testimony to the perception that it should have been Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar in the finals that, when it came time to name the Player of the Year, the award was shared by Eric Lindroth (Sailors) and Jerry Eubank (Sea Kings).

On the surface, 1968 was simply a replay of 1967, but there were some interesting things about the tournament nonetheless. For one thing, it was the longest tournament in history, stretching a full 22 days – first round games were played on Tues, Nov. 19; second round (Sweet 16) games on Fri., Nov. 22; quarter-finals on Tues., Nov. 26; semi-finals on Tues., Dec. 3, and the finals on Tues., Dec. 10. Imagine, as recently as 1960, the entire tournament had been played in just five days. The "second season" had really arrived.

And speaking of arrival, the sport itself got a major boost in prestige with the playing of the semi-finals and then finals "at fabulous Belmont Plaza Olympic Pool in Long Beach" (Daily Pilot). For players of a certain age (me for instance), nothing says CIF like Belmont Plaza. The pool was built earlier in the year to host the U.S. swimming and Water Polo Olympics Trials for the Mexico City games (oh, yes, that epic edition of the Olympiad also happened in 1968 – from Oct. 14-25). The CIF-SS finals would be held there every year from 1968-2006 (except for five years in the mid-1970s). Sitting just 50 yards from the Pacific Ocean, the enormous pool held one million gallons of water. And, with seating capacity for 2,500 on three sides of the

action, there was plenty of room for the 1,500 spectators that again watched Newport Harbor roll to a championship.

1969

During the 1968 playoffs, the Harbor-area-centric Daily Pilot for one had been calling for “the long-standing dream of a Newport Harbor-Corona del Mar confrontation for a CIF Water Polo championship.” That confrontation finally took place in 1969.

Unfortunately, the first meeting between the two programs with the most wins in tournament history was one of the more lopsided contests. The tournament was now 17 years old and it was time people started talking about “Greatest Team in CIF History.” The 1969 Corona del Mar team may not be the last club to be so labeled, but it was the first – and there is an argument to be made that they still hold the title. The Sea Kings featured two future Players of the Year, senior Bruce Black (1969) and junior Garth Bergeson (1970). And, a key defensive player was junior Kurt Krumpholz, who in the prelims of the 1972 U.S. Olympics Team Trials would set the world record for the 400-meter freestyle. Black, in fact, was the team’s only returning starter from the previous year, yet Lakewood coach Ken Hamdorf said of the young team, “Corona del Mar makes no mistakes.”

At six-foot-three, 195-pounds and with the ability to pass and shoot with equal power from either arm, Bruce Black was just an unstoppable hole-man. As the best player on perhaps the best team ever, Black certainly has to be in the discussion of “the greatest player in CIF history.” Known to his legions of friends in subsequent years as “BHB” and at the time by classmates by the ironic nickname “Tiny,” few players have dominated a year the way he did in 1969.

Black scored six goals in an 11-4 semi-final romp over Fullerton, played Tues., Dec. 2. It was a surprisingly easy victory considering Corona del Mar had narrowly won, 7-5, in their only previous meeting, played at Fullerton on Fri., Nov. 14. In the other Final Four game, Newport Harbor faced its Sunset League rival Anaheim. The Colonists had beaten the Sailors, 7-6 in overtime, on Sat., Nov. 8 at Anaheim, in the Sunset League contest (Newport Harbor still managed to win the league title). In a playoff tune-up played Sat., Nov. 15, the Sailors got even with a 7-5 win over Anaheim. For the third year in a row, then, Newport Harbor was playing a “rubber-match” in the semi-finals. The score was tied 3-3 with 3:27 left in the third quarter before the Sailors pulled away for a 7-3 victory. The two finalists had played each other once before – in the title match of the Corona del Mar Tournament, played Sat., Sept. 20, at UC Irvine. The Sea Kings claimed a reasonably close 7-4 triumph over the Sailors. Yet going into the CIF-SS final, Barnett told the Daily Pilot: “They’re like a basketball team with Wilt Chamberlain and Lew Alcindor playing on each post; frankly it’s a little ridiculous. It’s tough to play a team as well balanced as they are. If you stop Black, Bergeson kills you, and vice versa. You have to play them honest but it’s rough because they can all score and they all swim well....They are the best high school team I’ve ever seen.”

A full 76 days since their prior encounter, the Sailors and Sea Kings met on Fri., Dec. 5, with the tumultuous 1960s drawing to a close. (Though one counterculture landmark remained ahead – the infamous Altamont Free Concert headlined by the Rolling Stones took place the very next day, 354 miles north in Tracy, California.) At Belmont Plaza that night, the neighborhood rivalry – Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar are only 4.0 miles driving distance apart – attracted 2,000 fans. And, the Sailors gave the Sea Kings a good game for a while. Though Corona del Mar had never trailed, it was only 5-4 early in the third quarter. But then the better team took control and it was 8-4 by the end of the period. Corona del Mar cruised in the fourth, closing it out 9-5.

The Sea Kings completed a 23-0 season, the first unbeaten team since their own 1966 squad. Corona del Mar's total victory spread of 11 goals for the final and semi-final was the largest since 1961. Black had scored the final game's first six goals for "what many experts call the greatest CIF water polo team ever fielded" (Daily Pilot). Adding to their credentials, the Sea Kings would emerge the 1970 swimming champion – the first program in 11 years to win both aquatic sports titles in the same school year, and the last to ever do it. Even so, Corona del Mar was not as good as they were probably going to be because they would have most of their starting line-up back the next year. (Appendix IV lists undefeated teams since the tournament's advent, the "Contenders for Greatest.")

1970

As the 1971 magazine *Aquathletics* put it, "A funny thing happened" on the way to Corona del Mar winning a second consecutive title in 1970. "It is that thing which is peculiar to sports – the unwritten rule which says that the favored team doesn't always necessarily win." The previous year had been memorable for producing perhaps the greatest team ever; 1970 was memorable for producing perhaps the greatest upset ever.

The Sea Kings rolled through the season undefeated and reached the semi-finals 21-0, putting them at 44-0 over two seasons. Only once this year had anyone come within one point of them (beating Downey, 5-4). Corona del Mar had defeated number two seed Newport Harbor three times already, by scores of 8-1, 6-3 and 7-3 (the middle contest was the only other one where an opponent came within three goals). And, Newport Harbor was now hamstrung with their defensive ace, John Wilcox, the man who drew all the tough hole man assignments, out for the playoffs with an injury to his right eye. During the regular season, no opponent scored more than four goals against the Sea Kings. In the quarter-finals, played Tues., Nov. 24, Crescenta Valley had scored a season high six goals – but also lost by the widest margin in the Elite Eight in 10 years, 26-6.

But that narrow victory against Downey in hindsight revealed something, for Corona del Mar's semi-final opponent had beaten Downey not once but three times, including an 8-7 victory in the quarter-finals. That team was the last of the newly emergent Orange County triumvirate – Sunny Hills. Corona del Mar and Sunny Hills had not faced off all year, but it was Sunny Hills in fact who had given the Sea Kings

their only one goal contest of 1969 (4-3 was the score). This was something their coach, Hank Vellekamp, reminded readers of the Fullerton News-Tribune on the day of the game, Tues., Dec. 1. And like Corona del Mar, the Lancers had most of their team back in 1970.

Until this breakthrough year, Sunny Hills still operated in the shadow of the older Fullerton Indians (Sunny Hills opened its doors in 1959; the two high schools are even closer together than Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar at just a 2.8-mile drive apart). The Lancers first gained the playoffs in 1965 under coach Pete Carhart before Vellekamp arrived in 1966. Sunny Hills then won a first round game before losing in the second round for three years in a row, 1967-9.

Going into the semi-final game, Sunny Hills actually exuded that weird confidence common to teams with nothing to lose. On Dec. 1, the Daily Pilot reported “Sunny Hills coach Henry Vellekamp says his team has a good chance at beating Corona del Mar if it can effectively slough on the Irvine League champions’ hole man” (i.e., collapse perimeter defenders to double team the hole man and steal the ball or pressure the shot).

And, that is exactly what happened, as the Daily Pilot reported the next day: “Sunny Hills High’s Freeway League upstarts stunned the potent Sea Kings with six fourth period goals to nail Corona del Mar, 9-3....It was a near unbelievable sight as the omnipotent Irvine League champions never led – and were even only once at 1-1. Corona, to put it mildly, didn’t shoot well. The Sea Kings tallied only twice from the field on 20 attempts along with a penalty shot....Sunny Hills threw a zone defense at the Sea Kings and effectively sloughed off on the hole man....Despite the lack of a single penalty shot try, Sunny Hills outdid any of the previous 21 victims of Corona del Mar this year in the scoring department by five.”

According to the Fullerton News-Tribune’s account, “The score was 3-2 entering the fourth period. Greg Carey and (Gary) Najarian then started a scoring rampage that downed the Sea Kings. Both players notched three goals in the final quarter for the Lancers. (Garth) Bergeson made the third goal of the Sea Kings.”

In his comments to the Daily Pilot, Hooper said: “I didn’t see any turning point, we just couldn’t handle them. Their hole man was doing a job, that’s all.” A year later, Aquathletics reported: “Hooper attributed the loss to coaching and complacency on the part of his team. ‘They just outplayed us,’ Hooper said. ‘Probably the biggest factor in our losing was our extensive fouling. In each game, we try to play foul-free, but against Sunny Hills, we had nine fouls early. We played cautiously since then because a 10th foul would give them a penalty shot.’”

That point about the fouling remained a sore one for Sea Kings star Garth Bergeson. In an interview with Bergeson in 2001 (31 years later, proof that you never get over losses like these), the Daily Pilot reported: “In the 1970 CIF semifinal game, Bergeson, a two-meter standout, also felt the officiating destroyed his team’s chances of beating Sunny Hills....‘They were just killing us,’ he said. ‘The officials didn’t want to see one person dominate in a semifinal game.’”

For Vellekamp, his team managed to do the only thing it could do to beat such a good team: “We played a perfect game against Corona del Mar.”

This memorable game established a memorable series between the schools with the second (Corona del Mar) and fourth (Sunny Hills) most wins in tournament history. From this time forward, a strange dynamic seemed to always be hovering over their games – as if the victim from the most recent upset was always seeking revenge. Over 21 years, from 1970-1990, the schools would meet in the playoffs nine times, with the Sea Kings holding a narrow 5-4 edge. Six of these nine games are considered upsets – some of them almost as shocking as their rivalry’s inaugural.

As Corona del Mar and Sunny Hills played the 7:30 p.m. game at Belmont Plaza, watching from the shallow end with increasing interest was Newport Harbor goalie Ed White and his teammates. However, as they swam into the deep end to play the 9 p.m. semi-final against La Puente, they soon realized, as White put it, “Hey, this could happen to us, too.”

Like the other game, it was the first meeting of the season between the two teams. And, Newport Harbor would never trail. But, they did blow a 6-3 third quarter lead, and saw the game tied at 6-6 with 2:41 left in the fourth. The game remained tied for a tense 1:51 of play, before Matt Greer scored the decider with 50 seconds remaining, and Newport Harbor triumphed, 7-6.

That set up the unlikely pairing of Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills in the finals for the first time (though not for the first time in the playoffs, the Sailors having defeated the Lancers in the second round the previous year). Other than those three losses to Corona del Mar, Newport Harbor had a perfect record that included an 8-2 victory over host Sunny Hills, played Fri., Nov. 6. But, in that match, the Lancers’ scoring stars Carey and Najarian had not played.

The final was a much different game than that previous meeting of exactly four weeks earlier – a tough defensive struggle played Fri., Dec. 4. According to the Daily Pilot, “Superb play by Newport goalie Ed White saved the game repeatedly for the Tars. A dripping wet, but happy coach Bill Barnett could only say after the game, ‘our goalie was sensational. He did it for us tonight.’” Indeed, years later, Barnett would remark to me and my teammates, “We were lucky that night. Our goalie was hotter than a pistol.” The game was tied 3-3 going into the fourth quarter, but Newport Harbor put the game away with 23 seconds remaining to lead 5-3, then finished with a 5-4 victory.

Like Sunny Hills vs. Corona del Mar, the final game was the beginning of another fascinating rivalry. Again for 21 years, from 1969-1989, Sunny Hills and Newport Harbor would meet 15 times – a playoff record for frequency – with the Sailors narrowly ahead, 8-7.

The 1970 season also featured the second straight all-Orange County final match. That sort of repeat had not happened before. And to further indicate just how dominate Orange County now was in the world of Water Polo, UC Irvine, coached by Ted

Newland, had won its first NCAA Championship, beating UCLA, 7-6, on Sun., Nov. 29, also at Belmont Plaza.

1971

Corona del Mar may look back on 1970 as the one that got away. Newport Harbor, though, would get a taste of that in 1971, in the bitterest loss in all their many games with Sunny Hills.

Now up to 20 leagues, the tournament expanded again in 1971 to a 32-team, five-rounder for all comers. From the beginning, it looked to be a rematch of the 1970 final game and the two teams were the top ranked entering the playoffs.

Newport Harbor had the top seed, but as is often the case, they actually had the tougher row to plow on their way to the finals. This included a very unusual second round game against host Palos Verdes, played Tues., Nov. 30. The Sailors won, 2-0, with both goals coming in the first half. There were a grand total of 16 shots on goal – 14 for Newport Harbor and only two for Palos Verdes. “It was a great defensive effort and a lousy offensive one for us,” Barnett told the Daily Pilot. “This is probably the lowest scoring game I have ever been involved in.” He was right. This was the first shutout in 12 years and it remains the lowest scoring game in tournament history, edging out Fullerton’s 2-1 win over Oxnard in a 1966 first rounder. But things continued to get tougher for the Sailors, who survived by continuing to play well defensively. They beat Fullerton, 4-3, in the quarters, held Fri., Dec. 3; then Lakewood, 5-4, in the semi-finals played Tues., Dec. 7, to become the only team to ever reach the finals by winning the three previous games by a total of only four goals (next closest is Mira Costa – a six goal margin in 1973). In that semi-final, Newport Harbor didn’t gain its first lead, 4-3, until there was only 2:41 left in the fourth quarter.

Also playing good defense was second ranked Sunny Hills, who cruised into the finals with fairly easy victories over Upland, 10-2 (second round), Downey, 5-2 (quarters), and Crescenta Valley, 6-3 (semis). (It’s a good thing 32-team tourneys are all but a thing of the past as, of course, both Sunny Hills and Newport Harbor slaughtered their first round opponents on Wed., Nov. 24.)

This set up a final game on Fri., Dec. 10, between two very evenly matched teams. Sunny Hills entered with a 22-2 record – their two early-season losses occurring over eight days at the hands of La Puente, 7-5 in overtime, on Sat., Sept. 25, in the finals of the Moore League Tournament; and Newport Harbor, 8-7 in sudden death, on Sat., Oct. 2, in the finals of the Anaheim Tournament. Newport Harbor was 21-2, with two late-season losses (also in an eight day stretch) to host Sunny Hills, 8-4, on Fri., Nov. 12; and host Fullerton, 7-5, on Fri., Nov. 19. In the Sailors’ loss to Sunny Hills, the Lancers led 2-0 at half-time, then exploded for a 7-1 lead after three periods, with Greg Carey scoring all three of his goals during the decisive quarter. (Carey and Gordon Clevenger of El Segundo, which finished in the quarter-finals, shared Player of the Year honors.) Like last year, the two finalists were facing each other exactly four weeks since their most recent encounter.

At the end of regulation in the final match, the score was tied, 6-6, which meant two three-minute overtime periods, to be followed by a sudden death period if still knotted. The first overtime period was scoreless; then Sunny Hills went ahead briefly in the second overtime period, before Newport Harbor tied the score once again.

According to the Daily Pilot: “The score was deadlocked, 7-7, with 39 seconds remaining in the second overtime period and Newport in possession of the ball. There were nine personal fouls on Sunny Hills and one on Newport. When the 10th is called against a team, the other gets a penalty shot at goal. The Tars lined up in an I formation down the center pool after a timeout.”

The Fullerton News-Tribune then reports: “The Tars’ goalie tossed the ball out in the tank and (Sunny Hills’) Mark Newton left his man to help (teammate Tim) Harvey gather in the ball and go for the score. Newton got the steal and at the last second threw to Harvey who scored.”

The Daily Pilot continues that Harvey “tallied the winning goal with 25 seconds to play in a two-on-one situation and the elusive 10th foul was never called against the Lancers. Asked what he told his team during the timeout..., Barnett replied: ‘We had a play worked out, but they looked like they knew it better than we did. We were just trying to draw that 10th foul to get the penalty shot.’ Jim Sprague, (assistant) coach to the Lancers, felt his team lucked out but was the happiest and wettest civilian in the arena. ‘Our whole team played well but we had to have a lot of luck in the last part of the game to win.’”

For the second year in a row, the defending champ had been turned away in heartbreaking fashion. Yet, in this “Second Golden Age,” it was about to happen for a third straight time. And, for the second time in the era, a classic team would once again end its many years of frustration.

1972

Having won their first CIF-SS title in 1971, Sunny Hills was looking to 1972 for an initial two-in-a-row, just as Corona del Mar and Newport Harbor had recently done. However, Downey was the clear favorite that year, with Newport Harbor rounding out the trio of top contenders. Downey entered the final game with a record of 23-1, their only loss dealt by Newport Harbor, 7-6, in a game played Fri., Nov. 3, at the Sailors’ pool. In the semi-finals, held Tues., Dec. 5, the Vikings turned back La Puente, playing in their second Final Four game in three years, 11-7. (Downey and La Puente were both in the San Gabriel Valley League at the time, and La Puente had given the Vikings a tough league game, losing 8-7.)

Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills faced off in the other semi-final match, the two teams once again very evenly matched, and having split two previous games. Newport Harbor lost its only regular season game in the first encounter, 8-6, in the final match of Anaheim Tournament, played Sat., Sept. 30. (The game was actually held at Newport Harbor’s new 50-meter pool and the tourney would transform into the South Coast

Tournament in 1977.) The host Sailors then got even with the Lancers, winning 10-7, on Fri., Nov. 10. The playoff contest started out like the earlier ones, with the score tied 2-2 at half-time. However, the wheels popped off completely for the Sailors early in the third quarter. Through a combination of turnovers and fouling, they gave up five quick goals to go down 7-2. Sunny Hills finished with an unexpectedly lopsided win, 9-4. For the first time since 1963, then, a final game would be played without Newport Harbor or Corona del Mar involved.

Sunny Hills had avenged their loss to Newport Harbor, but their three other season losses had all come from Downey. As the Fullerton News-Tribune reported in its final game preview story, “Downey beat the Lancers, 8-6, in the Moore League Tournament. It beat Sunny Hills, 9-6, in a practice (*non-league*) game at Downey and it holds a 10-9 decision over Sunny Hills in the latter’s pool in the final game before the playoffs.” Still, as repeatedly remarked, it’s hard to keep beating a good team. The defending champs had reason to hope going into the Fri., Dec. 8 final match.

Very much in keeping with the way Downey historically played Water Polo, the game was close, frantic and high scoring. Sunny Hills jumped out to a 3-1 lead at the end of the first period, and still led 7-5 at half-time. However, the shoot-from-anywhere model that Downey had perfected over the years seemed to wear down Sunny Hills in the third, and Downey entered the fourth with an 8-7 lead. The two teams traded goals throughout the final period, with Downey going ahead, 11-10 with 48 seconds left. Sunny Hills tied the score with 14 seconds left, and the second overtime final game in a row appeared to be in the offing. But Downey raced the ball down court and Dennis Morales scored his second goal of the night literally at the buzzer for a shattering end to Sunny Hills’ championship reign. (Downey’s Jed Robinson contributed three goals – he would be named co-Player of the Year along with Corona del Mar’s Bruce Krumpholz.)

The 12-11 verdict meant the highest point total for a final game winner in 11 years, and the loser had never put that many points on the board. For Downey, it would be their second and last CIF-SS championship, but one that easily helped them forget the nine seasons since that first title, when they finished in the finals once, and the semi- and quarter-finals four times each.

1973

Sunny Hills answered the previous year’s heartbreak with another candidate for “Greatest Team Ever.” The 1973 Lancers featured one of the most awesome balanced offensive attacks in history, featuring senior Don Spicer (co-Player of the Year this season, along with Mira Costa’s Peter Payton), and juniors Rick Sherburne (co-Player of the Year, 1974) and Gary Figueroa (future Olympics team member in 1980 and 1984).

There were a few teams capable of giving them a good game. Newport Harbor had played them tough twice, 9-6 and 7-5 (seven goals was Sunny Hills’ lowest point total of the season). Downey had lost to them 8-6 (the only other game played within two goals). A resurgent Corona del Mar had not played the Lancers, but they had victories

over both Newport Harbor and Downey, and with their physical, methodical playing style, they certainly would have slowed Sunny Hills down. The problem was, all three of these teams were upset victims during the playoffs, so Sunny Hills' dominance was magnified by an unusually easy path to a perfect 25-0 season.

First, a complacent Downey lost in the second round to Estancia, playing in the tournament for the first time. The 6-5 loss for Downey on Tues., Nov. 27, meant the poorest title defensive since 1967 and it was the only time the Vikings failed to at least make the quarter-finals from 1952-74. Estancia would also get past its next opponent – Buena of Ventura, which claimed their own second round upset victory over Lakewood. Next, Newport Harbor was upset in the quarter-finals by Mira Costa, 8-6, played Fri., Nov. 30. Mira Costa was a solid program, but the Mustangs had never before advanced past the Elite Eight. For the Sailors, this marked the only time they failed to at least make it to the semi-finals from 1967-88. (In the first round, played Wed., Nov. 21, Newport Harbor had beaten North of Riverside, 24-0. The game was an indictment of the 32 team tournament format. It would be 24 years before the next shutout was recorded.) Finally, Corona del Mar was also upset by Mira Costa, 6-5, in the semi-finals, played Tues., Dec. 4.

Meanwhile, Sunny Hills defeated La Serna 14-6 in the quarters, and then romped over a completely overmatched Estancia, 15-2. This year the semis and finals were moved to East Los Angeles Community College, and the Lancers' semi-final match included one odd result of the general disorientation. According to the Daily Pilot: "Yet the (Estancia) Eagles were no more unfortunate than official Don Poucher, who fell into a pool well and had to be removed by stretcher, reportedly suffering severely bruised ribs."

After the defeat, Estancia coach Steve Farmer told the Daily Pilot, "Sunny Hills will easily win the title game Friday night (Dec. 7)." Even Sunny Hills' coach Hank Vellekamp was willing to say it out loud. He told the Fullerton News-Tribune beforehand that he thought his team would defeat Mira Costa by five goals.

It wasn't quite so easy at first. Mira Costa came into the finals with a 22-2 record, having lost to Downey, 7-6, and La Puente, 8-6 (the latter was defeated by Corona del Mar in the quarter-finals). The Mustangs actually led the game twice, including a 6-5 edge two minutes into the second period. But Sunny Hills tied it 6-6 with 2:37 left and went into half-time with a 9-7 lead. The Lancers broke it open in the third to finish the quarter ahead 14-8, then cruised to a 14-10 victory. Sunny Hills' 25 point total margin in the quarters, semis and finals was the most since Downey in 1962, and no team would have it so comfortable again until Mater Dei's 28 goal margin in 2011.

It was the first undefeated team since 1969. And, the Fullerton News-Tribune reported: "Sunny Hills' rooters came prepared for victory. Especially the cheerleaders. At the game's end, the cheerleaders stripped their uniforms to reveal swimsuits. Most of the male rooters stripped everything except their pants. All of them jumped into the pool for a victory swim joining the Lancers' poloists, Vellekamp and assistant coach Jim Sprague."

The high school kids of 1973 clearly enjoyed themselves at least as much as those at the Catalina Water Carnival of 1919! It was a fitting end to CIF-SS Water Polo's Second Golden Age.

BOOK THREE:

The
Many-Tournaments Years
1974-2020

CHAPTER VIII

Divide and Conquer: Multi-Division Play, 1974-1991

And Then There Were Two – Then Three

In previewing the 1972 playoffs, the Fullerton News-Tribune noted on Tues., Nov. 21 that “A total of 32 teams are entered in the playoffs which are not broken down into classifications as is football, basketball and baseball competition.”

That would change in 1974.

By the early 1970s, high school Water Polo in Southern California had reached a very high level of sophistication in terms of training, talent and facilities. Indeed, it was world-class, as high school coaches and even players were simultaneously participating in Olympics-level competition. But, of course, this elite level did not – and could not – apply to all. Among the wide variety of reasons was the economic status of the neighborhood surrounding the school, the size of the student body, and general lack of swimming experience, facilities and interest the further you went inland.

To address this disparity – and at the same time accommodate the sport’s rapid and sustained growth since the late 1950s – multi-level play was introduced. The tournament remained at only 32 entrants in 1974, with 16 teams representing 13 leagues in both a 4A (premier level) and 3A (secondary level) tournament. The size of the two tournaments expanded to 32 teams each in 1975 and 1976. In 1977, league alignment became uneven, with 12 leagues competing in 4A, 14 in 3A. The two tournaments contracted to 24 and 28 schools, respectively, with only two teams from each league awarded berths in the playoffs, so balance was maintained in that respect. In 1978, 4A went back up to 32 teams; meanwhile, 3A showcased for the first time ever a “Wild Card” play-in game, for a total of 33 schools competing. And, a third tier of championship play was added that same year, with now 11 leagues in 4A and 3A, and six leagues in the newly formed 2A. Play would remain at three levels from 1978 through the end of the era extending through 1991. (Appendix V shows league alignment and playoff entrants in the division “Inaugural Years” of 1974 and 1978.)

By 1990, 89 schools were competing in the playoffs, including 39 in 2A alone, a remarkable number given that exactly 30 years prior there were only 39 schools total playing Water Polo at all. The multi-division playoff structure had a number of advantages, and it surely did what its organizers sought to do – divide and conquer: create a platform for continued growth.

The structure enabled emerging programs to develop and find success at a lower level, then be ready to compete at a higher one. Indeed, by the end of this era the formula had worked a revolution. El Toro won the 4A championship in 1990, after

winning 3A titles in 1988 and 1989; and San Clemente won the 4A champion in 1991, following 3A second place finishes in 1986 and 1988. Neither school had been a part of playoff action on any level prior to 1978.

It was also gratifying to see some traditionally hard luck schools finally finding championship glory at the lower levels. One example was La Puente, a semi-finalist in 1970 and 1972, and then a 2A champion in 1980. Another was Costa Mesa, which had the misfortune of being in the same school district as Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar, but won titles in 1986 and 1987 when the Mustangs finally took a demotion to 2A.

Multiple tournaments also created level playing fields for programs that obviously lacked the resources to compete at the top level. In 1981, Crespi (Encino area of Los Angeles) became the first private school to win a Water Polo championship. Small public schools also benefitted – though it led to at least one asterisk in the record books. In 1985, Miraleste of Rancho Palos Verdes won the 2A title – beating a ghost from the past, El Segundo. The school was closed in 1991, and so Miraleste has the distinction of being the only now-defunct school to ever win a championship.

Finally, the new structure stretched the geographic boundaries of the sport as it opened up championship opportunities for schools north and east of the sport's Orange-Los Angeles counties epicenter. In 1976, 3A champion Cabrillo of Lompoc in Santa Barbara County became the first school north of Los Angeles County to win a title. The following year, Indio in Riverside County won 3A, becoming the first school from a county not connected to the ocean to win a championship.

In fact, at the end of this era, in 1991, Santa Maria won the 2A title and, as previously mentioned, San Clemente won the 4A title. Thus, 223 miles separated these champions – success in Water Polo stretched across the entire length of the vast CIF-Southern Section.

As stated in the Introduction (page 8), my focus going forward will remain at the elite level. The vastness of the story almost requires it. But, for those with an interest in these lower levels, I refer you to my statistical records at waterpolohistory.com, which are complete for all levels of competition. Therefore, all references to the first “this” or last “that” or most “whatever” – pertain to 4A/Division I/Division 1, unless specified otherwise. As I studied newspaper accounts from the mid-1970s onward, I found an almost cliqued way of handling Water Polo coverage. Typically, there would be the story of the 4A championship game, then one paragraph at the end saying, “and in 3A and 2A, so and so beat so and so.” I’m not going to do that in the year by year accounts that follow. I will only reference the lower divisions when it helps tell the story of the top level.

Was the creation of a multi-level play really a good thing? In spite of the ground just covered, I originally wasn't so sure. I played Water Polo in the early 1970s, and for most of that time, there was just one level. Indeed, for 22 years there had been a free-for-all dog fight to be the one and only team to end the season on a happy note – and it was thrilling. So, I can find myself agreeing with those who say, “There are

too many champions now.” But, then, I started my research on this era of Water Polo, and I gained a whole new appreciation for what many or even most schools have to go through to field a Water Polo team. Not every school can be Newport Harbor. Before we start our year by year march through this era, let me share a story with you.

The Lower Divisions: An Appreciation

In the process of cataloging and writing about the games that took place over more than 100 years, there have been three games that stand out as having been particularly hard to find. The first was the “No Ball at the Island” game of 1919, supposedly played on Sat., June 14, in Avalon Harbor between Los Angeles Poly and Long Beach Poly, only to be played instead on Mon., June 16, at Huntington Park High. It took me 18 years to discover that outcome (13-3 for Long Beach Poly), and only because I was referred by a school administrator to Kenny Wooten, an alumni and sports historian, who had saved the memorable clipping from the Long Beach Daily Telegram. The second was the non-championship game of 1951, supposedly played between Whittier and Downey. For years the CIF-SS record book had suggested a game had taken place, but did not report a score. After several months search, I discovered that Downey’s assistant coach had been Pat Tyne, who I was familiar with as he was coaching at Cerritos Community College while I played at Orange Coast College in the mid-1970s. He confirmed that the playoffs did not get underway until the following year. (Or, as he put it, “They wouldn’t play us.”)

The third game that was hard to find involves our friends from the early days of 3A and 2A.

After doing my original tournament research in 1981, I thought I had found every single playoff game ever played. However, in February 2012 I discovered an oversight in my record keeping. According to the Orange County Register of Tues., Nov. 14, 1978, a single 3A Wild Card game was scheduled for Wed., Nov. 15, 1978. I realized also I had a bigger problem with 1979. The Register of Mon., Nov. 12, 1979, announced four 3A Wild Card games to be played on Tues., Nov. 13, 1979, and two 2A Wild Card games scheduled for Wed., Nov. 14, 1979.

Even though the games were announced, the CIF-SS office did not issue a news release announcing the results of these seven games. Therefore, local newspapers did not report on them (with one exception). In addition, the results were not recorded in any of CIF-SS’ subsequent archival publications, including their seasonal newsletters and annual handbooks. Perhaps it was due to the newness of the Wild Card concept – seven play-in games that nobody would miss. But these were official CIF-SS playoff games, and they mattered to the kids who played in them.

What to do? No newspaper accounts. No records even with CIF-SS. November 1978 was more than 33 years removed from February 2012. When I started my original tournament research in early 1981, it had been just over 28 years since the first tournament.

As previously mentioned, that 1978 3A game was the very first Wild Card game ever played. It was won by Pacifica (Garden Grove), 13-12, over Crespi. The only surviving written account of this game is from the 1978 Crespi Boys Water Polo Awards Banquet Program, which had a page devoted to a rundown of all 16 games they played that year. This artifact was preserved for the school by Jeff Thornton, the vice principal of student and campus development. As a post-season game, it should be recorded for its own sake. But knowing this also helps to track Crespi's four-year playoff ascent. In 1979 Crespi went down to 2A, where they finished in the Sweet 16. They then got to the quarter-finals in 1980, before winning the championship in 1981. (The unfortunate thing for Crespi is that, as a small private school in Los Angeles, they eventually ended up in the same league as powerhouses Harvard and Loyola. They were sent back to 3A in 1983, and then dragged into the premier level in 1992. From that year until 2015, they compiled a 3-16 record, finishing in the Sweet 16 – and no higher – 15 times.)

In 1979, six Wild Card games were played on two levels. I found two of these games in school newspapers – both 3A matches. One involved Redondo, which has taken laudatory steps to create a history room on campus. The other game included Arcadia, though their newspaper wasn't archived at the school, but rather at the fine Arcadia Public Library. I was also lucky to find two additional games in school yearbooks – lucky because by the late-1970s the practice of listing complete season results in yearbooks had grown out of fashion. One of these games involved Crespi again (this time playing 2A) and the other El Rancho (a 3A game). I found a fifth game in the Orange County Register. In a triumph of good journalism, the Register followed-up with the score (Esperanza 16, Canyon 4), having called attention to this 3A match in its pages two days earlier.

So, that left just one 2A game to find – La Salle, third seed from the Prep League vs. Bell Gardens, third seed from the Rio Hondo League. But, as in 1919 and 1951, things just didn't happen according to plan.

La Salle is located in Pasadena, right on the border with Sierra Madre, a little more than one mile east on Sierra Madre Blvd. from Pasadena High, CIF-SS champs way back in 1925. It was founded in 1956, a private Catholic co-ed college prep school. The attractive campus has a tightly-fit, downtown feel to it, but features a good-sized gym and athletic fields that appear to occupy more space than the two-story classroom buildings. No pool though. For that, the Water Polo program – consisting in 1979 of only nine or 10 players on Varsity (no JV team) – went to Sierra Madre Pool, located a little under two miles further east on the boulevard from school.

The pool was not first-rate. Star player Tom Bigley remembers: “La Salle's home pool was the Sierra Madre Pool (an odd 33 1/3 yard pool). One deep end and one shallow end, where keeping your feet off the bottom was a true task at times. It had NO heater! So, when we made the playoffs, the pool became so cold for practice that we borrowed Monrovia High's pool (*just over five miles from La Salle*) for those cold November workouts. Our last couple workouts at Sierra Madre were hilarious. We

would literally jump in to swim one length and then jump out at the other end, which the coach didn't like...but he wasn't the one in the 59 degree water.”

Perhaps you are beginning to understand already why the 2A level was created. It's a story of hardship that seemed to belong to an era of several decades prior.

But, La Salle did have one thing going for it. The first year coach was Joe Shanahan, a former standout goalie with Downey in the 1960s, who then went on to USC and the national team in the 1970s. And, at 400 students, La Salle was actually the giant of the Prep League. Shanahan told me he once did a count of enrollment in all the league schools and it came to a total of 1,200 students. These favorable factors led to a third place finish behind Flintridge Prep and Chadwick, and their first-ever playoff berth. But the reward seemed unfavorable – relegated to a Wild Card play-in game and facing Bell Gardens, the team that had finished second in 2A the year prior.

Over at Bell Gardens, however, there was another first year coach with problems of his own. His name was Ron Milward, who played at La Serna in Whittier, graduating in 1972. After Bell Gardens' run at a championship in 1978 (they lost a 14-13 heartbreaker to San Marino in the inaugural 2A final match), the school was definitely in a rebuilding mode the following year. Still, they were good enough to finish third in the Rio Hondo League behind San Marino and La Canada.

But that wasn't Milward's real problem. As he put it to me diplomatically, “We had a lot of maturity problems” among his young men, including one who was declared ineligible, resulting in the forfeiture of crucial league wins. Milward was learning the bitter lesson of all high school coaches – in many ways they're additionally expected to be mother, father and babysitter.

So, even though the newspapers of Mon., Nov. 12, 1979, published playoff matches that included La Salle vs. Bell Gardens, by then Bell Gardens was already forced to decline the invitation. Instead, fourth place Temple City was chosen to face the Lancers of La Salle.

Temple City was not only an unprepared team for the playoffs, they were a depleted and dispirited team as well. Yet another first-year coach, Tom Williams, was beset with discipline problems. The problems were so widespread that they made interesting and highly unusual copy in the school's 1980 yearbook, and Williams was not treated sympathetically. The story read:

“Hair Raising Situation Cuts Season Short”

“Five Poloists Dropped From Competition”

“Since the changes of the 60's, wearing long hair has become a commonly accepted masculine fad throughout the world. In spite of this, numerous coaches of high school and collegiate athletics continue to prefer their players' hair short and well-groomed. This long-standing tradition, however, may have cost the water polo team the season.

“(The) Varsity...displayed competitive spirit at the season’s start and (they) did go on to beat South Pasadena two times. But their loss of five members who did not comply with the hair code contributed greatly to the fourth place the team received in Rio Hondo League play.”

La Salle was all along designated the home team, but their pool was completely inadequate. Fortunately, Shanahan was friends with the coach over at Arcadia High, less than five miles away. Arcadia would lose its 3A Wild Card game on Tues., Nov. 13, leaving the pool wide open for La Salle and its new opponent to play their game on schedule the afternoon of Wed., Nov. 14.

It turned out to be a truly sunny day for La Salle. According to Shanahan, about 50 to 60 students turned out to root on their boys in their very first playoff game. Temple City just didn’t seem to want to even be there. As recounted to me by email by another La Salle player, David Ebert, “My memory serves me that it was Temple City that lost to us with the score being 16-10 and it was (in) regulation (*i.e., not overtime*). As Tom Bigley (*in another email to me*) mentioned, we were in control of that game and were never really ‘challenged.’”

Ebert’s email of Wed., Feb. 29, 2012, is a real keeper for me. All of the thousands of scores I have recorded in my statistical records are based on written, contemporary accounts. This is the one and only score recorded on the basis of a personal recollection – fortunately, a very clear and definite one, one that had all of the connecting facts (opponent and venue) remembered without aid.

Both Milward and Williams would be out of their posts by the following year, highlighting another familiar problem of smaller programs – lack of coaching continuity. Shanahan, happily, was not a walk-on, but a full-fledged facility member. He would go on to coach at La Salle for another five years, building up the program to include 39 players one year – with a JV coach! When I caught up to him in 2012, he was still coaching – the Girls Water Polo team at Montclair High.

As for La Salle, they were a fairly consistent 2A playoff entrant through 1987, but this 1979 Wild Card game would be their only win in seven appearances. In fact, the glow of that first win was short lived. In the next round, they were crushed 24-0 by La Puente (which was not only the final score, but the score after three quarters). La Puente had taken a demotion all the way from 4A that year and ended up second, and would gain the championship the next year. Bigley could only marvel at a program like La Puente, which earlier in the decade was giving eventual CIF-SS champs tough semi-final matches. He wrote: “Their conditioning was unreal as we were gassed after the first quarter. Every man they substituted in seemed just as good as the man they took out.”

Of course, this 1979 scheduling mishap was only part of the rather rocky beginnings of the 2A tournament. When it was founded in 1978, it was intended to field 16 teams – three from each of five leagues and a single freelance “league” entrant. However, the Los Padres league at the extreme northern border of CIF-SS only sent two schools – Atascadero and Santa Ynez. If I can ever get up there to study the local papers, they

may contain an entertaining story as to why! In any case, the first 2A tournament only fielded 15 teams, with La Canada awarded a bye and the opportunity to capture a championship with only three wins (naturally, they proceeded to lose in the semi-finals).

So, I originally discovered that I was missing seven Wild Card games from 1978 and 1979 on Sat., Feb. 3, 2012. I was not fully satisfied that I had the accurate story behind the La Salle-Temple City game until Mon., March 12, 2012, when I traded emails with Milward confirming everything I had learned from the La Salle coach and players, and the Temple City yearbook. It took more than five weeks to find that one score. Well, beats 18 years!

Finding the right sources has certainly gotten easier in the age of the Internet. I was able to initially reach out to Milward and Shanahan by Googling their names, and I was even able to find a player from Temple City (Robert Harvey, a junior in 1979, but he had only the vaguest recollection of the game). I could not find Tom Williams. I connected with Ebert and Bigley with the generous assistance of Kristen Schultz, director of alumni relations at La Salle.

Let me assure you – I have triple checked my statistical records, and every playoff game ever played is accounted for! I also learned an important lesson. Not every school is blessed with a 50-meter pool, 3,000 students enrolled and a coach who is also coaching the Olympics team. The situation of most programs is quite humble, and in many cases it is a remarkable feat that a school even manages to field a team. Yes, there should be multi-level competition. In addition, once a program is formed, it is even more difficult to build and maintain a tradition of excellence. But now, let's go back to the premier level in 1974, with the newly given name of 4A. On this level, in this year, traditions of excellence collided in a way they never had before or since.

1974

In 1982, Corona del Mar claimed their 40th playoff win, which surpassed El Segundo's final mark of 39, and moved the Sea Kings into the all-time top four teams in total wins with Newport Harbor, Sunny Hills and Downey (the Vikings earned their 40th and final win in 1981). Long Beach Wilson gained its 41st win in 1994, finally surpassing Downey. For 12 years, then, Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Sunny Hills and Downey reigned with the most wins all-time. Yet, these four great programs were together in the semi-finals only once – in 1974. This was also the first year that all four semi-finalists had previously won a championship, an occurrence that is still rare. In fact, all four were multi-year champs, having collectively won it 10 of the previous 12 years.

This year's tournament was additionally classy in that it featured Huntington Beach – one of the first two Orange County teams to ever be in the playoffs – for the first time since 1958; and Long Beach Wilson advanced as far as the quarter-finals for the first time since that year also.

Like the year before, the semi-final and final games took place at East Los Angeles Community College in Monterey Park. Why on earth were they playing way out there, as opposed to Belmont Plaza (the Final Four home from 1968-72)? In fact, prior to 1973, the final match had only been played outside the Long Beach city limits twice (1953 and 1959). I don't know – and I played back then. East L.A. was much less conveniently located for most schools compared to Belmont, and a wash for the rest. The facility was not as good, though Sunny Hills Coach Jim Sprague told me the East L.A. pool was actually “a great place to play.” Still, he added, “My one outstanding memory is that I used to videotape every game and it was so humid in there my camera lens always fogged up.” Scheduling at Belmont was probably more difficult. Perhaps a five year agreement at Belmont had expired, so CIF-SS found another home with a new five year lease at East L.A., where the finals remained until 1977. (The section's swimming finals were also held there from 1975 to 1978.) In any case, this five year sojourn in Monterey Park would be a source of some controversy in 1974.

The semi-finals got underway the night of Nov. 29, in the unusual circumstance of the Friday after Thanksgiving, with top seeded Newport Harbor playing Downey. Newport Harbor had roared out of the early season gates with lopsided wins against all comers, but the competition seemed to catch up as the season wore on. Their only loss was their next-to-last regular season game against Sunny Hills, played at Cypress College. The Sailors lost 6-5, after blowing a 5-0 lead early in the second quarter. Newport Harbor had beaten the Lancers soundly on Sat., Sept. 28, in the title match of the Anaheim Tournament, 7-2. The Sailors had also handily whipped Downey that morning, 19-4, in the semi-finals. A mid-season contest hosted by the Vikings had also gone to the Sailors, 15-7, though the score had been tied at half-time, 7-7. Thus, having been blown out in the first game, and remaining competitive for one half in the second, Coach Sexton of Downey told me in 1981 he felt his team was capable of staying with Newport Harbor for an entire game by late November.

Indeed, they did. Downey was able to play the type of game they loved to play – a ready, fire, aim shoot out. With Newport Harbor leading 12-11 and just 24 seconds to play, Downey was awarded a 6-on-5 scoring opportunity. However, their shot with only seven seconds left went straight into the hands of the goalie, and the Sailors advanced. Who else but Downey would record the highest score for a losing team in the semis since 1955, and not to be seen again until 1991?

Everyone expected a tough match in the nightcap between second seed and defending champ, Sunny Hills, and Corona del Mar, last year's third place team. Sunny Hills was having another strong year, led by Rick Sherburne and Gary Figueroa, but certainly down from the previous year's remarkable team. The program also experienced a coaching change. Hank Vellekamp had accepted a plume job coaching swimming at UC Irvine. Taking over the reins was Jim Sprague, an accountant-turned-teacher-and-coach. He began coaching at Buena Park high school, before moving over to assist Vellekamp at Sunny Hills, the both of them starting there in 1966.

Corona del Mar was a very good team that had been getting better the entire season, led by Mark Watson, who would share Player of the Year honors with Sherburne. The Sea Kings had lost to Sunny Hills, 9-4, and then to Downey, 10-9 in overtime, in the semis and third place game of the Anaheim Tournament. One week prior, Sat., Sept. 21, Corona del Mar had lost to Newport Harbor, 8-6, in the title match of their own tourney. The disappointing results of the Anaheim Tournament could be partially explained by the absence due to a hand injury to one of the Sea Kings' key starters. Still, they were only 5-3 at the end of September. From there, though, they had gone undefeated for two full months, winning 13 regular season and playoff games. They had avenged their loss to Downey during this streak (also by a 10-9 score). Suddenly, they were in a position to avenge their only other two losses, with Sunny Hills then Newport Harbor in front of them.

Sunny Hills' reliance on Sherburne called for him to be as active on defense as he was on offense, and that ended up playing dramatically into the Sea Kings' hands. With 27 seconds left in the first half, and Corona del Mar leading 3-2, Sherburne fouled out of the game. The Sea Kings immediately capitalized on the situation, making it 4-2 with five seconds left in the half. It was Sherburne who had accounted for Sunny Hill's two goals. The game seemed over right then.

Corona del Mar tallied again early in the third quarter to go up 5-2, yet Sunny Hills did not quit. They pulled to within one goal with 1:45 left in the fourth, but got no further shots on goal. An intercepted pass near the Sea Kings goal with 20 seconds left sealed the Lancers' fate, and Corona del Mar held on for a 5-4 "shocker" (according to the Daily Pilot's headline).

"Shocker" overstates it somewhat, but it was indeed the second upset in two playoff meetings between these two schools. Everyone was immediately recalling the memorable 1970 semi-final contest between Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar. The public address announcer that night invoked "revenge" seconds after the end of the game.

Corona del Mar, now 19-3, and Newport Harbor, 22-1, had to wait an unusually long time to finish the season, with the final game not scheduled until one week later, Fri., Dec. 6. When they did swim out to begin their warm-ups in the playing area, they encountered the unique spectacle of a championship celebration already underway. The inaugural 3A championship had been played immediately prior, with University handily beating Laguna Beach for the third time, 8-1. These two teams had finished first and second in the South Coast League, so this one south Orange County league had dominated the new Water Polo division. University was the only 3A school remotely competitive with 4A. The Trojans, in just their fourth year playing Water Polo, probably could have made it into the quarter-finals of the 4A tournament. Their only two losses had come at the hands of 4A semi-finalists, 10-6 to Sunny Hills and 8-5 to Downey. But Laguna Beach had not played a single 4A tournament qualifier and may not have been able to beat any of them. University took a promotion to 4A the following year, and promptly lost in the Sweet 16 themselves.

The fact that four south Orange County high school teams were traveling to Monterey Park to play each other did not escape notice or comment. University's drive was 38.6 miles to East L.A., Corona del Mar 38.7 miles, Newport Harbor 39.6 miles and Laguna Beach had the furthest to go at 46.4 miles. All in Friday night traffic, and all less than nine months after the brutal energy crisis that lasted from October 1973 to March 1974 following the Yom Kippur War. If the games had been played at Belmont Plaza, for instance, Corona del Mar would have had to only drive 22.5 miles, and Newport Harbor 17.9 miles; in other words, about half the distance.

Now, just two and a half years earlier, the Newport-Mesa School District had opened a beautiful 50-meter pool on the Newport Harbor campus. Part of the rationale for building it was to host major aquatic sporting events – such as national and international Water Polo tournaments.

According to the Daily Pilot's Glenn White, who wrote an 18 paragraph column on this matter on Thurs., Dec. 5: "The opportunity to stage one of these events was presented to the folks of the Harbor Area by CIF commissioner Ken Fagans." White wrote that Fagans said the schools "could play their 4A, 3A title showdowns at Newport, if all parties were agreeable." The columnist went on: "Fagans (said) the games could be played whatever day, whatever hour would be agreeable. That way the Newport-CDM clash could be scheduled away from Newport's CIF football playoff game." (Newport Harbor's football team had advanced to the quarter-finals and they were scheduled to play West High School of Torrance at 8 p.m. Friday at Veterans Stadium on the campus of Long Beach City College. That was one hour earlier than the scheduled 9 p.m. start of the Newport Harbor-Corona del Mar Water Polo tilt 22.5 miles away at East L.A.)

This proposed move would have significantly reduced the drive time for all participating schools – down to zero in the case of Newport Harbor. It was this point that did not escape the notice of Corona del Mar administrators. According to White's column, "CDM administrators balked, claiming that Newport would have unfair advantage of playing in its home pool."

In response, White quoted Newport-Mesa District Associate Superintendent Dr. Norman Loats as saying, "I can't see where there is any home pool advantage. I'm personally dissatisfied not to have the finals here. That's why we built the pool – to hold events such as this." White, who passionately argued the game should be played in the Harbor Area, himself interjected, "Surely CDM would have as many fans at the game as Newport, so vocal advantage would be nil."

It was true that the pool at Newport Harbor was a district pool, and Corona del Mar was part of the district. The Sea Kings had also used the pool for regular, long-course swimming workouts during summer and occasionally for fall morning workouts if their own campus pool was broken; not to mention playing many games there. Still, there was clearly something to be said "for home pool advantage." If the games had been moved, for instance, they certainly would have had to play them at the odd time

of Saturday afternoon. Newport Harbor's own demanding workout schedule normally pushed workouts past nightfall and the Sailors definitely had a better idea than anyone of how the stadium lighting affected vision in night play. So, everyone hopped in their cars and drove to the humid confines of East L.A. pool – as, in fact, there was never much doubt they would.

Newport Harbor had beaten Corona del Mar by two goals in the Sea Kings' pool on Sept. 21. Now it was Dec. 6, almost a full 11 weeks later – 76 days to be exact, just like their 1969 showdown. Coach Barnett of Newport Harbor told the Daily Pilot on Wed., Dec. 4, "Corona del Mar is much more polished now." And there was something else on Barnett's mind. Even though the Sailors were favored, the team was comprised of just two seniors in the starting line-up, with four juniors and one sophomore. Everyone off the bench was an underclassman also. In his usual matter-of-fact way, he said: "What has really come to light is that we're an inexperienced ball club." Coach Hooper of Corona del Mar, however, said in the same article, "They scored 12 against Downey and I don't know if we're capable of scoring 12 goals against anyone. Frank Anderson scored five goals and Greg Fults scored three and we'll probably have to contain them somewhat."

Corona del Mar's solution to containing the powerful Newport Harbor offense was a bold defensive strategy. They fouled the Sailors' hole man, and kept letting the fouls add up to 10, which gave a team a 6-on-5 opportunity. They gambled that they could stop man-advantage goals – and they did, Newport Harbor went 0 for 3 that night. The Sailors were also hurt on a backcourt turnover on a fast break attempt that resulted in a Sea Kings goal and a 2-2 game early in the second quarter.

Newport Harbor led, 3-2, at half-time, but Corona del Mar moved ahead 4-3 at the end of three quarters, and extended the lead to 5-3 early in the fourth. The Sailors closed to within 5-4 with 2:30 left, but a final scoring attempt with 21 seconds left went into the chest of the Sea Kings goalie and that was it.

The final score, though not terribly unusual for the time, turned into a milestone in low scoring championship games. In 1994, CIF-SS Water Polo moved from playing six-minute quarters to seven-minute quarters. With 17 percent more playing time, low scores became even more unlikely. It would not be until 2018 that the total of nine goals scored would be equal or lower.

The problems that columnist Glenn White raised over the drive to East L.A., and especially over Newport Harbor's conflict with a football game, turned out to be well founded. Only 1,000 fans showed up for the final match according to the Daily Pilot, a much lower attendance than should have been the case with a heated crosstown rivalry. In terms of "vocal advantage," that clearly went to Corona del Mar, as evidently many of the Newport Harbor student body elected to go to the football game instead. At Veterans Stadium, Newport Harbor's football team was winding up a 24-0 quarter-final loss in front of 5,400 fans at virtually the same moment as its Water Polo counterparts.

Avoiding this sort of conflict with football – which Water Polo can never win – must be among the reasons why Water Polo moved up its final game within a few years to before Thanksgiving Day, and away from Friday night.

The aligning of the stars that brought Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Sunny Hills and Downey together in the Final Four had, of course, produced three one point games. The triumph of the Sea Kings, owing to their suffocating defense, also proved to be historic. Adding in their 4-3 win in the quarter-finals against Lakewood, they are the only school to record three one point victories in the final three games of a championship run.

For Hooper, it was a crowning achievement, and the last of his three championships. The following spring he resigned his coaching duties at Corona del Mar. In the previous section, we looked at the trials of coaching in smaller programs, but coaching on the premier level has its hazards also. As he told the Daily Pilot in 2001, “I loved being an assistant coach (for Ted Newland). You don’t get ulcers and you don’t lose sleep as an assistant.”

And, though humbled in 1974, by getting back to the finals Newport Harbor had put themselves on a record setting track of their own. They would return with a vengeance in 1975.

1975

Comparatively little needs to be said of the 1975 season, other than few years in history has seen a single team so dominate the field. Newport Harbor completed a perfect 24-0 season, the fourth undefeated team in 10 years. In an era of tremendous teams, Newport Harbor put together its own candidate for “Greatest Team Ever” – certainly, it was the greatest team that this most successful of all programs ever produced.

Newport Harbor was held to one-point victories twice during the season, once by University (4-3), now playing 4A, and Sunny Hills (8-7). Other than that, no one came closer than five goals until the final, including a second, end-of-the-regular season match with Sunny Hills (7-2).

Sunny Hills had an outstanding team, finishing 23-3 (regular and post-season), its only losses coming at the hands of the eventual champ. In fact, the Daily Pilot reported on the day of the final, Fri., Dec. 5, “The Lancers coach (Jim Sprague), who calls his 1975 unit the best ever out of Sunny Hills,...says Newport Harbor is the best prep Water Polo team ever.”

The two teams were so far and away better than any other competitor that they both won their semi-final games by five goals or more, the widest margins since 1955, when goals from the field were awarded two points. In games played on Tues., Dec. 2, the Sailors won their contest, 12-7, over San Marcos (of Santa Barbara) in the first instance in which a school north of Los Angeles advanced this far. San Marcos, like Newport

Harbor, had entered the game undefeated – evidently the Fighting Knights didn't travel south very much! Perhaps to acknowledge the breakthrough, though, it was the Sailors that made the three-hour bus drive to a game held at UC Santa Barbara. The Lancers defeated Los Altos, 12-5, after Los Altos had beaten defending champ Corona del Mar in the quarter-finals, 10-8. It was the only instance that either opponent ever reached the semis.

The Daily Pilot's story on the final game stated, "Newport Harbor High's invincible Water Polo team put a perfect end on a perfect season Friday night by thumping Sunny Hills of Fullerton, 8-5....And it left no doubt about its overwhelming superiority against all comers this year."

A three-goal win doesn't seem all that awe-inspiring, but in fact the final game in four of the previous five years had been decided by a single goal. And, the Daily Pilot account continued in a highly unusual vein, perhaps further explaining the victory margin: "The Sailors jumped to a 5-0 lead with 2:31 left in the half, but the one-sided officiating by Don Smith and Walt Puffer (fouls were 18 for Newport, 5 against Sunny Hills at one juncture) kept the Lancers in the game." The first half ended with Newport Harbor only holding a 5-3 lead, but that was as close as the game got.

What made the Sailors so outstanding that year? The Daily Pilot report again provides an excellent clue. The story mentioned no less than nine different players – Frank Anderson and Kevin Robertson (co-Players of the Year), Jeff DeMott, John Dobrott, Greg Fults, Ted McGinley (the future actor), George Newland (son of the legendary coach), Randy Parole (goalie) and Mitch White (brother of the goalie from Newport Harbor's 1970 championship team). Not mentioned was Mitch Grey, another fine athlete who saw extensive playing time. The team had incredible talent, and incredible depth and balance, resulting in a unit few can be compared with, and dominating even when their chief rival might have won easily in most other years.

1976

Newport Harbor's undefeated streak extended well into the next season, winning their first 20 games, making it 44 straight victories in 1975-76, tying the string recorded by Corona del Mar in 1969-70. But, things were quite a bit different this year – Sunny Hills was clearly as good or better than the Sailors. Newport Harbor did beat Sunny Hills in an early season match-up, 9-7; but Sunny Hills returned the favor and ended the Sailors' winning streak, 8-7, in the end-of-the-regular season contest for both, played on Fri., Nov. 19. What certainly was the same as the year before is that it was all about these two schools. They each entered the playoffs – Sunny Hills ranked first, Newport Harbor, second – with only one defeat, to each other. Everyone else was a just a supporting player.

A cut below these two schools – but a cut above all the others – were the other two eventual semi-finalists, Mira Costa and University. Mira Costa's only four losses came via two defeats to both Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills, while University's four

losses were accountable to two losses to Newport Harbor, one to Sunny Hills and one to Mira Costa – the latter being a 6-5 defeat enabling Mira Costa to take the third seed. For Mira Costa, the 1973 runner-up, this year was a signal that they were ready to make another run at a title; for University, the 1974 3A champ, it was validation that they were now a worthy 4A power.

It turned out that top seeded Sunny Hills had the tougher of the two semi-final matches, played Wed., Dec. 8. University only trailed the Lancers by two goals at the end of three quarters, 6-4, but Sunny Hills finally pulled away from the Trojans for an 8-5 win. In the other game, the Sailors had an 8-3 lead by half-time over the Mustangs, and coasted to a 15-7 victory.

And so, on Fri., Dec. 10, exactly three weeks since their last engagement, Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills met in the finals for the fourth time in seven years.

The Sailors were led by Kevin Robertson, a senior who had been starting since he was a freshman. He would go on to be named Player of the Year again, having shared the honor the year before. Sunny Hills answered with Zack Stimson, of whom Coach Sprague said, “Zack is ahead of where Gary Figueroa (a star of the 1973 team) was at this point in his career.” Sprague continued to tell the Daily Pilot, “Our team is one of the best high school squads I’ve seen. It approaches the level of the Newport team last year.”

The championship game was tied 5-5 at half-time, with the Daily Pilot reporting, “It was a see-saw battle from the outset with the score tied six times before Sunny Hills took the lead for good, 7-6, with 3:11 remaining in the third period.” Still 11-10 late in the fourth, “the Lancers cashed in on a penalty throw with 46 seconds to go to up their edge to 12-10,” the final score.

As a former goalie, and a member of the crowd at this game, I remember in particular Sunny Hills took the unusual step of swapping out goalies in the second half. The exchange didn’t seem to make much difference, though with 90 seconds left the Lancers goalie made the type of dramatic-but-easy stop goalies love – batting away a powerful but desperate shot from nearly half-court.

For Sprague, it was his first title as head coach. Ironically, playing that night for Newport Harbor was Mike Vellekamp, the son of Hank, the previous Lancers coach. For Sunny Hills, it was their third title in six years – the high-water mark for Sunny Hills’ dominance. And, this particular championship run included a thumping triumph in the quarter-finals over Corona del Mar, 14-7, avenging their loss in 1974, and making things all the sweeter.

1977

The 1977 season was one of those unique years where a particular school makes a rare appearance in the finals. Usually it is the case that once a team achieves premier status, they tend to get into the finals year after year. And, it was certainly a unique year

by late '70s standards, the only time from 1975-80 when Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills didn't face each other in the final game. Mira Costa made it for the second time in five years – but it turned out also to be the last time they ever appeared. Defending champ Sunny Hills was way down (by their standards), and Newport Harbor had a young team, though they still got to the finals for the fourth year in a row. So, there was the odd circumstance of Mira Costa being the favorite to win the title, with the Lancers and Sailors both underdogs. As the season wore on, the front-runner status seemed to grow more uncomfortable for the Mustangs.

Mira Costa finished the regular season with a 19-1 record. They had defeated Newport Harbor soundly, 11-5, at the Sailors' pool on Sat., Sept. 24, in the finals of the South Coast Tournament – formerly the Anaheim Tournament and still the traditional early season test of strength. Yet, they lost in lackluster fashion to Newport Harbor, 6-4, on Sat., Oct. 22, in a Sailors home game I attended. In spite of splitting their series, Mira Costa got the number one seed for the playoffs because Newport Harbor had finished the regular season, 20-2. The Sailors' only other loss had been to University, who beat Newport Harbor for the first time, after suffering three close-game losses to them in the previous two years. The Trojans beat the Sailors 9-7 on Sat., Oct. 15, at the Stanford Tournament. (Starting in 1975, CIF-SS powerhouses started making annual field trips to this prestigious Northern California tourney.) But, the Sailors evened that out also when University visited their pool on Fri., Nov. 4, beating the Trojans, 11-6.

The 1977 tournament was a 24-team “Big Dance,” the first time since 1970 that stronger teams were awarded first round byes. Mira Costa would face Sunny Hills in the semi-finals, which was somewhat lucky to have gotten that far. Sunny Hills was seeded fifth in the tournament, and upset number four seed University, 9-8, in the quarter-finals. Mira Costa probably wasn't happy with the upset – seeing as how it forced them to play the defending champs, and a still-tough team that they had narrowly beaten, 9-7, late in the season, in their only other engagement. Still, Mira Costa triumphed in the semis, 8-7, to avenge their drubbing by the Lancers in the 1973 title game.

For Newport Harbor, their semi-final opponent held another unique facet of the 1977 season. Opposing them was none other than Long Beach Poly, the winner of 11 pre-tournament-years CIF-SS titles, but unfortunately the last coming in Spring 1929. It would be the only time in the tournament years that the Jackrabbits ever made it to the semis – and it was a short-lived honor. Long Beach Poly had given the Sailors a tough 7-6 match in the morning game of the final day of the South Coast Tournament. But now, on Wed., Nov. 30, Newport Harbor was in complete control, with a comfortable six-goal lead by the end of the third quarter, and cruising to a 15-8 win.

The final game took place in a final circumstance. It was played on Sat., Dec. 3, and it was the last year of the five-year trek to East Los Angeles College. In 1978, the finals would return to Belmont Plaza in Long Beach.

Among the amusing things of the final game was how little confidence the coaching staffs of each seemed to have in their teams' chances. For Newport Harbor, Assistant Coach Ed White told me before the game, "We're going to have to play our best, and they're going to have to be mediocre, to win." Coach Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "We would rather be lucky than good."

For Mira Costa, Coach Joe Bird told the Daily Pilot: "In last year's semi-finals they did it to us. It will definitely be a big factor Saturday night." That could be taken two ways – either they were hungry for revenge, or nervous over bad memories. Perhaps it was the latter. Consider what Bird went on to say, which ranks among the classic observations of coaching teenagers: "'We've been playing very poorly,' he said matter-of-factly. 'In my opinion, if we play like we did Wednesday (in the semis), we won't win Saturday. But then again,' he quickly added, 'if we would have played Wednesday like we did last Saturday (in the quarter-finals), we wouldn't have won either. We must be improving or something.'"

On the morning of game day, the Daily Pilot observed, "This time around Mira Costa finds itself in the favorites role because of experience. All seven starters are seniors and six started a year ago. By contrast, Newport Harbor has only one player in the lineup who started last year, junior James Bergeson. Only three of coach Bill Barnett's starters are seniors."

The three seniors were goalie Chris Forsyth and two "kid brothers" – George Robertson (brother of Kevin, star of the previous two years) and Jeff Young (brother of Jim, a junior on the Sailors' 1971 finalist team). Actually, Bergeson was a kid brother, too – to Garth, a star on Corona del Mar's awesome 1969 team and Player of the Year in 1970. And, oh, what a player – James was about to win his own Player of the Year honors.

It was a tight game throughout, but Mira Costa held the lead after every quarter, 2-1 after the first, 4-3 at half, and seemed poised to pull away at the end of the third, leading 6-4. But then says the Daily Pilot the next day:

"James Bergeson put on a one-man exhibition in the fourth period Saturday night to lead Newport Harbor High to its fifth CIF Water Polo championship. Bergeson scored three goals, had four steals and blocked one shot in the last stanza as the Sailors overcame a 6-4 deficit to upset Mira Costa (Manhattan Beach) High, 7-6, before a packed crowd at East Los Angeles College."

Bergeson's three goals in the fourth added up to four for the night. The 1977 title was among Newport Harbor's more unexpected championships, perhaps right behind the surprising 1970 outcome. But, if the Sailors "stole one" this year, it meant they were beautifully set-up to repeat in 1978, with so many underclassmen having been a part this victory – and especially with Bergeson returning. For, if the Daily Pilot thought he had put on an exhibition on this night, just you wait.

1978

Newport Harbor, in fact, followed its championship year with a monster team. Any time a team goes undefeated, as this year's version of the Sailors did, it is ticketed to the "Greatest Team Ever" conversation. The 1978 team certainly deserves to be there, yet the amazing thing about Newport Harbor is that it only ranks second-greatest at this singular program.

The Sailors entered the final game with a record of 26-0, and a 40 game winning streak stretching back to the previous year. Sunny Hills – back in fine form – came into the finals with three defeats. Two non-league losses were against the Sailors, both 11-6 final scores, with the first played on Tues., Oct. 10 at Sunny Hills, and the second on Fri., Nov. 10 at Newport Harbor. The Lancers' other defeat came at the hands of El Dorado, the eventual 3A champion, in a semi-final match of the South Coast Tournament, played Sat., Sept. 30. El Dorado won that contest, 9-8.

In the playoff semi-finals held on Wed., Nov. 29, Newport Harbor beat Dos Pueblos, 13-7. Dos Pueblos was seeded fifth and had upset fourth seed Los Altos, 11-9, in the quarter-finals. It was one of only two times Dos Pueblos (of Goleta) got to the semis, the other not occurring until 2010. Sunny Hills also faced a rare entrant to the semis – defeating Chaffey, 11-9. It was the only time the Ontario school ever reached the semis – as well as the last time it appears in the playoffs period.

The final game was played Sat., Dec. 2, and is often the case with coaches and players of undefeated teams, Barnett shared some apprehensions with the Daily Pilot: "I think they're setting us up for a sting, a good con job. It's extremely hard to go in against a team you've already beaten twice because it's tough to get up for it."

And, the final game did indeed turn out to be a sensational one. The score was tied 4-4 after the first quarter, Newport Harbor led 8-6 at half-time and 9-8 after three periods. Sunny Hills managed to tie the game, 10-10, when the key moment arrived with 3:29 left to play – a memorable back-hand shot from the hole by James Bergeson. Guarded to the point of being flagrantly fouled, Bergeson seemed to bounce the ball twice off the water then drilled it into the top right corner of the goal, a shot no goalie on earth could defend. It was the most awesome shot I ever saw a high school player make, as the Daily Pilot account supports: "His most important goal, the game winner, was a spectacular, no-look, back-hand shot from about eight yards out." Newport Harbor scored again at the 2:59 mark to seal it. A score by Sunny Hills with 33 seconds left brought the final score to 12-11. In the previous year, Bergeson scored four goals in the finals; on this night he scored six – sufficient for the Sailors' second straight title and his own second straight Player of the Year recognition.

In 1983, Coach Sprague would recall this as the most memorable game in the great rivalry between the two schools because of the fight his team put up against a clearly superior opponent. As he told the Fullerton News-Tribune, "It was a super job on Newport's part and on our part as well. Newport deserved to win, but we deserved to win it also. Our kids did a great job.... We played very well. They were really up for this game, and I'm proud of this team."

As in 1975, Newport Harbor became the fourth team in 10 years to go undefeated. This time, however, it would be quite a while before another team achieved the feat – a full 20 years. They had become the sport's first 27-0 team. From 1975 to 1978, the Sailors had compiled a record of 98-4. Yet, they were only half-way through their run of consecutive championships, and less than half-way through their run of successive appearances in the final game.

1979

For Sunny Hills, 1977 had been a rebuilding year following their latest championship, 1978 signaled they were ready to try for another, and as they entered the 1979 playoffs they seemed well positioned to actually win it.

On the day of the final game, Sat., Dec. 1, the Daily Pilot reported, "Sunny Hills stopped the Sailors early, lost a second game, then rebounded late in the season for another win." So, the Lancers had beaten the Sailors in two of three meetings, including the most recent, earning them the number one seed in the playoffs. The first meeting between the two was on Sat., Oct. 6, at Newport Harbor, with the Lancers winning, 8-6. Their second contest was in the final match of the Nor Cal "Santa Teresa Tournament," played on Sat., Oct. 13, the Sailors winning, 12-8. In the third go-round, Sunny Hills won, 6-5, in a game played again at Newport Harbor, on the last day of the season, Fri., Nov. 9.

Sunny Hills entered the final game of the playoffs with a record of 23-2. The Lancers' other loss had come via an upset in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament, held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 27-29. Sunny Hills got beat by Riverside Poly, 6-5, leading to final-day championship rounds crowded with good 3A teams. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated El Dorado, 12-3, and Riverside Poly edged Mission Viejo, 9-7. The Sailors then won the title match over Riverside Poly, 11-7. Sunny Hills finished out the tourney in fifth place. Newport Harbor was also 23-2 coming into the playoffs final game, seeded second due to the two losses to the Lancers.

In the three matches, Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "The difference seems to be psychological. We played poorly in our first game with Sunny Hills and were pretty mad about it. We were ready the second time. But the third time we played poorly and Sunny Hills was up for the game."

There certainly was good reason for the Sailors to be mad about that first loss – it cost them an epic win streak. They had entered the game with a record of 6-0, following a 14-6 victory over host Long Beach Wilson, played on Thurs., Oct. 4, both teams being unbeaten at the time. Combined with winning the final 14 games of their 1977 season, all 27 games in 1978 and now the first six in 1979, their winning streak had extended to 47 games. This was three more than the Sailors' 44 wins in 1975-76 and Corona del Mar in 1969-70. In fact, it established a new record – though no one at the time was keeping track (see reporting on the 2011 season). Ironically, it had been Sunny Hills that ended both of those previous streaks – and now this longest streak of all.

To get to the finals, Sunny Hills had beaten University, 15-9, the Trojans' second loss to the Lancers in the semis in four years. And, in a preview of things to come in the next decade, Newport Harbor defeated Long Beach Wilson, 10-7, with both semi-final games played on Wed., Nov. 28. For the Bruins, they had finished in the quarter-finals four of the previous five years, but this was their first appearance in the semis since 1955.

In the finals, it was Newport Harbor that was up and mad this time, as the Daily Pilot reported the next day: "(The Sailors) blasted the Lancers out of the Belmont Plaza waters, 13-8, before 1,500 to claim their third straight CIF 4A Water Polo championship." Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "We were mentally prepared. I had more confidence in this team than any I've ever had going into the finals. We were mad, we were aroused." He added – and he said virtually the same thing to reporters with the Orange County Register and Fullerton News-Tribune – "I thought we'd win by three or four goals or lose by one goal. We were emotionally ready." For his part, Coach Sprague could only confess to the News-Tribune, "We just got the hell beat out of us, that's all."

The score was close at half-time, with Newport Harbor up, 7-5; but they then stretched the lead by the end of the decisive third quarter to 11-6, and cruised to the 13-8 final score. The five goal margin was the most lopsided final game in 11 years.

Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "There were three keys. The first was emotion, the second was to get the ball to (the Sailors') Mike Grier at two meters and the third was to stop (the Lancers') Mike Spicer." The final game is always an emotional experience for the participants, but in my research I have never seen it referred to so often. As for Grier, who would earn Player of the Year honors, he scored a total of six goals that night, but Newport Harbor also had a highly balanced attack, with five other players putting in goals – two from Steve Beckett and Diggy Riley, and one each from John Gifford, John Layman and Robert Thomas. This offensive balance contrasted with Sunny Hills, who really only had one weapon – Mike Spicer, a junior, and brother of Don, the 1973 co-Player of the Year. Sunny Hills in 1979 employed a unique "dual-post" offense – with two hole-men and the other four players arrayed on the outside in a semi-circle. Spicer held down one post, and in actuality the point remained to get the ball to him. Drawing the tough assignment to defend Spicer that night was Grier, and Spicer did end up scoring six of Sunny Hills' eight goals. But it was a fine work of containment, particularly in the third quarter, given the Lancers' lack of other options, and especially given how active Grier was also expected to be at the other end of the pool.

This final game was the last high school game of the 1970s, as noted by the P.A. announcer immediately prior to the start. It pitted the two dominant teams of the decade against each other, he continued, Sunny Hills with three titles, Newport Harbor with four going in. Tonight's winner would determine "The Team of the 1970s." It was clearly Newport Harbor, especially in the second half of the decade, with four titles and an overall record of 122-6 from 1975 to 1979.

1980

Well, this is the season that got me started on all this (see the Introduction). A casual observer would have every right to find 1980 rather dull. As an alumnus of Newport Harbor, I thought the year was great, and no doubt the 1980 Sailors enjoyed it as well.

The year was a near-replay of 1979, with Newport Harbor facing Sunny Hills in the finals and winning by a wide margin, and both teams played the same semi-final opponents, both winning again easily. About the only thing different was that Newport Harbor entered as top seed.

When Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills did meet in the finals, it was for the fifth time going back to 1975, nearly equaling the incredible string of El Segundo-Whittier from 1955 to 1960. And it would seem the local media was beginning to find it a little tiresome. Following the semi-finals, played on Fri., Nov. 21, the Daily Pilot reported, "To no one's surprise, it will be Newport Harbor against Sunny Hills in the CIF 4A Water Polo finals." On the day of the final game, played Wed., Nov. 26, the Orange County Register observed, "Dominance. That's what Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills have over the 4A division in Water Polo. Dominance." After the game, the Fullerton News-Tribune asked, "Will Newport Beach (sic) and Sunny Hills High ever stop meeting like this?"

Newport Harbor first encountered Sunny Hills while hosting the South Coast Tournament. In the final match, played Sat., Sept. 27, the Sailors triumphed, 14-11. The two teams returned to the Sailors' pool on Sat., Oct. 4, for a non-league game, Newport Harbor winning a second time, 18-13. The Lancers and Sailors then faced each other a third Saturday in a row, Oct. 11, in the final match of the Santa Theresa Tournament in San Jose. Here, Sunny Hills recorded a seven-goal third quarter to hand the Sailors their only defeat, 16-7. They weren't done. The best game between the two took place once again at Newport Harbor in a second non-league match, played Fri., Nov. 7. It was a tight game throughout, with the score tied at 2-2 after the first quarter and 4-4 at half. Newport Harbor moved ahead, 7-6, after three periods and forged a 9-6 lead early in the fourth. The Lancers rallied, however, to make it 9-9 with less than two minutes left. Finally, reports the Daily Pilot, "Diggy Riley scored his fifth goal with 90 seconds remaining to give the Newport Harbor High water polo team a 10-9 (victory)." The Sailors entered the playoffs with a 20-1 record.

Four regular season meetings – including two scheduled non-league contests – tells you everything you need to know about the superiority of these two programs to everyone else. For six years running their only real competition was each other. The Fullerton News-Tribune on Nov. 26 wrote of the finals, "Each year it's called, 'The Great Rematch.'" Indeed, from 1975 to 1980, Newport Harbor lost a grand total of seven games, five of them coming at the hands of Sunny Hills. For Sunny Hills' part in 1980, their only other reversal was a wild 16-15 loss to Riverside Poly.

The quarter-final games were played on Wed., Nov. 19, and were dull. Long Beach Wilson's 8-5 win over Santa Barbara was the only half-way competitive game.

Otherwise, the quarter-finals were only distinguished by the reappearance of Downey to the quarters for the first time since 1974, but the Vikings lost to University, 14-9.

So, Newport Harbor played Long Beach Wilson in the semis for the second year in a row, but winning by an even wider margin. They led 8-1 at half-time, with the final score being 12-4. Sunny Hills again played University, except they won by an even wider margin. The Lancers led 10-4 at half-time, widening the lead in the second half to the 15-8 final score. It was the third time in five years that Sunny Hills had beaten University in the semis, and the fourth time in that period that they had beaten the Trojans in the playoffs, also winning a quarter-final game in 1977.

At least this dull season was over relatively early. The final game took place on the night before Thanksgiving Day – the first time since 1967 that the game had taken place before the holiday. And, this has continued to be the case to this day.

So, yes, when Newport Harbor faced off against Sunny Hills in the finals, it was for the fifth time that year – no pair of finalists had ever seen each other that often. And like the season itself, the game was over early.

The game went from 2-2 at one point in the second period to a 14-6 Newport Harbor lead at one point in the third, an amazing margin for a final game. Coach Sprague called time-out and I recall the crowd seemed to universally breathe out a “Geez...” at how utterly the Sailors were dominating the game, not to mention the preceding three years. In this game, Sunny Hills adopted a high-risk strategy by moving their star hole man, Mike Spicer, out to a parameter position. But this only succeeded in marginalizing their by-far most productive player (like his brother Don before him, he’d be named Player of the Year). Down by eight goals, they abandoned this desperate gambit and returned Spicer to the hole. The Lancers cut the lead to 14-9 at the end of the third, but could close little ground in the fourth, with the final score at 17-13.

Like last year, Sprague could only make a painful confession afterwards: “We just got blown out of the pool,” he told the Fullerton News-Tribune. Sprague told both the News-Tribune and the Register that they had played terrible defense. In truth, Newport Harbor seemed only concerned with putting points on the board. The 30 goal total between the two teams bested the 24 goal total of 1973, and remains the record for total points in the final.

With the return of the final game to Belmont Plaza in 1978, it became the ritual of the winning team’s players to jump into the pool from the ultra-high-dive platform way above the water’s surface. The practice continued until the mid-1980s, when the adults in the vicinity started to notice it was dangerous – teenagers plunging one on top of another – and put an end to it.

And, tonight, the Sailors fully indulged in the new tradition. Why not? They were the first team in the playoff era to win four titles in a row, and the first to do so since El Segundo won four titles exactly 30 years prior. At this moment, Newport Harbor seemed unstoppable, and they could start to be mentioned not just in the same breath as

El Segundo, but comparisons could be drawn to the seven straight titles of Long Beach Poly and the six straight of Fullerton, won at literally the dawn of the high school game. It was curiosity about how exactly they did compare with powerhouses of the past that led me to study this wonderful game's history. Maybe Coach Barnett would take a promotion to the college ranks? Opponents could only hope.

1981

Actually, Barnett had taken a promotion. Since early 1975, he had been coach of the United States Junior National Team. In 1985 he would be promoted again to coach of the U.S. Olympics team, and the demands on his attention from this assignment probably contributed to some slippage by Newport Harbor in the second half of the decade – that and the fact that the competition just kept getting better. The latter was something Barnett well knew, and he observed in at least one interview as the decade wore on that Newport Harbor's dominance was unlikely to continue.

These two elements blended somewhat in 1981. The previous few years had been a duopoly, but this year the steadily ascending Long Beach Wilson made it a triumvirate. The Bruins were coached by Rick Jones, who had arrived at Long Beach Wilson in 1978. He actually traveled often with Barnett and the U.S. Junior National Team, in his capacity as team manager for USA Water Polo programs. Of their close association and friendship, Jones told the Long Beach Press-Telegram, "It's family. We're very much familiar with each other's philosophy."

The Orange County Register of Wed., Nov. 25, the day of the final game, reported, "Newport, Wilson and Sunny Hills have dominated the 4A competition this season, with their only setbacks against each other." Newport Harbor entered the playoffs the number one seed, with a 21-2 record. Long Beach Wilson was number two, 22-2, following the regular season. The Register story continued, "The Sailors lost to Long Beach Wilson in overtime (10-8) in (the final game of) the South Coast Tournament and (a few weeks later) defeated the Bruins on a goal in the final nine seconds, 6-5, in the Wilson pool." The only other loss for both teams came courtesy of Sunny Hills. The Lancers entered the playoffs with only three losses, one to the Sailors and two to the Bruins.

The seedings were not a true indicator of the favorites – the extremely evenly matched Sailors and Bruins made it a toss-up. And, in fact, in an example of predictable injustice, it was the number one seed Sailors who were designated to have the much tougher semi-final match. This is because Corona del Mar was back in the hunt, and what's more, back in the same league as Newport Harbor. The Sea Kings should have been the fourth seed, but because they finished second in the Sea View league behind the Sailors, the schedulers sought to avoid a meeting of the two league rivals until the final game. Thus, Sunny Hills was made the fourth seed, Corona del Mar the third.

Since winning the title in 1974, the Sea Kings had gone through a series of coaching changes that inevitably crippled the program. After finishing in the quarter-finals in 1975 and 1976, they bottomed out by not qualifying for the playoffs at all in

1977 and 1978. The Sea Kings started to inch back in 1979 by getting to the Sweet 16, but then lost in the first round of the 23-team 1980 tournament. Third-year Coach Jeff Stites, however, had clearly restored order by 1981. Corona del Mar got to the Final Four by beating classic old-foe Downey, 11-9, in the quarter-finals. For the Vikings, it was the last hurrah – the last time they ever got into the Elite Eight. In 1982, they exited in the first round, then disappeared entirely from the tournament after 31 years in a row of qualifying. This record – going back to the tournament’s very beginning – would stand until Long Beach Wilson’s 34-year run from 1974 to 2007. From 1983 to 1991, Downey qualified for the 3A tournament eight out of nine years, then took further demotions in level.

The semi-final games took place on Fri., Nov. 20, with Long Beach Wilson facing off against Corona del Mar at Newport Harbor’s pool. Not incidentally, this was the only one of four playoff games for the Bruins in which they did not play at what was essentially their home pool – Belmont Plaza. After enjoying a bye, they beat both El Dorado, 18-8 (second round), and Edison, 18-6 (quarters), at Belmont before they would return there for the finals. Against the Sea Kings, Long Beach Wilson exhibited a stifling defense to lead 10-0 at half-time. They had done virtually the same thing in their previous game, leading Edison 10-1 after two periods. The Bruins added to their semi-final lead after three, 14-3, then took it easy in the fourth for a final score of 16-6. With the blow-out delivered by a far-superior team, Corona del Mar had little reason to hang their heads. In fact, they had every reason to be encouraged, as Coach Stites observed to the Daily Pilot: “We haven’t been anywhere near this since 1974. Whenever you get into the final four, there are no losers. I’ve got six juniors coming back and now they have a taste of playoff action.”

Meanwhile, Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills were tangling at Cerritos College in what the Daily Pilot called “another polo classic” between the two schools. The Fullerton News-Tribune was less cheery, headlining their report “Familiar Story for Lancers in Water Polo.” In marked contrast to their four previous playoff engagements going back to 1976, this was a tough, low scoring affair. The box score read Sailors up 3-2 after one period, still leading 6-5 at half and tied 6-6 after three. The News-Tribune then delivered the bad news, “Going into the final quarter...Sunny Hills’ players shouted, ‘This is our quarter, this is the season.’ But Newport’s defense had other things in mind, holding the Lancers to two feeble shots, and generally controlling the ball, although managing only a game-winning goal itself by Jim Bennan, his third.” The Daily Pilot added that Sunny Hills had possession of the ball with 20 seconds remaining before a turnover ended their last chance, and sealed the Sailors’ 7-6 win. So, Newport Harbor had now beaten Sunny Hills for four consecutive years, the first and only time in tournament history this has occurred.

This set up the final game, played again the night before Thanksgiving Day. Long Beach Wilson became the first Moore League representative to gain the finals since Lakewood in 1968, and it also marked their first trip to a championship game since Spring 1933, in the pre-tournament age, when they faced off against Fullerton two weeks after the disastrous earthquake. They had a talent-laden team led by Doug

Bolichек, eventual Player of the Year and a member of Coach Barnett's Junior National team. Yet from a goal-production standpoint, at least, Bolichек would have a contained playoff run. Randy Reed led the Bruins' scoring in the second round and quarter-final games, putting in four and five goals, respectively. Jim Peligrino would score six goals in the final. Others making key contributions along the way were Eric Elder, who the Daily Pilot noted had been "a part-time goalie last season," as well as one Antone (Tony) Martinho. The latter was a senior and would eventually return to his alma mater to coach the Bruins to six championships from 1999 to 2005. Newport Harbor, by contrast, had only a single returning starter from the previous year's team, current goal-machine J.R. Salvatore.

The game itself was a heart-stopping, wildly seesaw affair. After gaining a 4-3 advantage at the end of the first quarter, Newport Harbor widened its lead to 7-4 during the second quarter. But in a bad omen for the Sailors, Long Beach Wilson scored a goal with just eight seconds left before half-time, to make the score at the break, 7-5. The Bruins proceeded to add on six more unanswered goals to go up 11-7 with just 4:19 left in the game. The Sailors would go a total of 9:50 of playing minutes from the second quarter to the fourth without a goal, and their dynasty seemed dead in the water. Then, the Sailors rallied furiously, starting with a goal with exactly four minutes to play. Finally, the Sailors closed to 11-10 and earned a penalty throw with 1:07 remaining. The estimated crowd of 2,500 went "into a frenzy," according to the Daily Pilot, when Jim Bennan converted the four-meter shot. Coach Jones called time-out and, to his team's great credit after such a dizzying reversal, came out composed and put things right immediately. Eric Elder scored a close range goal just 11 seconds later, to make it 12-11 Bruins with 56 seconds remaining. The Sailors had two more chances, but both shots "hit wood," with Elder picking up the loose ball in front of the net after the final attempt, and the Bruins had their first championship. In addition to the half-dozen from Peligrino, "whose shots seemed to have eyes" said the Daily Pilot, the well balanced Long Beach Wilson attack included goals by four other players.

At the conclusion of this exhilarating, hard-fought game, and his own run of championships over, Barnett walked out to the middle of the floatation bridge and gave a bright smile and thumbs up to the celebrating Bruins, which included his colleague Coach Jones, now drenched in the pool, along with his Junior National team player Bolichек. It was the first time a school from Los Angeles County had won the championship since 1972, and it would be the last time a county school would make it to the finals at all until Long Beach Wilson returned in 1990. This absence of nine years would be the longest stretch in tournament history for Los Angeles County schools.

The year was also significant because it marked the first case that the current all-time "Big Four" comprised the Final Four. Since 1994, Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Long Beach Wilson and Sunny Hills are the four winningest schools in tournament history, and each would be returning to do considerable playoff damage for the remainder of the decade.

1982

Like the previous year, the playoff seedings were no indicator of the favorite – the top two teams were extremely evenly matched. The final 4A poll, reported by the Wed., Nov. 10, Daily Pilot, listed: 1) Corona del Mar and Newport Harbor (tie), 3) Costa Mesa, 4) Long Beach Wilson, 5) Sunny Hills, 6) El Toro, 7) Hacienda Heights Wilson, 8) El Dorado, 9) University and 10) Downey.

Newport Harbor suffered a 6-5 loss to visiting Santa Clara on Fri., Sept. 24, in the South Coast Tournament, but entered the playoffs the number one seed with a 21-2 record. Corona del Mar was seeded second with a 23-1 record. How their regular season records came to be that way, how they were seeded and, indeed, how the whole tournament was configured, is a story of the extremely tough Sea View league, which comprised five of the top nine ranked teams in 4A.

The eight-team Sea View league featured Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, El Toro, Costa Mesa, University, Estancia, Irvine and Saddleback. In seemingly round-robin fashion, the four top teams beat up on each other, with results as follows:

– Wed., Sept. 22	Newport Harbor	14	El Toro	6
– Wed., Oct. 6	Corona del Mar	18	El Toro	5
– Wed., Oct. 13	El Toro	10	Costa Mesa	6
– Wed., Oct. 20	Corona del Mar	12	Costa Mesa	6
– Wed., Oct. 27	Costa Mesa	10	Newport Harbor	8
– Wed., Nov. 3	Newport Harbor	7	Corona del Mar	6

Costa Mesa and El Toro, thus, finished with 5-2 records. El Toro advanced to the playoffs as the league's third seed by virtue of their victory over the Mustangs, while Costa Mesa, in spite of being the third ranked team in CIF-SS, did not get into the playoffs at all. Of course, Costa Mesa by now had grown used to being "screwed-over." In 1980, ranked fifth in CIF-SS, the Mustangs still ended up having to play second-ranked Sunny Hills in a Sweet 16 game. For Newport Harbor, they came into their at-home Nov. 3 contest with the undefeated Sea Kings desperately needing to win. If they lost, pushing their league record to 5-2, their fate would be determined by a "coin toss" with Costa Mesa and El Toro, and they might be the ones left out of the playoffs. As it happened, the Sailors jumped out to a 4-1 lead after one quarter, and then hung on for the one-goal triumph. With Corona del Mar and Newport Harbor both sporting 6-1 league records, the Sailors got the top seed due to the head-to-head outcome. And, needless to say, number nine ranked University, buried fifth in the standings, didn't make the playoffs either. This single-league pile-up led to one last peculiarity in the playoff schedule. The 1982 tournament was a 25-team "Big Dance," with nine first round games and only seven teams receiving byes. Because Corona del Mar was a second place league finisher, they had to play in the first round, in spite of being

the tournament's number two seed. (Their unfortunate opponent was the venerable Fullerton Indians in their first trip to the playoffs in 10 years. Of course, the Sea Kings won easily, 19-4, the only double-digit margin in the first round.)

With Costa Mesa out, Long Beach Wilson, Sunny Hills and El Toro each moved up a notch in the seedings (third, fourth and fifth, respectively), and the top tournament contenders were set.

The most competitive game of the quarter-finals was the four-five seed match-up between Sunny Hills and El Toro, played Tues., Nov. 16 in the Chargers' brand, spanking new 50 meter pool. The Lancers seemed to approach this year's playoffs as if their hearts weren't really in it. Sunny Hills barely got past Rowland, 12-11, in the Sweet 16, which was the only time their opponent ever rose to that level. Perhaps they just couldn't stomach the idea of losing to Newport Harbor in the semis, which would make it five playoff years in a row (the Sailors had just whooped the visiting Lancers, 12-6, on Fri., Nov. 5, the last day of the season). El Toro, on the other hand, was highly motivated, in their first playoff appearance ever. They had the 50-meter pool, and since the year prior they had the coach. Don Stoll arrived at El Toro in 1981 at age 31 as a math teacher, and he was the model of the new generation of innovative coaches coming up and establishing first-class programs. Having spent three years at Ocean View and five years at Westminster already, Stoll would have a distinguished career at El Toro stretching another 31 years, through the 2011 season. In a feature story in the Orange County Register upon his retirement in December 2011, it was noted, "Stoll built a reputation for training his teams to peak in the postseason.... 'Instead of (climbing) tiny mountains, you have one mountain (or goal),' Stoll said." The Chargers' 1982 playoff opponents were about to start learning, beginning with Sunny Hills. In a game I attended, it was not as close as the score would suggest. El Toro upset the Lancers, 9-8, denying them entry into at least the semi-finals for the first time since 1969.

So now there were three Sea View league teams entering the semi-finals. I actually attended three of El Toro's playoff contests that year, including the Sweet 16 game, when they beat Beverly Hills, 12-5, which was also played at El Toro. I then proceeded to catch them at the game I couldn't miss, in the semis against Newport Harbor, played Thurs., Nov. 18, at Tustin High School. The Sailors had beaten the Chargers handily more than eight weeks earlier, but now Stoll had his team peaking at just the right time. Newport Harbor led after one quarter, 1-0, and at the half, 2-1. El Toro tied the score at the end of three, 3-3, before Newport Harbor finally pulled away for a final score of 7-5. In spite of the loss, it appeared that a new powerhouse had emerged, and in the long-run that turned out to be true. However, the next year the Chargers lost in the Sweet 16, then took a demotion and spent the remainder of the decade in 3A.

The other semi-final match was played at Belmont Plaza in a return engagement from the previous year, with Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson locking horns. Coach Stoll was one example of the new generation of coaches, and Jeff Stites, now in his fourth year leading the Sea Kings, was certainly another. But, he was also a

different type – he was not a full-time educator, but a walk-on. Walk-on coaches were suddenly cropping up everywhere, due to budget constraints on public schools resulting from 1978's Proposition 13. Corona del Mar certainly landed one of the better ones, with Stites currently a member of the U.S. National Team. In the contest, the score was tied at 2-2 after the first period, and then the second period turned out to be decisive, with Corona del Mar gaining a 4-2 lead at half-time. Corona del Mar managed to maintain its two-goal margin after the third, 6-4, and at game's end, 7-5. It was a remarkable turnaround for the Sea Kings, to hand the defending champs a close but convincing defeat, after being crushed in the semis by them the year before. Dave Imbernino, a 6-foot-4-inch senior and eventual Player of the Year, scored four goals for Corona del Mar, and Stites was effusive in his praise for his star player – maybe even a little excessive. Stites told the Daily Pilot, "Imbernino, he's just a god, awesome."

This set up the final game played on Wed., Nov. 24, exactly three weeks after Newport Harbor and Corona del had met in the Sea View league finale. The Sailors and the Sea Kings are the two most successful teams in the history of CIF-SS. What's more, they are "archrivals" (as the Daily Pilot noted) from across town. This contest was the greatest game they ever played against each other. As the greatest game ever played between the two greatest programs, perhaps it was the greatest final game ever played.

Going in, both coaches agreed that it was good thing for Corona del Mar to have lost, and a bad thing for Newport Harbor to have won, that Nov. 3 league match. Call it "Costa Mesa's Revenge!" The Daily Pilot on the day of the game quoted Stites as saying, "Maybe that loss was a blessing in disguise. It took the pressure off and our kids found out we weren't the top flies in the pile anymore." The story continued, "Barnett isn't over-enthused about the situation of requiring back-to-back triumphs over Corona del Mar." It then quoted him directly, "I would say that they have an advantage going into the game. When you have two teams of equal ability, the one that wins the first game is at a disadvantage in the second game between the two. And that's where we are now with Corona del Mar in the finals."

One measure of the game is the extraordinary coverage the Daily Pilot gave it the next day – it was the lead story in the Sports section, 28 paragraphs long, with three large photos, that took up almost the entire front page. I've never seen anything approaching this in all my research. The paper reported the crowd at 2,600 fans. Belmont Plaza is always crowded, hot and noisy on finals night, but as I sat in the stands, I didn't think it was ever more so.

Here's how close and intense the game was – the score was tied at 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, before the ninth tally by the winner. This means, of course, it was tied eight times and there was never a lead of more than one goal. The lead changed hands frequently as well – Newport Harbor had the lead five different times, Corona del Mar three times when the score reached 8-8 late in the fourth quarter. Even the goal distribution was balanced – five players on each team contributed.

With 56 seconds remaining, Imbernino – who was fouled almost immediately whenever he had possession – scored his only goal to make it 8-7 Sea Kings. It was their first lead since 3-2 back in the second quarter. However, the Sailors' David O'Donnell scored with 16 seconds left, his second goal, sending the final game into overtime for the first time since 1971.

The overtime this year, though, was different due to a rule change. Instead of two three-minute periods the game went straight to sudden death, making the opening sprint to the ball seem all-important. I recall one thing not reported in the papers. Before sudden death could get underway, there was a short delay when an unruly fan near the pool's edge got pushed into the water by at least one person who couldn't take it anymore. The fan, already agitated, came out of the water hopping mad, but was prevented from seeking revenge when he was immediately hustled out of the building by a school official there to supervise student behavior. Once the opening sprint did take place, the Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar players reached the ball at exactly the same time. I remember them twirling around in a circle once or twice, each with one hand on the ball, before the first possession went to the Sailors.

It turned out that winning the sprint didn't matter. The Sailors failed to score and the Sea Kings took possession. The Daily Pilot then says, "John Morrow (of Corona del Mar) had a chance to put it away but a sparkling block by Newport Harbor goalie Mike Hinze saved it. The Sea Kings, however, maintained possession." At that point, Corona del Mar tossed the ball into hole-man Imbernino, who was promptly fouled. Imbernino passed the ball to Tom Temple, who at five meters fired in the winning goal, his fourth of the night, 64 seconds into sudden death.

The Corona del Mar coaching staff didn't wait for the traditional push from their victorious players. The Daily Pilot reports, "The goal sent Stites leaping into the water in celebration," with Assistant Coach Jim Turner diving in right behind him. Well, that's what I would have done! "Barnett," says the paper, "put his arms around his standouts, telling each of the great job they did."

"Both teams played the game of the year," Stites told the Pilot. "Two healthy rivals and they brought out the best in both of us." Barnett said, "They (both teams) played a great game, a helluva game. The difference? We made one more defensive mistake than they did."

With the 9-8 triumph, Corona del Mar became the first team since Whittier in 1955 to win the title after being forced to play in an opening round involving byes – the 11th such tournament. It also meant the Sea Kings had won their three most recent championships against Newport Harbor – 1969, 1974 and 1982. In fact, the win this night was the first time the Sea Kings had beaten the Sailors at all since that 1974 final game. It was, indeed, a "classic duel" (Daily Pilot). The two schools would be back at each other again soon, but never quite like this.

1983

After winning four straight titles, Newport Harbor suddenly found itself going in reverse, losing two straight finals, something they wouldn't repeat until 2018-19. One thing they could take away from the previous year, though, was that they had made it to the finals nine years in a row, breaking El Segundo's record streak of eight from 1954 to 1961. They were about to make it 10, but it was no easy road in this wide open year.

The year began with the assumption that it would again be Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar in the finals. Indeed, the two met in the championship game of the South Coast Tournament on Sat., Sept. 24, with the Sea Kings escaping with an 8-7 win. Towards the end of the season, though, it seemed possible neither would make the finals at all. Corona del Mar's star player Jeff Oeding suffered a broken nose, causing him to miss a string of mid-season games. With him out of the line-up, the Sea Kings dropped four contests. Corona del Mar and the Sailors met again on Wed., Nov. 2 at Newport Harbor to decide the Sea View league title, and the Sea Kings managed a second one-point victory, 5-4. This enabled Corona del Mar to enter the playoffs as league champs but, with a 19-4 record, only third seed. Newport Harbor entered as the league's second place representative, with a 20-3 record, and seeded in what for them was way back – fourth. In addition to their two losses to Corona del Mar, Newport Harbor had lost a season-ending contest with Sunny Hills on Sat., Nov. 5, 9-7. Sprague would be dismissive about the win, saying Barnett hadn't played his top people, including Matt Tingler, the eventual co-Player of the Year. All the same, the Sailors entered the playoffs on a two-game losing streak. The Sea View league actually sent four teams to the playoffs this year – El Toro went in as the third place team again, and University (to the great envy no doubt of the 1982 Costa Mesa Mustangs) went in as a fourth-place “At-Large” entry.

What about the top two seeds? Sunny Hills claimed the second seed, led by their own co-Player of the Year, Rob Carver, and entered the playoffs with a 20-2 record. Their first loss was a 12-11 overtime setback to Villa Park on Fri., Sept. 23, in the South Coast Tournament. Then, they lost to Newport Harbor, 10-8, on Sat., Oct. 15, in the finals of the “Acalanes Tournament,” played in Lafayette, California. So, Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills split their two regular season match-ups. And the top seed? It was Foothill, which had only risen once to the quarter-finals, back in 1971. The Knights had, however, been having some recent success on the 3A level, playing there from 1976 to 1982. They had made the finals of that tournament in 1981 and now, in 1983, they were back in 4A as the surprise number one seed. But their record of 22-2 called for it. Their only two losses were to Newport Harbor, one of which was in overtime, 6-5, on the morning of Sat., Sept. 24, in the semi-finals of the South Coast tourney. Later in the season, the Sailors beat the Knights by a wider margin, 15-11, with Matt Tingler scoring six times. (This score comes courtesy of the fraternity of ex-players from this year – Jon Pliner of Foothill, who was asked by Eric Oberg, who was asked by Alan Slutzky, both of Newport Harbor; my grateful thanks, gentlemen!)

Things got interesting early, starting in the quarter-finals on Tues., Nov. 15, with all four games being competitive. Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar had the easier challenges, with the former beating Fountain Valley, 11-7, and the latter taking down Villa Park, 8-5. Not entirely out of the picture was Long Beach Wilson, just one year removed from their championship, and entered as the fifth seed. This meant Newport Harbor and Long Beach Wilson would be meeting up a bit earlier than recent custom. In a game played at Newport Harbor, the Sailors beat the Bruins with a tough but convincing 10-8 final score.

The remaining quarter-final game was more interesting still. At the time when playoff seeds were announced, the Orange County Register reported, "Unlike some coaches who feel jinxed when seeded first, Foothill coach Dave Simcox couldn't be happier. 'We're excited about going in as No. 1,' Simcox said. 'We may not win the title, but being the top seed is something they can never take away from us. There will be a lot of upsets. Out of the 16 teams in the playoffs, 13 have the ability to bump anyone off.'" Certainly, Newport Harbor must have been on Simcox's mind; but really, that many teams capable of unseating the top seed? It turns out the answer was yes, and Simcox's observations were all horribly ironic as well as prophetic. According to the Daily Pilot, "University's Matt Torchiana's goal with 2:45 remaining, the lone tally of the fourth quarter, was the game winner." The Trojans had dealt Foothill a stunning 8-7 defeat, proving undeniably that moving up a level in competition is difficult, indeed. It was the first time in tournament history that a number one seed exited prior to the semi-finals, and for the second year in a row the Sea View league placed three teams in the Final Four.

The semi-final games, played on a cold, dreary afternoon, Thurs., Nov. 17, were both terrific, heated contests. Newport Harbor faced University at Heritage Park in Irvine (renamed William Woollett Jr. Aquatics Center in 2004). The Sailors had won at home, 12-7, against their league rival on Wed., Sept. 21. But exactly as was the case last year when Newport Harbor faced El Toro, they found their opponent much tougher in the rematch more than eight weeks later. The Daily Pilot's story summed it up nicely: "The Sailors advanced with a tense 6-5 verdict over University.... Alan Slutzky notched the game-winner for the Tars with 1:32 remaining to unlock a 5-5 tie.... The Sailors had to survive a manpower disadvantage in the final 1:15 before wrapping up the victory. University also had a two-man edge for the final 15 seconds but could not take advantage. The match was close throughout and was deadlocked at the end of each of the first three periods. A key goal came from Matt Tingler with one second remaining in the first half, which brought Newport into a 2-2 tie at half-time. 'That goal really hurt us,' admitted University coach Chuck Morris, whose team subsequently scored first in the second half. 'We would have had a two-goal lead in the third quarter and things might have turned out differently.'" Indeed, with four losses in the semi-finals in the last eight years, and never advancing, University was becoming the hard-luck story of the era.

At the same time less than 12 miles away, Corona del Mar was taking on Sunny Hills at Newport Harbor. Sunny Hills had visited the Sea Kings on Tues., Oct. 11, when

they were without the injured Jeff Oeding, and escaped with a win, 8-7 in overtime. This semi-final game was a classic renewal of their great rivalry and, while not an upset, it might be remembered as the most controversial. First of all, though, the Sea Kings had a new coach – John Vargas, who was yet another fine example of the new generation of coaches, in addition to being yet another walk-on. And incredibly, he would remain a walk-on for Corona del Mar for 19 years, through the 2001 season, when he accepted one of the most prestigious head coaching jobs of all – Stanford University. More prestigious, perhaps, than coaching the U.S. Olympics team, which he did at the 2000 Olympiad. When Jeff Stites left Corona del Mar – just to prove last year was “nothing personal” – he joined Barnett over at Newport Harbor as assistant coach! Newport Harbor’s 1984 yearbook has a fun picture of him laughing heartily in the pool with several players.

Like the magnificent Newport Harbor-Corona del Mar final game the previous year, neither the Lancers nor the Sea Kings held a lead of more than one goal. The score was tied seven times at 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. The Orange County Register summed up the key moments this way: “Sunny Hills’ Barry Atnip took advantage of an extra-man situation and drove home the winning goal with 1:07 remaining in the fourth period, breaking a 7-7 tie....The game ended in a controversy, with both coaches filing protests. After Sunny Hills’ final goal, the Sea Kings’ Stuart Lillas was wide on a shot and Sunny Hills had the ball with 41 seconds on the game clock. The Lancers put the ball in play with 35 seconds showing on the shot clock. But shortly thereafter, the shot-clock timer, apparently affiliated with Corona del Mar, turned off his clock. Sunny Hills, seeing the shot clock dark, spread the offense across the entire pool and played keep-away until the game clock ran down to two seconds, when a Lancer player fired a long shot, thinking the game was over. But the Corona del Mar players saw the error and told the officials, who stopped the game and met with both teams’ coaches and the timekeepers for nearly 20 minutes. During the sometimes heated debate, Lancer coach Jim Sprague said, ‘It was their (the Sea Kings’) desk’s mistake. I want to know why we have to suffer for it.’ It turned out they didn’t. The officials restored the clock to six seconds, giving the Sea Kings goalie the ball inside two meters. They couldn’t manage a scoring threat. It was a wild ending to a well-played game,” final score, 8-7.

So, it was Newport Harbor vs. Sunny Hills on Wed., Nov. 23 at Belmont Plaza – together in the finals for the eighth time in 14 years, but which also proved to be the last time. As Sprague observed to the Register, “I’ve been battling Bill for a long time and I guess I enjoy it. Bill is so good, the best.” Barnett had done a fine job as usual, with the Daily Pilot reporting, “None of their starters were starting for the Sailors a year ago.” It was the Sailors’ 10th trip in a row to the finals, and when the P.A. announcer said it just before the start of the game, the crowd let out a gasping groan of amazement. The seedings meant nothing, really. With the Sailors dominating the rivalry in recent years, the outcome seemed inevitable. There was also a demonstrable tapering off of excitement to this year’s game – the Daily Pilot estimated the crowd at only 1,400, barely half of the previous year. And, indeed, though the game was close, Newport Harbor did seem in control from early in the second quarter on, taking an 8-6 lead into half-time.

The Sailors' Trevor Benedict scored his fourth goal of the night with 1:57 remaining in the game to have Newport Harbor go up 13-11. Sunny Hills got to within 13-12 with 51 second left, but the Tars maintained possession until only 15 seconds were left. Sunny Hills could not get a shot on goal in the time remaining, and Newport Harbor had its ninth championship, surpassing El Segundo's eight tournament titles. "It was a 100 percent effort," Barnett told the Daily Pilot. "It was just a group which did what it had to do." Indeed, a total of seven players contributed goals, including three from Tingler. What's more, this total team effort enabled Newport Harbor to survive a rare coaching mistake by Barnett. With the Sailors up by three goals in the third period, Tingler fouled out of the game with only 1:46 spent in the second half. "That was my stupid mistake," said Barnett. "I should have pulled him out after his second (major) foul, but I didn't. Thank God I didn't live to regret it." In fact, Tingler's absence didn't even seem to matter much.

It had been quite a playoff season for everyone. It was a rare instance where a fourth seed won the title, and the second year in a row that the Sea View league's second place team had won it all. It was also the Sailors' narrowest route to the crown – winning their final three games by a total of only four goals. Yet, in the end, few were surprised.

1984

In the prior year, the early prognosticating had Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar in the finals. It didn't work out but that didn't stop the same learned ones from making the same predication for 1984. They were right this time, but if this year's story is one of the two schools pulling away from everyone else, it is also a story of the Sailors pulling away from the Sea Kings.

A quick detour here. As the reader has by now gathered from this history, I am covering a lot of things going on in the culture, in addition to what's going on in high school pools. I'd like to mourn at this time the death of the afternoon community newspaper, which has played such a key role in my research. By at least 1981, the Fullerton News-Tribune was only appearing two or three days a week. And, in 1984, the Daily Pilot was reduced to one reel of microfilm per month when previously it was two. So, it was hardly the Internet ("The Year of the Internet" wasn't until 1995) that led to the demise of these important local daily records. I'm happy to report, however, that for 20 surprising more years to come, the Daily Pilot's coverage of Water Polo was truly excellent.

Back to Water Polo. Newport Harbor entered the playoffs the number one seed with a 21-1 record. Their only loss of the year was a convincing one – 11-7 to Miramonte of Orinda, in the final match of the Nor Cal tourney played at Stanford University, Sat., Oct. 27. Perhaps it's a good thing Miramonte wasn't in CIF-SS because in the morning they beat Corona del Mar in the semi-finals in overtime, 7-6. So, this school located about nine miles east of Oakland beat the top two teams in CIF-SS on the same day. Not bad.

Corona del Mar was second seed, entering the playoffs at 20-4. Long Beach Wilson had also beaten the Sea Kings, 5-4, on Thurs., Sept. 27, at Belmont Plaza. Their two remaining losses had come against Newport Harbor. The first occurred in the finals of the South Coast Tournament, on Sat., Sept. 22. It was a game so close it ended on a Hail Mary-type play. Reports the Daily Pilot: "Newport Harbor High's Rich Stanley fired in a shot from the middle of the pool as the buzzer sounded to give the Sailors a 9-8 victory....Stanley's freak goal came after Corona del Mar goalkeeper David Vistaunet had made a save with three seconds remaining....Vistaunet swam the ball to the two meter area and was fouled by Newport Harbor. He then attempted to loft a pass to one of his teammates at the other end of the pool. But Stanley intercepted and took the (game winning) shot." Corona del Mar squared off again with Newport Harbor at the Sailors' pool on Wed., Oct. 31. This time, Newport Harbor won fairly handily, leading 4-3 at half-time, and putting it away in the second half to triumph 8-4 and clinch the Sea View league championship.

Rounding out the top contenders were Foothill, third, and Long Beach Wilson, fourth. Like the previous year, the quarter-finals were uniformly interesting, in games played on Tues., Nov. 13. Newport Harbor easily beat their opponent, 15-7, but it's worth observing who it was. The Sailors beat their ancient rival, the Fullerton Indians, in their first quarter-final game since 1971, when Newport Harbor had defeated them as well. Long Beach Wilson scrapped by Villa Park, 7-6, in the Spartans' second straight quarter-final appearance. Like Foothill, Villa Park had spent 1976 to 1982 enjoying success in 3A, and actually beating Foothill in the 1981 finals to win that tournament. They were now clearly competitive at the highest level. As to Foothill, they did much better this time, sending Sunny Hills home early, 5-3. Lastly, Corona del Mar was given a very tough game by Marina. The Sea Kings won 7-6 on a goal by Jeff Oeding (their star again this year) with 42 seconds left. Marina had tied the score with 2:01 remaining and the two teams battled even for a tense 1:19 before Oeding's game winner.

In the semi-finals, played Thurs., Nov. 15, Newport Harbor and Long Beach Wilson faced each other for the fifth time in six years, this time at Tustin High School. The game pitted the Sailors' Andrew Lawson against the Bruins' Robert Lynn, the two co-Players of the Year. Newport Harbor jumped out to a 6-1 lead in the second quarter, then proceeded to squander it, having only a 7-6 lead with 5:30 left in the fourth quarter. It stayed that way for a long time, until Rich Stanley of the Sailors scored at the 2:00 mark. Newport Harbor scored again with no time left to make it a misleading 9-6 final. Barnett's advice to his troops as they saw their lead evaporate? "I just told them to shoot the ball in the cage and relax," he told the Daily Pilot. In the other semi-final match, Corona del Mar battled Foothill, played like last year at the same time some 12 miles away at Newport Harbor. The Sea Kings trailed 3-2 until Oeding scored with 10 seconds left in the third period. They went ahead to stay on a goal by Gary Tichy 45 seconds into the fourth period. Corona del Mar added two more goals to go up 6-3, then hung on for a 6-5 victory.

In the Daily Pilot's story on the semi-finals, without knowing yet the outcome of the other game, Barnett was quoted as saying, "I'd rather play Foothill. I don't like playing

Corona del Mar three times in one year.” Especially in the finals, where Corona del Mar had won each time in its previous five trips, three of them against Newport Harbor. But it wasn’t over-familiarity or history that led the Daily Pilot to headline its finals preview story “Sailors are Loose, but Barnett Tight.” It had everything to do with the maddening art of coaching teenagers. Newport Harbor had an all-senior line-up, “which is good and bad (Barnett says seniors are too cocky).” The biggest issue, now quoting Barnett directly: “But suppressing their egos – that’s a problem.... Complacency. That’s my biggest worry.” Barnett went on to cite their loss to Miramonte as a case where the Sailors lost their composure against an unexpectedly tough opponent. Adding to Barnett’s angst, if he bothered to read it, is what the story then had to say about second-year opposing coach John Vargas: “On paper, the Sailors appear to have the edge in coaching, too.” Vargas might have modestly agreed, but Barnett would have winced. So, it boiled down to this: Barnett worried about complacency, and Vargas hoping that was the case – “Who knows? They might be overconfident.”

Once again, the game took place the night before Thanksgiving Day, on Wed., Nov. 21. With the crosstown rivals involved, it was again a packed house, yet the mood was more subdued than when they last met in 1982. As with 1983, the P.A. announcer made it known that Newport Harbor was in the finals for the 11th year in a row. The crowd again let out a disbelieving, exhaling whistle. I can’t find the source where I read it, but I have a very clear memory of Barnett saying during this run, “We consider it a bad year if we don’t make the finals.” What a standard! Yet it was met year after year, to produce a record that will probably never be broken.

The score was 7-7 at half-time. The Daily Pilot – congratulations to Roger Carlson, the journalist – offered an incisive analysis: “Thus they proved both theories – that they could be had because of complacency or cockiness, but in the end they’d be on top because of superior talent. Simply put, the Sailors had too many weapons.”

Newport Harbor’s superiority did take over in the second half. The Sailors began by taking advantage of the Sea Kings’ Oeding sitting on the bench early in the third period due to foul trouble. Oeding would lead Corona del Mar’s scoring with four goals. Newport Harbor jumped out to a quick 9-7 lead, maintaining that edge into the start of the fourth period. For the Sailors, the attack was led Trevor Benedict, pumping in a game-leading five goals to go with the four he scored in last year’s final. Newport Harbor poured it on in the fourth to finish with a 14-9 victory – their third of the year against Corona del Mar, with the margins growing greater each time.

The Sailors had won their seventh championship in the string of 11 consecutive appearances, compiling a 265-19 record during that time for a .933 winning percentage. With Newport Harbor graduating an all-senior starting line-up, maybe, just maybe, things would be different in 1985. But for tonight, the Sailors had got the monkey off their back after three consecutive final game losses to Corona del Mar going back to 1969, and handing them their first defeat in the finals extending to 1965. The Daily Pilot the next day very appropriately included a photo of Barnett being tossed into the pool by his players – it could not have been a better way to win his 10th (!) championship.

1985

Things really were quite different than they had been in the year before. For starters, Newport Harbor would finish their season with a 17-8 record, their fewest number of wins since 1973 (they went 16-5), and the most losses since before Barnett took over coaching duties in 1966. The eight losses was nearly half their total for the prior 11 years. Yet, they would only have two more losses all told than the eventual champion.

We have entered an era when teams are playing around 25 games in the regular season, with competition continuing to intensify. Even the best teams are going to accumulate losses. Yet, again, the 1985 season almost produced – operative word, almost – an undefeated team.

Sunny Hills headed into the playoffs the number one seed, a record of 26-0, and a chance to finish with an incredible 30-0 season. Just before their semi-final match, Barnett had said of the Lancers, “They really have an awesome team.” Above all, they had “Probably the best goalie in high school,” Corona del Mar’s Coach Vargas said a few weeks earlier. Both quotes are from Register stories, and the paper further reported, “(Mike) Day, according to his coach, Jim Sprague, also gives teammates problems. Day is so sharp in goal the Lancers in practice try to shoot around him – something they don’t have to do against another goalie, he said. ‘I wish our shooters didn’t have to go up against him,’ Sprague said. ‘They try to score on him in practice and then in a game they’re trying to make the same kind of shots against goalies they can beat normally.’” Day would eventually be named Player of the Year, the first time a goalie was so honored.

Long Beach Wilson had the next fewest losses on the season – four, but this particular year a record of 20-4 was good enough for second seed. Newport Harbor had seven losses coming in, the most crucial of which was an 8-7 Sea View League finale set-back to host Corona del Mar on Wed., Oct. 30. The loss left the Sailors and Sea Kings both with 5-1 records, but Newport had to go in as second-place finisher. That loss really hurt the Sailors – it meant fourth seed and a very unappealing date with Sunny Hills in the semis. The Sea Kings entered as third seed with a 17-6 record. What really counts is knowing their losses, so here they are:

– Fri.,	Sept. 27	Sunny Hills	8	Corona del Mar.....	4
– Wed.,	Oct. 2	University	6	Corona del Mar.....	5
– Fri.,	Oct. 4	El Toro	8	Corona del Mar.....	7
– Sat.,	Oct. 5	Long Beach Wilson	3	Corona del Mar	2
– Sat.,	Oct. 19	Sunny Hills	11	Corona del Mar.....	6
– Sat.,	Oct. 26	Miramonte	6	Corona del Mar.....	2

That first loss to Sunny Hills occurred in the quarter-finals of the South Coast tourney. The Lancers went up 4-0 at half-time, and cruised to the 8-4 final. This loss led to the Sea Kings and Newport Harbor facing off the next day in the tournament’s fifth-place game. Corona del Mar won that contest, 5-4, so they wound up beating the

Sailors twice in 1985. The Sea Kings' road loss to University was their only league defeat; Sea View was tough as always and University would enter as the league's third representative, and ranked eighth overall in the final season poll. You'll then notice that Corona del Mar lost three of their six games in the space of just four days. According to the Daily Pilot, "Vargas had two starters out" when they lost to Long Beach Wilson in the "Sunny Hills Invitational" (ironically played at Newport Harbor). Perhaps Vargas was missing these two players the day prior, when they lost to El Toro (which had a very good 3A team – they would go to the finals in that tournament). Corona del Mar's second loss to Sunny Hills was a non-league test of strength (again at Newport Harbor), and all the strength belonged to Sunny Hills. The Lancers went up 5-0 after the first quarter, and had an 11-3 lead at the end of three quarters, before turning it over to substitutes to finish out the 11-6 win. Their final loss came to Miramonte in the semi-finals of the Nor Cal tourney. Losing to them, however, did set up a third place match with Long Beach Wilson, which the Sea Kings won, 10-3, allowing them to split their season series with the Bruins.

So, perhaps Corona del Mar's six losses really weren't so many. There were just the two to the "awesome" Sunny Hills; those three-losses-in-four-days, all to good teams, and with key players missing in at least one and maybe all of them; and finally losing to a good Nor Cal team, as So Cal teams frequently did after several days up north. In any case, the tournament got underway for everybody a little early this year, with first round, Sweet Sixteen, games played Fri., Nov. 8, and quarter-finals on Tues., Nov. 12. There were no one-point games played in either of these two rounds and only two two-point games, both in the Sweet Sixteen. But this dull start was more than made up for when the "Big Four" met up in the Final Four for the second time in five years.

Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson met in one semi-final, played Fri., Nov. 15, at Newport Harbor, site of their first meeting nearly six weeks earlier. The Sea Kings put themselves at a disadvantage by continual fouling, giving the Bruins an 11 to 6 margin in extra-man, 6-on-5 situations. The Bruins would ultimately score all seven of their goals in that fashion. Corona del Mar had led 2-1 at half-time, but had a terrible third quarter and trailed 5-2 with 4:55 left in the fourth. Suddenly they rallied to make it 5-5 at the 1:47 mark. Long Beach Wilson went back ahead 6-5 with 1:15 remaining, "but Corona del Mar forced it into overtime when Jason Likins popped it in with seven seconds left," reported the Daily Pilot. Now, the rules on overtime had changed once again, so this afternoon's contest would be settled by a single three-minute period, followed by sudden death if needed. Once again, the Bruins went ahead, 7-6, with 1:22 left in the overtime period. At this point, Corona del Mar got to take advantage of the comparatively few 6-on-5 situations that came their way. The Sea Kings scored with 17 seconds remaining on a goal by Jeff Harvey and an assist by Mike Klarin, sending the game into sudden death. And, with Long Beach Wilson again a man down, the Sea Kings won it with 2:01 spent in sudden death, on a goal by Mike Story, with an assist once again by Mike Klarin. Quite a game!

The other semi-final game took place at the same time at Belmont Plaza between Sunny Hills and Newport Harbor. The Lancers had beaten the Sailors twice previously, 8-4 and 4-2, but Sunny Hills had reason to be uneasy – the way Newport Harbor had

been dominating their rivalry in recent years, the task of beating a good team three times in a row and the general wizardry being attributed to Barnett, now the National team coach. Indeed, the Daily Pilot reported, “the Lancers must have been a tad edgy when the Sailors roared back from a 3-1 deficit to take a 7-4 lead with 3:40 left in the third period. . . . But the Lancers took advantage of several Sailor ejections (due to fouling) to get right back in the game.” Sunny Hills tied the game at 7-7 when Javier Santiago “scored from in front” with 5:01 left in the fourth quarter. The Sailors retook the lead 8-7 with 3:50 remaining. However, Sunny Hills soon tied it, then went ahead 9-8 on a goal with 2:45 left. Bob Slope, who led all scorers with five goals, put it away for the Lancers at the 1:39 mark, for the final score of 10-8. “I would have had higher hopes if we had that big lead late in the game,” Barnett told the Daily Pilot. “But with that team, you know they can make something happen and they did. We just started throwing the ball away and didn’t play well on offense.”

Again, it was quite a game, eliminating the Sailors prior to the final game for the first time since 1973. In fact, such was the feeling of accomplishment – and perhaps relief – the Lancers bench erupted at the end of the game in an almost final game-like celebration. Understandable, but maybe a little excessive – they still had one more win to get.

Being an undefeated team is a unique burden that both sides were aware of prior to the final game. Sprague sought to keep his team focused on the unparalleled achievement of a 30-0 record, but told the Register on the day of the game, “We’ve won 29 straight games this year, and if we lose the next one our season is considered a failure. If Corona del Mar wins, its season is a great success.” Vargas heartily agreed, as the Daily Pilot reported, “Vargas sees the contest as an opportunity for the Sea Kings, a pressure-cooker for the Sunny Hills. ‘We’re definitely the underdog with nothing to lose,’ said Vargas. ‘I don’t see any pressure on us. They have it all with a 29-0 record. I think we know what they do offensively. For us, we’re going to try some new things and hopefully be successful.’” Added to this, of course, Sunny Hills had to once again beat a good team three times in a row. And, as in 1974, the Sea Kings had a full week to prepare “some new things” for the game, not played until Nov. 22, the Friday before Thanksgiving Day.

Simply put, everything that proceeded the game didn’t matter. Corona del Mar outplayed Sunny Hills and seemed to have the upper-hand the entire night, in front of “2,487 poolside fans” by the Daily Pilot’s unusually specific count. The game proceeded with Corona del Mar up 2-1 at the end of the first period; tied up 2-2 at half-time; Sea Kings up again 5-4 after three; and tied up again 5-5 at the end of regulation. This tough, tough defensive game, with many displays of fine goalkeeping on both sides, was the lowest score after four quarters since 1974. Comparatively speaking, then, the two teams went on a scoring binge in the three minute overtime period. Jason Likins put the Sea Kings up for all of 11 seconds before Bill Slope answered for Sunny Hills, knotting it again at 6-6. “Then,” the Daily Pilot wrote, “Corona goalie James Wagner (*a sophomore*) came up with his biggest save of the night when he denied Slope from point blank range with just 15 seconds left to preserve the tie.” The Sea Kings called

time out with 13 seconds left to set up a final attempt, with Likins lofting a 15-foot lob shot into the cage with just two seconds left “to send the Corona del Mar faithful into a frenzy.” The 7-6 triumph came via balanced contributions from three Sea Kings – Jeff Harvey, three; Mike Story, two; and Likins, two goals.

They say, “only the last four games count,” and never did a team seem to more fully adopt that mindset than the 1985 Sea Kings. No team had ever won the championship with six losses but, as earlier discussed, maybe that wasn’t such a big deal, and it certainly wasn’t a big deal given the weird dynamic that is the rivalry between these two schools. As in 1969 and 1974, a “stunning” upset had occurred, and Sunny Hills became the first team in exactly 20 years to enter the finals undefeated and lose – ironically, it was Corona del Mar who had disposed of El Segundo in the same manner. But this latest upset only meant that Sunny Hills owed one to Corona del Mar.

1986

The roles of Corona del Mar and Sunny Hills from the prior year could not possibly under any work of fiction been more perfectly reversed in 1986.

Once again, we see expanded regular season schedules with even good teams racking up losses. It seems the philosophy of “only the last four games count” had achieved widespread adoption, but the year almost produced – again, almost is the operative word – an undefeated team. Corona del Mar marched into the playoffs the number one seed, with a perfect 26-0 record. Their season included four victories over number two seed Newport Harbor, entering with a 20-5 record. Their two most recent encounters had occurred just five days apart – in the Nor Cal final match, 5-4, on Sat., Oct. 25, and the Sea View League’s final week, 12-7, on Wed., Oct. 29 in the Sailors’ pool. Corona del Mar had also beaten Newport Harbor in the finals of both the Sunny Hills Invitational, 9-8, on Sat., Oct. 11, and the South Coast Tournament, 8-6, on Sat., Sept. 27. This led all observers to assume the two would meet in a fifth and final, final. Sunny Hills was 19-7 going into the playoffs and seeded third. Somewhat surprisingly for top contenders, the Lancers and Sea Kings only played each other once during the regular season. Corona del Mar beat Sunny Hills (the home team) on Sat., Oct. 4 in a tight game – the Sea Kings led 4-3 at half-time, finally winning, 9-6. University was the fourth seed at 18-6. The Trojans also gave the Sea Kings a good battle in a league match held at University, Wed., Oct. 15. Corona del Mar had a 6-4 lead at half-time before recording a 13-10 victory – the only case all year that a Sea Kings opponent scored in double figures. University was again the third place representative of the sport’s toughest circuit, and 1986 would make the third time in five years that three of the semi-finalists were from the Sea View League.

Again, in yet another mirror image of the previous year, maybe Sunny Hills’ seven losses really didn’t mean anything by the time the playoffs started. That’s because prior to Fri., Oct. 24, Sunny Hills had been without two of their star players. As the Los Angeles Times reported following the final game, played Fri., Nov. 21, “(Jose) Santiago and his brother, Javier, have played just the last four weeks with Sunny Hills.

Natives of Puerto Rico, they had played for the Lancers last season. Their family decided they should return home this year. And they did, but apparently put up such a fuse that their parents let them return. As soon as their eligibility was cleared with the Southern Section, they were back in the swim for Sunny Hills.” The Fullerton News-Tribune used the term “badgering” to describe the Santiago brothers’ intense lobbying of their parents “to return to the Lancers pool.” As a result, Sunny Hills was now a team transformed, with two members of the Puerto Rican Junior National Team now back in their own line-up.

The four top seeds made it into the semis in good order, with University surviving a 9-8 challenge from Villa Park in the quarter-finals, played Tues., Nov. 11. In the University-Corona del Mar semi-final, played Fri., Nov. 14, the Sea Kings had only a 5-3 lead at half-time, but took control quickly in the third period and dominated the second half, winning 12-4. For University, it was the fifth time in 11 years they had lost in the semis. And, it would be their last appearance at this elevated level, never being able to advance beyond it. In the other semi, Sunny Hills upset Newport Harbor, actually winning rather handily. The Lancers had an 8-4 lead after three quarters, and kept the Sailors at a safe distance to win 10-8. The upset completely upended the year’s storyline. It was supposed to be another renewal of the “crosstown rivalry” between the Sea Kings and Sailors. Now, a new storyline instantly arose – revenge, revenge, revenge.

Like the year prior there was a full week between the semis and the final match, plenty of time for Sunny Hills to plot and Corona del Mar to stew. The latter just so happened to be going into the finals with a chance to go an unprecedented 30-0. The Sea Kings also just so happened to be riding a 41 game winning streak, their longest since their 44 game streak came to a crashing end to Sunny Hills in the semis of the 1970 playoffs. After the final game, the Fullerton News-Tribune, now a Thursday weekly and which had written about local championship teams going back to Spring 1931, reported “Sprague admitted he couldn’t bear to look at the videotapes of last year’s heartbreaking loss, but did in order to properly prepare for the game....But the coach also acknowledged he put several new wrinkles in for the Sea Kings, which included revenge for a championship nearly won one year ago.” His players got the message. In the same story, goalie Sean McCloskey said, “We had the whole year to think about this game. In fact, we wanted Corona del Mar to go undefeated so we could see justice reversed.” And Bill Slope, a star from last year and eventual Player of the Year, told the Register beforehand, “We have a debt to pay....It’s interesting the way it has worked out because it’s pretty much an identical situation, just turned around. That works towards our favor because last year we had everything to lose. Now we have everything to gain.” And Jose Santiago, considering what he and his brother had done to get there, could speak without exaggeration when he told the News-Tribune, “The team had a mission, and that was to beat Corona del Mar.” The Lancers’ desire for revenge did not take Corona del Mar by surprise, of course. Coach Vargas told the Register, “The players realize what Sunny Hills is thinking.” However, perhaps they didn’t realize the full intensity. The great upsets of 1970 then 1974 then 1985 had happened years apart – involving new kids without prior grudges. But the Sunny Hills players of 1986 had personally experienced the shock of the last upset.

Even the game itself mirrored the prior year – a tough defensive battle. Corona del Mar had gained a 2-0 lead by early in the second quarter, but Jose Santiago scored at the 4:28 mark and then with just 11 seconds left in the half to tie it, 2-2. Corona del Mar's Chris Oeding, younger brother of Jeff (see 1983 and 1984), scored early in the third quarter to give the Sea Kings back the lead, but two goals by Bill Slope gave the Lancers their first lead, 4-3. Oeding tied the game again on a four-meter plenty shot and the third quarter ended, 4-4. Sunny Hills went out ahead again with a goal by Jose Santiago early in the final quarter, but Oeding scored his third goal at the 2:33 mark to tie it once again, 5-5. Finally, Jose Santiago scored his fourth goal, to put Sunny Hills ahead 6-5 with just 43 seconds left. The Sea Kings had two more opportunities – a shot at 31 seconds was batted out of bounds by a Sunny Hills defender, then a final shot at 25 seconds left was blocked by the goalie. That was it – “Year of Waiting Pays Off for Lancers” ran the News-Tribune headline.

A quick aside – the Daily Pilot made a peculiar editorial choice in its finals coverage. In spite of 22 years of detailed reports on final games involving Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar, the paper only listed the final score in the “For the Record” section. Instead, it focused on the 2A game, in which long-suffering Costa Mesa claimed the title against San Luis Obispo – the 4A game was acknowledged in one sentence. True, the paper's editorial office actually was in Costa Mesa, and it was the first time ever that a team in their service area other than the Sea Kings or Sailors had gotten to the playoff finals on any level. Another case, perhaps, of too much Friday night football to cover!

Sunny Hills' victory marked their first championship in 10 years, after losing in the finals five times, and the semis and quarters twice each in the nine attempts between titles. A championship team with a record seven losses, but who's counting. Sweet revenge and sweet reward after years of frustration; still, Sprague would only tell the Los Angeles Times, “This was a great game. So was last year's. It's nice to come out on the right end this time.” One can imagine he knew it was Corona del Mar that had come away feeling they owed Sunny Hills one.

1987

Now well into the 1980s, a pattern and hierarchy of competitors was clearly established. In some ways it would grow tiresome for even those doing well. In 1989, just before the quarter-final games were to be played, I happened to spot John Vargas at a car wash near 17th and Irvine in Costa Mesa. I went over and introduced myself and soon mentioned that Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills were again facing each other in the playoffs. He replied, “Yeah, for like the millionth time.” Actually, it would be only 15 times in 21 years – it only seemed like a million times!

For 1987, the “Big Four” of Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Long Beach Wilson and Sunny Hills would battle each other again in the Final Four – the third time in seven years. Even so, there would be some unique and interesting things that would play out eventually this year.

The season began exactly as the previous year ended – with a one point Sunny Hills victory over Corona del Mar in a final game. The Daily Pilot reported, “In a dual between the two top-ranked Water Polo teams in CIF 4A Saturday (Sept. 26), No. 1 Sunny Hills defeated second-rated Corona del Mar, 8-7, in the Championship of the South Coast Tournament at Newport Harbor High. Jose Santiago led the Lancers with four goals” – just as he had done the last time the two schools met, in the playoff finals the previous year. By now, the heated rivalry between Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar was not merely institutional. Both Javier and Jose Santiago of Sunny Hills were in their third year playing Varsity – and Jose was still only a junior. And, in their third year of Varsity over at Corona del Mar were James Wagner, the eventual Player of the Year, and second goalie in three years to be so honored; and Chris Oeding, still only a junior himself. Other players on both sides may also have personally had a hand in upsets going back to 1985. The two schools would eventually play each other four times in the regular season, Sunny Hills winning three of them. It was not as dominating as that sounds – all four games had been decided by one goal. The Lancers suffered only one other loss during the season, and retained their number one ranking upon entering the playoffs with a 24-2 record.

Corona del Mar stayed number two until right up until the final week of the season, when the visiting Sea Kings were defeated 7-6 by Newport Harbor on Wed., Oct. 28, for the Sea View League championship. Corona del Mar had beaten Newport Harbor soundly, 7-4, in their only other meeting (Sat., Oct. 10). The outcome of the league competition – not for the first time – scrambled the assumptions for tournament seedings. Newport Harbor shot up to second seed with a 22-4 record. Sunny Hills had tagged at least one loss on the Sailors, beating them 12-9 on the morning of their victory over Corona del Mar at the South Coast tourney. Corona del Mar sank to fourth seed with a 23-4 mark (so, its only defeats came from the three to Sunny Hills and the upset by Newport Harbor – all one point losses). The tough Sea View League, with only six schools, actually sent four entrants to the playoffs, including University and Tustin, the latter having graduated to 4A after winning the 3A title in 1982. The schools would all win their Sweet Sixteen games (played Fri., Nov. 6), and the Sea View League contributed four of the eight quarter-finalists.

Long Beach Wilson was seeded third with an 18-4 record at the end of the regular season, but they would have minimal impact on the playoffs. They had the toughest quarter-final match, played Tues., Nov. 10, beating Tustin, 9-7. They then faced Newport Harbor in the semis, played Fri., Nov. 13, at Heritage Park (Woollett Aquatics Center) in Irvine. The Sailors handled them easily, taking a 6-3 lead into half-time and winning going away, 10-5.

The other semi-final game was far more interesting. Naturally, since it was Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar, playing on lucky Friday the 13th, 16 miles away at El Dorado High School in Placentia. And, like their meetings in the past two finals, this was a tough defensive affair – even tougher this time. Reports the Daily Pilot, “After a scoreless first period, Jose Santiago staked the Lancers to a 1-0 lead, but (Corona

del Mar's) Hagen Grantham evened the score. Sunny Hills' Adam Smith and the Sea Kings' Chip Blankenhorn traded goals to knot the game (2-2) at the half. Blankenhorn and Grantham scored again in the third for a 4-2 lead, but Danny Leysen pulled Sunny Hills closer, 4-3. (The Sea Kings') Derek Dundas made it 5-3 entering the fourth." Javier Santiago then scored to make it 5-4, setting up the final drama: "It took a pair of saves by goalie Jim Wagner with Sunny Hills a man up....(Wagner) made the clincher with 35 seconds remaining and CDM held the ball the rest of the way." It was the fifth meeting of the year between the two schools, and the fifth one point game, according to the Register's story. And, it was the fifth upset in the great rivalry between the two schools, and for the third year in a row. The bitter taste of the defeat led Coach Sprague to tell the Register, "We had one mental breakdown when we let them score four goals in about three minutes. I may go home and erase those three minutes from our film so I don't have to watch it again."

The Register's story on the Sunny Hills-Corona del Mar semi-final also stated, "Sprague had said publicly that he felt this game would decide the eventual champion." I think that was a correct assessment – championships frequently are decided in the semi-finals. Barnett seemed to lend credence to that in remarks to the Daily Pilot's preview story on the final game, "Anytime you play Corona it's any extra incentive. (CDM) probably was a little complacent in the league match. We were lucky and we surprised them. I don't think Corona was ready to play. They thought they were going to march in and roll over us." The final game was not played until Sat., Nov. 21, a record eight days separating the semis from the finals. It seems there would be plenty of time for both schools to dream up new devilry for each other, but in fact the game turned out to be the dullest and most rote and mechanical of their final game meetings, in spite of it being rather close. This is evident by the box score (Chris Oeding was unstoppable, scoring seven of Corona del Mar's goals):

	1	2	3	4	F
Newport Harbor	2	2	2	2	8
Corona del Mar	1	3	3	3	10

The box score clearly illustrates a better team slowly grinding down a good, but not as good opponent. Corona del Mar took control of the game by the middle of the third period. The Daily Pilot (back to faithfully covering the final game), reported that with 1:38 left to go in the third quarter, the Sea Kings had built a 7-5 lead, cut to 7-6 with just five seconds left in the period. Corona del Mar never trailed or was tied thereafter, going from two-point to one-point leads in the fourth, sealing it 9-7 with 4:58 left. Newport Harbor made it 9-8 with 1:20 to go, but Oeding's final goal with 1:03 to play made it 10-8 for the final score.

In 1986, Vargas had told the Daily Pilot, "Bill Barnett is the best coach in the United States." Now, his team had beaten Barnett's. For Barnett, it would be his last

appearance as a head coach in a final match, though he would come back to win two more finals as Newport Harbor's assistant coach. It was also the last time the two schools have met in the finals, and the last time they would face each other in the playoffs at all for 18 years. They would go on to play four times from 2005 to 2012 in games leading up to the finals – including three one-pointers that reflected the intensity of their rivalry much better than this 1987 meeting. Indeed, beating each other seemed to become the main goal – the winner all four times lost in the next round. For the 1980s, though, Newport Harbor had entered the decade with a string of titles; Corona del Mar was about to exit it with one.

1988

The next year brought the last assembling of the “Big Four” in the Final Four – Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Long Beach Wilson and Sunny Hills in the semis for the third time in four years, and fourth time in eight years. There was something about this alignment that Corona del Mar liked, because they emerged triumphant three out of the four times it occurred.

It was really, though, just a big two in 1988. Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar traded places five times during the regular season as they competed for the top spot in the weekly coaches poll rankings. Sunny Hills had the early season lead, but stumbled against Tustin, losing 11-10, on Fri., Sept. 30 in the South Coast Tournament. The Sea Kings would claim the tourney championship – and the poll's top spot – the next day, handily beating Tustin in the final match, 9-3. Sunny Hills then reclaimed the top spot by winning the first head-to-head contest between the two, beating the Sea Kings, 10-6, on Sat., Oct. 8 at Independence Park in Fullerton.

Exactly one week later in the same location, Corona del Mar beat Sunny Hills, 10-8, to win the North Orange County Tournament and take back the top spot. As both coaches would say later, the result had a great deal to do with Newport Harbor giving Sunny Hills a tough 10-6 semi-final game just two hours beforehand. Vargas described that earlier game to the Daily Pilot as “a grueling match” and Sprague told the Register the Sea Kings then “caught us when we were a little tired.” Corona del Mar had little trouble in their own semi-final match, beating Coronado (of San Diego), 14-4. The top poll position began to drift back to Sunny Hills, however, when Long Beach Wilson defeated the Sea Kings, 11-9, at Belmonte Plaza on Sat., Oct. 22. And, the Lancers' number one spot was confirmed on Fri., Oct. 28, when Sunny Hills won the third meeting between the two, beating Corona del Mar up in Nor Cal at the “Cal State Championships,” 12-9.

Sunny Hills finished the regular season 25-2, with Corona del Mar right behind them at 24-3. Corona del Mar had defeated Newport Harbor, 8-4, on Wed., Nov. 2, in their traditional Sea View League showdown. (The game was played at Newport Harbor for the sixth time in seven years. Corona del Mar's pool area was inadequate for the large crowds the contests attracted. The 50-meter pool on campus today did not begin use until 1990.) The Sea Kings' win ensured that there would be no egregious

scrambling of the seedings this year, though it knocked the Sailors into a three-way tie for second place, with Newport Harbor, University and Tustin all having 3-2 league records. In the resulting coin-toss, Tustin was awarded second place representative, Newport Harbor third and University “At-Large.” This left the Sailors out of the top four playoff seeds and, instead, Long Beach Wilson drew its by-now familiar third seed, and fourth seed went to Villa Park.

The quarter-finals, played Tues., Nov. 15, had some interesting features. Corona del Mar defeated Fullerton, 12-5, in the very last time the Indians reached the Elite Eight, and their penultimate playoff game ever. After a first round loss in 1989, Fullerton would disappear into the lower divisions. The remaining quarter-final games featured set-backs to three former 3A powers, starting with Sunny Hills taking revenge on Tustin, 15-4, and Long Beach Wilson squeezing by Foothill, 12-11 in overtime. For Villa Park, the “reward” for their highest seeding yet was to get to play a third-place league entrant, one they had already beaten soundly – Newport Harbor! Villa Park defeated the Sailors 5-1, on Sept. 30 in the South Coast tourney. But exactly as Newport Harbor had pushed around El Segundo in 1964 when Urho Saari was away at the Olympic Games, now the Sailors had been without Barnett when the South Coast tourney took place. Barnett was in Seoul, South Korea, where the 1988 Olympics Water Polo tournament extended from Wed., Sept. 21 to Sat., Oct. 1. Barnett’s U.S. team finished with Silver medals after Gold-medalist Yugoslavia defeated the Americans, 9-7, in the final match. On the U.S. team were two of Barnett’s former high school players, Kevin Robertson and James Bergeson, Newport Harbor Classes of 1977 and 1979, respectively. So, when the Spartans and Sailors met up again more than six weeks later, things were much different. Newport Harbor defeated Villa Park, 6-3, an “upset” that surprised no one, and consigned the Spartans to their sixth straight loss in the quarter-finals since ascending to 4A.

This year’s “Big Two” had little trouble with the other members of the “Big Four” in the semi-finals, played unusually on a Saturday, Nov. 19, but both at familiar Belmont Plaza. In the Corona del Mar-Long Beach Wilson game, the Sea Kings scored the first three goals and never trailed; in fact, they never lost a quarter-opening sprint for the ball. Yet, the Bruins remained stubbornly close. It was only 9-7 with 11 seconds left in the third period, but a half-court shot at the buzzer by Corona del Mar’s Hagen Grantham made it 10-7 at the quarter and seemed to take the life out of the Bruins. The Sea Kings scored the first goal of the fourth period, sealing the verdict, and Corona del Mar finished with a 13-9 win. Scoring five goals for the Sea Kings was Chris Oeding, in his fourth year of playing Varsity, and on his way to Player of the Year honors. In the Sunny Hills-Newport Harbor game, the Lancers won it with embarrassing ease. Sunny Hills had an eight goal lead after three periods, 13-5, and coasted to a 14-9 win. And, scoring five goals for the Lancers was Jose Santiago, also in his fourth year of Varsity play.

The finals returned to the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, Nov. 23. What transpired was the sixth upset in the total nine playoff games played between Sunny

Hills and Corona del Mar, but perhaps this one was the most predictable. First, the number one seed by now really was a curse – in the nine preceding years, the top seed had failed to win the title seven times. Coach Vargas fretted to the Daily Pilot about the three- and four-point losses they had suffered to Sunny Hills, and that their only win had come after Newport Harbor had softened them up in a game played that same day – “This time we won’t have the same advantage.” But, all that could just make it that much tougher for Sunny Hills to get up for the fourth encounter. And, since they were in reality pretty evenly matched, it also meant that it was the Sea Kings’ turn to win.

It did not appear at first that an upset was in the offing, in front of the Daily Pilot’s once again exact count of 1,783 in attendance. The Lancers’ Jason Klingsberg converted a four-meter penalty throw with 1:47 left in the second quarter to put them ahead, 7-4, with Jose Santiago contributing three to their total. But then, as the Los Angeles Times, the Register and the Fullerton New-Tribune all noted in precise amazement, Sunny Hills was held scoreless for the last 13:47 of game time. Goals by Corona del Mar’s Chris Oeding at 1:27 and Gunnar Gustafson with 23 seconds left in the first half brought it to 7-6 at intermission. With the Sea Kings’ goalie Greg Rhodes keeping the ball out of his own net, Hagen Grantham scored his only goal with 52 seconds left in the third, leaving the score knotted 7-7 at the quarter. From there, Josh Speyer scored 19 seconds into the fourth period (his second), Gunnar Gustafson scored with 4:35 left (his fourth) and Chris Oeding scored with just three seconds left (his third), to bring the final score to 10-7. The season rankings had changed a sixth and final time.

A team kept scoreless for this long hadn’t happened since before any of the players had been born. It was the first time a team had been held without a goal for two periods in a row since Newport Harbor stopped Fullerton in the second and third frames of the 1967 finals; and the first time a team showed a scoreless half since El Segundo held off Newport Harbor in the first half in 1964. Sprague was stunned, telling the News-Tribune in its Thurs., Dec. 1 edition that he couldn’t remember ever being shut out for a full half. He was quoted as complaining, “When you get to the championships, you should have the best officials available. They (Corona del Mar) were hammering our two-meter guy and guys were going over the top and it was never called.” Sprague’s for-the-record statement was very unusual, but the article took a further unusual turn by pointing out that Corona del Mar had six ejections called on them compared to only one against Sunny Hills!

Perhaps Sprague needed some time away! And, in fact, in May of the following year, Sprague would accept an assistant coaching job at USC, leaving a great legacy of coaching at Sunny Hills covering 23 seasons, including two titles as head coach. He remained among high schoolers, however, continuing as a math teacher at Sunny Hills. And, the pull of head coaching would ultimately prove irresistible. He returned to high school Water Polo in 1992 to build Servite into a Division II (the successor to 3A) title winner in 1998, 2002 and 2005, remaining at the Anaheim school through 2007. His legacy includes a son, Scott, who himself would coach Whittier to a Division III (the successor to 2A) crown in 2001.

Sprague's departure presaged Sunny Hills' decline, indeed, Water Polo in Fullerton generally speaking. It has already been noted that Fullerton High School would soon disappear. Sunny Hills would never again reach the finals, and disappear themselves from the tournament after 1991. The City of Fullerton had been sending teams to CIF-SS finals since Spring 1931. After this year, the closest a finalist would ever get to the city limits again would be in Orange, separated by Anaheim, when Orange Lutheran would win it all in 2016.

For Corona del Mar, though, they had won their fourth title of the decade and eighth overall. At five title game appearances in a row, they were suddenly almost half-way to Newport Harbor's recent 11-year streak. In fact, as the 1980s were coming to an end, the Sea Kings only seemed to be picking up speed.

1989

In the previous year, the lack of an upset in the Newport Harbor-Corona del Mar Sea View League finale kept the playoff seedings from being badly reshuffled. It had been known to happen, and it happened again this year – but this time leading to an unprecedented outcome.

Corona del Mar had marched through the season unbeaten and top ranked all the way until the last two weeks of the season, when the wheels popped off over 10 days. On Mon., Oct. 23 they visited number two-ranked El Dorado and lost, 7-3, in the first meeting of the two teams that had been top ranked all year. It wouldn't be long until the second meeting – El Dorado won again, 10-5, on Sat., Oct. 28, at the Nor Cal "All California Tournament." (The Register's story the next day was headlined, "El Dorado Maintains Hold, Shocks CDM Again for Title.") By themselves, these setbacks would have meant only a trading of the one-two seeds for the playoffs, except Corona del Mar then proceeded to lose to the Sailors, 8-7 in sudden death, on Wed., Nov. 1 (played again this year at Newport Harbor). This loss sentenced Corona del Mar to second place Sea View League representative, ahead of third place and ninth ranked University. The Sea Kings had beaten the Sailors just the previous Friday in Nor Cal, 5-3, in what was their third game of the day. (The 16-team event was currently a five-game tournament. It would start with conventional first and second rounds, yielding four semi-finalists who would then play a round robin championship bracket Friday night and Saturday to determine places one through four.) The fact that Corona del Mar – as well as others – were playing five games total over two days at the Nor Cal tourney would have interesting ramifications in the next year. For this year, though, the Sea Kings entered the playoffs "unseeded," in spite of being ranked second in CIF-SS in the final season poll, with a 22-3 record, according to the Daily Pilot. This meant Corona del Mar could have drawn anybody in the quarter-finals, though the schedulers had the good sense to put them in line to play fourth-seed Long Beach Wilson (17-8) in the Elite Eight. Newport Harbor, at 17-9 on the season, and with six more losses than Corona del Mar, was awarded the number three seed, even though they were ranked sixth in the final season poll. The schedulers foreordained yet another playoff meet-up

for the Sailors with Sunny Hills, which had polled fifth at season's end and which also entered with a 17-9 record.

The first and second seeds went to two once (and future) 3A/Division II champions – El Dorado and Villa Park, respectively. El Dorado (22-3), in fact, had racked up six 3A titles from 1975 to 1987. They took a brief promotion to 4A in 1981-1982, without the same success, and were now giving it another try. They had lost in the Sweet 16 last year to Newport Harbor, giving the Sailors a decent 8-6 game, and seemed to find their footing for real this year. Their first loss was to Sunny Hills, in the initial game of the year for both teams, played Fri., Sept. 15, with the Lancers defeating them, 8-7. The Golden Hawks' other two losses were to El Toro, 12-10, on Fri., Sept 29, and 9-5, on Sat., Oct. 14. For Villa Park (20-4), they were looking for a long-awaited break-through following a previously unheard of six straight quarter-final finishes. Their season was notable for a very busy September. Villa Park played in three tournaments in the first three weekends of the season, adding up to 15 games for the month, in which three of their losses occurred. The Spartans won the Century League, the only league to send four teams to the playoffs, including seventh-ranked Foothill. Villa Park's four defeats came via Marina (an eventual 3A semi-finalist), 9-8 in overtime, on Sat., Sept. 16; Long Beach Wilson, 6-3, on Sat., Sept. 30; and, like El Dorado, two losses to El Toro, 6-3 on Sat., Sept. 23, and 11-10 on Oct. 23. (El Toro was getting very good – they were on their way to a second straight 3A title.) As the careful reader may note, Villa Park's last of four losses for the regular season occurred on the same day as Corona del Mar's first of three. And, further, Villa Park had not played El Dorado or Corona del Mar, the two consistently top ranked teams, all year long.

With the seedings so equitably arranged – so often they don't mean anything! – the tournament got underway with 16-team first round games played Fri., Nov. 10. The quarter-finals followed on Tues., Nov. 14, and had some notable features. First, the “Big Four” actually did meet as a foursome for the third year in a row – but this time one round earlier. Corona del Mar handled Long Beach Wilson easily at Belmont Plaza, leading 6-1 at half, ending with a 10-4 final score. (The Sea Kings had beaten the Bruins by this identical score on Sept. 30 in the finals of the South Coast Tournament.) And, for the 15th and final time, Sunny Hills faced Newport Harbor in their earliest encounter since their first one in 1969. This time, however, the Lancers had a new look by virtue of their first real coaching change since the arrival of the Vellekamp-Sprague combination in 1966. Now leading Sunny Hills' program was 27-year-old Keith Nighswonger, who had spent the previous five years coaching at Workman (City of Industry) and then Montebello. Nighswonger would not be able to maintain the Lancers at the elite level, but he did lead them to a second place finish in the 1993 Division II tournament, and eventually became venerable in his own right. He began coaching the Girls as well as the Boys team in 2001, and combining both genders and three schools, celebrated 900 career coaching wins during the Girls 2018 season. He remains at Sunny Hills through the 2020-21 Boys and Girls seasons. And, Nighswonger did oversee a final victory over Newport Harbor, in a match worthy of their historic rivalry, held at Independence Park. Sunny Hills jumped out to a 5-2 half-time lead, then held on for a 7-6 final. It was the first time Newport Harbor had failed to gain at least the semi-finals

since 1973. Getting to the semi-finals instead were two schools that had never done so previously – El Dorado beat University, 14-10, while Villa Park and Jeff Ehrlich (coach since 1974) at long last advanced, beating Long Beach Millikan, 9-6.

Semi-final games were played on the now regular Saturday before Thanksgiving, Nov. 18. In the Villa Park-Sunny Hills game, the Register reported, “The No. 2 Spartans got out to a 4-1 half-time lead, struggled in the third quarter (5-3 at the quarter) before pulling away for the victory at Newport Harbor High,” final score, 8-5. For Sunny Hills, the previous year had been their final trip to the title game, now they bowed out of their last semi-final match. For Villa Park, they had now not only burst through the quarters, they had made it all the way to the finals.

The other semi-final was played at Tustin High School. It cannot quite be said that the “finals were played in the semi-finals,” but this game between Corona del Mar and El Dorado did pit the two teams that had been top-ranked throughout the season. And, it lived up to the billing. The Daily Pilot noted El Dorado had “soundly defeated CDM twice turning the final week of October,” but the Register’s account astutely led with the old adage that it is difficult to beat a good team three times in a row. For nearly seven minutes, it looked like El Dorado might pull it off, going up 2-0 with 5:28 remaining in the second quarter. Then, says the Daily Pilot, “the Sea Kings’ Gunnar Gustafson and Ryan Weir teamed for a 4-2 lead by half-time and never trailed again.” Corona del Mar extended its lead to 6-3 at the end of three quarters. The Golden Hawks battled back to make it 7-6 with 37 seconds left in the game, “but the Sea Kings ran out the clock.” It was El Dorado’s first loss in exactly five weeks, and ended what would turn out to be their only advance as far as the semi-finals.

By 1989, Corona del Mar’s Vargas had a familiar on-the-record tendency to extravagantly laud his opponents, while being skeptical of his own team’s abilities. The coaching genius of it began to be revealed following that Sea View-ender with Newport Harbor. After that loss, he took it to a new level, telling the Daily Pilot, “We haven’t shown our character all year. We have no chemistry whatsoever. Apparently, we’re not peaking at the right time. In fact, we’re getting worse. The guys we’re supposed to be counting on didn’t come through. And all year it’s been like that. The guys who are supposed to come through are not. I don’t know if that’s a sign of a winner or not, you tell me.” By the end of the semi-final game against El Dorado, however, Vargas was saying to the paper, “We played great defense, and everything came together. That was a great team effort.” As he explained to the Pilot in a third story, previewing the finals, the original public chewing out “shook my boys up. It did exactly what I wanted. It’s tough to have a high school team win so many games in a row... Losing (against Newport Harbor) just didn’t seem to affect them as much as it should have. They just kind of had a cavalier attitude about it and it upset me.” It was a testimony to the challenge of coaching teenagers while maintaining a long string of wins and championships. Barnett at Newport Harbor had the same problem in the late 1970s. One player on the 1980 team told me the first thing Barnett said to them at the start of “Hell Week” was, “I hate this team. You think you’ve already got CIF won.” And, they did win it, as Corona del Mar was about to do now.

Villa Park represented a series of firsts or first-in-a-long time. They were the first “new” team to the finals in eight years, and Long Beach Wilson in 1981 itself represented the first “new” team in eight years, going back to Mira Costa in 1973. Now, Villa Park opened up a sudden burst in which five “new” teams would appear over four years. It had everything to do with the training ground of the 3A tournament, of which Villa Park was the first champion to ascend to the premier division’s final game. And, the Villa Park-Corona del Mar game marked the first final game in which the opponents hadn’t played each other during the year since Sunny Hills-Mira Costa in 1973. The two schools also had virtually no playoff rivalry at all – their only prior meeting had been in the quarter-finals of the 1983 tournament.

The game itself took place again the night before Thanksgiving, Wed., Nov. 22. The Daily Pilot’s story noted that Corona del Mar had to contend with “a very stubborn Villa Park team.” The Spartans led 5-4 at half, and 6-4 early in the third quarter. Then, the Sea Kings seized control. Corona del Mar scored three goals between the 4:19 and 1:11 marks to gain their first lead of the game, 7-6, the score after three quarters. Vargas would reflect later that the big win against El Dorado had a hangover effect on the Sea Kings – “(That game) was an emotional win for us. That’s why I was yelling and screaming at them (because) they were uptight and nervous. At half-time, I told them to get their heads in the game.” Corona del Mar managed to battle Villa Park evenly in the fourth quarter, which is all they had to do, winning 10-9, and handing the Spartans their first defeat in exactly a month. The balanced scoring attack – so common among championship teams – included three goals by eventual Player of the Year Brandon Howald, three by Gunnar Gustafson, three by Ryan Weir and one by Conrad Macedo. “The guys who are supposed to come through” had come through in the end. Vargas crowed with perhaps as much relief as pride, “When was the last time an unseeded team won CIF.” Never, of course, but he also certainly knew the Sea Kings had put themselves in that hole after being top ranked for all but the last two weeks of the season.

The team of the 80s? It had to be Corona del Mar, winner of five titles during the decade, including the current threepat, and seven final game appearances, including the last six in a row. It also marked nine titles in 25 years. Yet, even though they didn’t exactly fade away, the 1989 championship remains their last. The several “firsts” represented by Villa Park suggested a new order of things was soon to take place.

1990

It has been observed that the seedings are often not a reflection of the true championship favorites. In 1990, it was never more so. Let’s start by stating the top four seeds – first: El Dorado (16-4); second: Sunny Hills (15-11); third: Long Beach Wilson (18-6); and fourth: Newport Harbor (19-6). Then, let’s reveal that only one of these four teams survived to the semi-finals. That begins to tell you that something mysterious was afoot this year. It was more than just one thing. Let’s unravel how things got this way.

Like the previous year, Corona del Mar was top seed for most of the season, they finished second ranked and went into the playoffs unseeded. They staked their claim to the top spot by winning the South Coast Tournament on Sat., Sept. 29 with a semi-final victory over El Toro, 14-11, and a final game win over El Dorado, 8-6. Again, like the previous year, El Dorado continued to closely trail the Sea Kings at second ranked through late October. Corona del Mar also seemed to lock up the Sea View League title early this year. With apparently the idea of avoiding the late-season seeding jumbles so common in earlier years, the traditional Corona del Mar-Newport Harbor finale was instead scheduled for the very first week of league play. On Wed., Oct. 3, the Sea Kings defeated the host Sailors, 9-4, further establishing their top ranked status.

Then came the Nor Cal tournament, played at De Anza College in Cupertino, Oct. 26-27, the Friday and Saturday before the last week of the season. The Sea Kings entered the tourney with one loss, and finished third – but with two more losses due to the event’s novel structure. As in 1989, the tourney started with standard first and second rounds, producing a three-game round robin between the semi-finalists, for five games total. And, here’s where the real trouble lay. This was “one game more than the CIF-SS allows for a 16-team event,” explained the Daily Pilot. Eight teams were guilty of this infraction, including Corona del Mar, El Dorado, Long Beach Wilson and Newport Harbor. According to the Long Beach Press-Telegram, “The Southern Section notified each team that it would have to forfeit one of its remaining games. Seven had non-league games they canceled, but Corona del Mar didn’t, and had to forfeit a Sea View League game.” Newport Harbor, for instance, was able to simply forfeit their non-league encounter with El Toro, scheduled for Fri., Nov. 2, while being able to keep the league win recorded on Wed., Oct. 31. Corona del Mar had only their final league game left to play, which they had to forfeit to University (scored as 5-0). The Sea Kings had already lost their top ranking to El Dorado; the Golden Hawks finished second at Nor Cal and, yet again like last year, beat Corona del Mar, this time 7-4. But what really hurt was that the forfeit created a three-way tie for first place between Newport Harbor, University and Corona del Mar. The subsequent coin toss put the schools into the playoffs as league representatives in that order. In a crowning absurdity, this year was the first since 1982 that the tournament was expanded beyond 16 teams. A sixth league had been added to 4A, with three teams entered per league, leading to a two-game Wild Card round. And, just as in 1982, Corona del Mar (22-4) ended up having to play this additional round, taking place Wed., Nov. 7.

Coach Vargas took a rather conspiratorial view of these developments, telling the Nov. 2 Daily Pilot – “We knew about the rule, but it had never been a problem in my eight years at CDM. The CIF got an anonymous phone call from someone challenging the rule.” A follow-up story was published Tues., Nov. 6, under the headline “Joke of Year: CDM Poloists a Wild Card Entry for CIF.” The story, by the great Roger Carlson, called it “One of the all-time quirks in Southern California Water Polo playoffs.” Vargas stated in the piece, “It’s pretty silly. I don’t mind. But I think it’s unfortunate for them,” i.e., their Wild Card opponent Esperanza (10-5) and fellow third-place entrant from the Empire League. It was also unfortunate for Sunny Hills, which was lined up to host the Sea Kings at Independence Park in the Sweet 16 round on Fri., Nov. 9,

once Corona del Mar took care of Esperanza. In its own story of Nov. 6, the Register's headline read, "Sunny Hills' Water Polo Draw Tough." The opening paragraph said, "Sunny Hills earned the second seed in the Southern Section 4A Water Polo playoffs Monday, but the Lancers might want to throw the honor back." Corona del Mar had already faced and handily beaten the Lancers twice during the season. The article went on to quote Sunny Hills' Coach Nighswonger as saying "It's interesting that we were ranked eighth in the poll, but were seeded as the second team. I'm flattered by that, but I think I know why it happened. There's not much we can do about it."

The fact that there was now a sixth league in 4A was not incidental. The drama of the playoffs in recent years had been in many respects a drama about the Sea View League. But not so much anymore, because the new league – the "New Sheriff in Town" – was the South Coast League, freshly promoted from 3A. The league contained three 3A powerhouses – El Toro, which had won the 3A title in 1989 and 1988; Capistrano Valley, the second place finisher in 1989; and San Clemente, which had placed second in 1988. El Toro appeared headed to top its two league rivals again – the Chargers beat Capistrano Valley, 9-6, on Thurs., Oct. 4; while Capistrano Valley took care of San Clemente, 8-5, on Thurs., Oct. 11. However, San Clemente came back to beat El Toro, 12-11, on Thurs., Nov. 1. On the same day, Dana Hills tripped up Capistrano Valley, 6-5. That left San Clemente and El Toro tied with 4-1 league records, but first place went to San Clemente by virtue of the head-to-head win. Capistrano Valley finished 3-2 and in third.

El Toro (19-7) had been ranked fifth in CIF-SS prior to their league defeat and finished seventh at season's end. But, the second place league finish and the confusion involving Corona del Mar left them "unseeded" as well, and functionally in the eighth seed. In an email written to me by Don Stoll on Aug. 12, 2012, the Chargers' coach totaled up their seven losses chronologically – "We lost to CDM, 12-7 (first week of the season); CDM, 14-11 (South Coast Tourney); Newport Harbor, 9-8 (North Orange County Tourney); CDM, 12-7 (North Orange County Tourney); Coronado (of San Diego), 10-8; Villa Park, 12-8; and San Clemente, 12-11 (South Coast League)."

Empire League champ El Dorado earned its top seed as the only CIF-SS team with a non-forfeit win over Corona del Mar. (The Sea Kings also fell by 4-3 scores to Nor Cal-winner Bellarmine Prep of San Jose, and to Coronado at the North O.C. tourney, Fri., Oct. 12.) But the Golden Hawks would now likely draw a quarter-final match against El Toro, a team that had been fifth ranked going into the season's last week. About the only school with no qualms was third-seed Long Beach Wilson, the Moore League champs. The Long Beach Press-Telegram quoted their first-year coach Ricardo Azevedo as saying, "I'm very happy with the draw. Looking at what happened to some of the other teams, I can't be anything other than happy."

Corona del Mar traveled to Esperanza for the Wild Card game, and did take care of the Aztecs, 19-6. For the Sea Kings' company in this round, the other game featured Santa Ana Valley, third in Century, and Sonora, third in Freeway, two teams that had gotten to the quarter-finals in 1985 for the best they would ever finish. Santa Ana

Valley won, 9-7. And so Corona del Mar did meet Sunny Hills in the Sweet 16 for the ninth and final time in their great rivalry. It was not an upset this time – except in the absolutely strictest sense as Sunny Hills had the higher seed. It was also their earliest playoff meeting ever, and unfortunately not a game worthy of their tradition as Corona del Mar defeated the Lancers easily for the third time this year, 10-2. It put an end to Sunny Hills' season, but one that included a 12-4 win over Sonora on Nov. 1 for their 21st consecutive Freeway League championship and 119th league win in a row. The Sweet 16 game also signaled yet another unique factor that would impact this year's playoffs. Coach Vargas was still pursuing a playing career as a member of the National Team, and this team was embarking on an extended European tour – which Vargas left for immediately after the Sunny Hills game. For the rest of the playoffs, the Sea Kings would be in the hands of assistant coaches Eric Vinje and Joe Vargas (John's brother). This also meant that Newport Harbor would be without Bill Barnett after the first round. Barnett was continuing to coach the National Team through the 1992 Olympics cycle, with his high school coaching rival among his players. Such were the international prestige and obligations of prominent members of the Southern California high school Water Polo community, that it was pulling them away from the culminating contests of their prep teams' seasons.

So, one of the top four seeds had been eliminated before even getting to the quarter-final games, played Tues., Nov. 13. The least competitive game, surprisingly, turned out to be between Newport Harbor and Capistrano Valley, which had beaten Century League champ Villa Park, 8-3, in the Sweet 16. The Cougars were on their way to demonstrating an extremely stingy defense this playoff run. They took a 3-1 lead after three quarters against the Sailors, then ran away for a 6-1 final. In the Long Beach Wilson-University game, Coach Azevedo's satisfaction with their seeding held up beautifully, as the Bruins won, 11-8. Corona del Mar, in its third playoff game already, then handled San Clemente in a match with a tight-sounding final score, but a game in which the Sea Kings were never really in danger. They held an 8-5 lead after three periods, then finished it out, 9-8. Then came the shocker of the playoffs – El Toro vs. El Dorado, in their first meeting of the year. The very tight game was tied at the end of each of the first three quarters – at 2, 4 and 8. With eventual Player of the Year J.P. Mathot scoring five goals, El Toro edged the Golden Hawks in regulation, 11-10. For the second time since 1983, the top ranked team had lost in the quarter-finals. For El Dorado, it was about all they could stand. After another quarter-final finish the next year, they would take a demotion and never returned to the premier division. Thus, the playoffs said good-bye to two more of the top four seeds heading into the semis.

The semi-final games were played on Sat., Nov. 17. And, as game day approached, El Toro was perched nicely for a trip to the finals. The only remaining top seed and the top ranked team for most of the year were playing one another in the other semi-final game. The Chargers just had to get by their league competitor – Capistrano Valley, in a rematch of the 1989 3A title game. It turned out to be a tough defensive game with the lowest total points scored (five) since in 1971. The score was tied 2-2 going into the fourth quarter and, in an extreme rarity for El Toro, J.P. Mathot had been held scoreless. But then, according to the Register, "Mathot scored on a pass from Matt Spencer with

1:54 remaining in the game to lead the Chargers past the Cougars at Capistrano Valley.” Coach Stoll offered one explanation for the low score to me in an email of Aug. 14, 2012, “Don Cholodenko (Capo Coach) and I took a group of Capo Valley players and El Toro players to Australia in the summer prior to that season. We knew each other’s players so well that defense was easy, hence the 3-2 score in the semis.” In spite of El Toro’s upset of El Dorado, they were flying under the radar somewhat. The sentence quoted from the Register was virtually their entire game write-up. And, perhaps the Chargers didn’t mind for now. Meanwhile, all the attention was being given to the other game, being played at Newport Harbor.

First, let’s consider something important in the evolution of the high school game. We have just observed that two semi-finalists had sampled competition in a summer tour of Australia. Also, two prominent coaches were currently away competing in Europe. And, just two years prior, Sunny Hills was winding up four years in a row of having members of the Puerto Rican National Team contributing to their championship hopes. In our coverage of the sport in the 1960s, careful attention was paid to the incredible amount of time and hard work being put into workout routines of elite programs. Now, at the beginning of a new decade, we see where this pursuit of excellence has brought high school Water Polo in Southern California – it has reached an international standing and reputation. And this segues nicely into an introduction of the 1990 Long Beach Wilson Bruins and their new coach. In early 1990, Rick Jones relinquished his duties with USA Water Polo (team manager and vice president) and also his coaching duties at Long Beach Wilson to become the school’s athletic director. Named in his place was Ricardo Azevedo, born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 34 years earlier. Azevedo played on the Brazilian National Team until 1980 and eventually completed his education at CSU Long Beach, joining the Long Beach Wilson faculty as a language teacher. He would go on to become one of the world’s premier coaches on high school, college and international levels. He was already the U.S. Junior National Team coach as well. In addition to Azevedo, the Bruins had a remarkable foreign exchange student arrive at their doorstep in September. As the Long Beach Press-Telegram reported, “When Wilson High Water Polo Coach Ricardo Azevedo first saw 6-foot-4, 240-pound New Zealander Clark Tamariki, he didn’t quite know what to do with him. ‘My first reaction was to send him to the football coach,’ Azevedo said.” He didn’t, of course, much to the year-long misfortune of Bruins opponents and Corona del Mar now in particular.

The Bruins had lost twice to Corona del Mar this year, according to both the Long Beach Press-Telegram and Daily Pilot. The latter reported, “Wilson dropped a 9-8 decision to CDM in sudden death the first time they two schools squared off, then lost 8-7 in the Northern California Tournament.” The Press-Telegram added that the Bruins had actually lost three one-point games during the Nor Cal tourney. (Can you imagine? To add insult to injury, the Bruins then had to forfeit one of their remaining games when they got home!) For the third meeting, the Daily Pilot’s story began poetically, “Corona del Mar High Sea Kings, with their coach, John Vargas, thousands of miles away, played to a distant drum Saturday.” In other words, they got killed, “behind a barrage of second period scoring.” Long Beach Wilson took a 1-0 lead into the second quarter, led 2-1

early in the period, then went on a tear to arrive at half-time with a 6-2 lead. The game was over right then, with the uneventful second half leading to an 8-4 final score. The Sea Kings held Tamariki scoreless, but Azevedo thought that was actually part of their problem. The defense sagged in on the two-meter man, he told the Press-Telegram, and left shooters wide open on the parameter. Julian Werts led the Bruins scoring with three goals. Long Beach Wilson was now the first non-Orange County school to reach the finals in nine years – when they had last done so themselves.

I have made a few teasing remarks about teenagers along the way, but I should be sure to say at this point what fine young men these players almost universally are. The teams that made up this year's finalists provide a good example. Stoll's Aug. 14, 2012, email said, "My kids were easy to motivate because it was the start of tradition. Three players on the 1990 team won rings in 1988, 1989 and 1990. (We had) great leadership...those three were J.P. Mathot, Greg Craycraft and Andy McIntyre," the latter going on to attend West Point. Mathot had been an absolute goal-machine all year. Entering the final game, he had scored 114 goals in 29 games, an average of four goals per contest. For Long Beach Wilson, the Press-Telegram's final game-day story focused on five of the Bruins' starters – Julian Werts, Charley Cover, Luke Phair, Scott Brizius and Jeff Bostrom. The story relayed that the five had already been playing together for 10 years, since they were 7- and 8-years-old on age-group teams. Over the years, they had become fast, inseparable friends. The story quoted the other two starters, sophomore goalie Nick Fullerton and New Zealander Clark Tamariki. Both expressed amusement at the cliquishness of their five teammates – yet they felt accepted and included by them all the same.

And speaking of doing everything together, after El Toro had beaten Capistrano Valley, the team drove the 22 miles to Newport Harbor to see if they could learn something about their next opponent. El Toro had been beaten three times by the Sea Kings, but they hadn't played the Bruins all year. For the second year in a row, the finalists would be facing each other for the first time. "We've seen them play several times this year," Stoll told the Register in its own game-day story. "They have the biggest two-meter man (hole) in the Southern Section." It would seem it was all about stopping Tamariki. Would El Toro make the mistake Azevedo felt the Sea Kings had made? Was there really any other way since he was virtually unstoppable with single coverage?

In the game played Wed., Nov. 21, El Toro seemed to do both. The Register reported "the Chargers used a sagging, sometimes even a zone defense to frustrate Tamariki in the second half." It also cited "a strong defense that clamped down on top Bruins' scorers, Julian Werts and Clark Tamariki." The Press-Telegram reported "the Chargers did it with only one player guarding Tamariki. Very impressive." Doing the impressive work on defense, according to Stoll, was El Toro's Greg Craycraft. The game began with an explosive first quarter, which ended in a 4-4 tie. Tighter defenses and some sloppiness on offense resulted in a 5-5 tie at half-time. El Toro forged a narrow 8-7 lead at the end of the third to set up the final drama. Werts scored on a

four-meter penalty shot just 43 seconds into the fourth period, but the 8-8 tie was short-lived. Just eight seconds later Craycraft made it 9-8 and El Toro was off to the races. The Chargers' Jason Knietael scored his third goal to make it 10-8 with 3:30 to play, then Mathot scored his third goal also on a four-meter penalty with 40 seconds left to make it 11-8. Werts scored again (his game-high fourth) for the Bruins with 27 second left, to bring the final score to 11-9.

After El Toro took its 9-8 lead at the 5:09 mark, the Press-Telegram reported, "the Bruins managed only three shots the rest of the way, turning the ball over on six of their next eight possessions. And in four of those instances, Wilson turned the ball over on either offensive fouls on Tamariki or steals from Tamariki by El Toro defenders." Like Coach Sprague of Sunny Hills in 1988, Azevedo complained to the hometown paper about the officiating involving his two-meter man – "El Toro played a good game, but I think the refereeing decided the outcome of this game. I think they punished Clark for being so big, let El Toro have its way with him." Perhaps what really decided the game, though, was at the other end of the court, with the Bruins unable to stop El Toro's offense. The 11 goals pumped in by the Chargers was the highest final game total in six years. Tamariki scored two goals – two more than in the semis – and Long Beach Wilson scored one more goal than in their romp over Corona del Mar. Yet they were outgunned by two goals through a balanced El Toro attack that included contributions from five players.

For El Toro, it was a remarkable type of threepart. In the two years prior, they had won the 3A title in the game played immediately before the premier level teams took to the pool. Now, they had won the game that followed and were 4A champs, the first instance in the 17-year-old divisional system in which a school from a lower level had repeated its success at the top level. They were the first "new" champion in nine years. And, they did it the ultra-hard way. Following seven regular season losses, they became the first eighth-seed to win the title. They also became the fourth school in 27 years to win it all by a margin of four goals or less total in their last three games. The Chargers remain the last team to have achieved this. What is left to be considered is whether things would have turned out differently had Vargas remained stateside to coach Corona del Mar for 12 more days. Stoll in his two emails to me certainly wondered the same, and thought the Sea Kings would at least have made it to the finals – and, then, who knows? But, as humble as a high school sporting event may be in the grand scheme of things, in order to win it, you have to be there to play it.

1991

It's not especially uncommon for the true championship game to be played in the semi-finals. It is very rare, however, when the championship game is played in the quarter-finals. Such was the case in 1991, due to the by-now almost confusion around playoff seeding. This year, though, the problem wasn't with Corona del Mar and the Sea View League – the Sea Kings won it uneventfully, and entered the playoffs the top seed at 23-2. It was the other ultra-tough league, South Coast, which once again

exposed the flaw in the current playoff system – what do you do with a league over-populated with really strong programs? Attempting to resolve this problem was at the very least a contributing factor to the playoffs expanding beyond three levels after this year.

Let's take a close look at South Coast League play to illustrate the dilemma and explain the conspicuous absence of defending champion El Toro from this year's playoffs:

South Coast League 1991	
Week 1, Thurs., Oct. 10	
– Capistrano Valley..... 6	Dana Hills 5
– San Clemente..... 9	El Toro..... 6
– Irvine 16	Mission Viejo 0
Week 2, Thurs., Oct. 17	
– Capistrano Valley..... 12	El Toro..... 8
– Dana Hills..... 11	Irvine 8
– San Clemente..... 15	Mission Viejo 3
Week 3, Thurs., Oct. 24	
– Capistrano Valley..... 9	San Clemente 5
– Dana Hills..... 15	Mission Viejo 3
– Irvine 9	El Toro..... 8
Week 4, Thurs., Oct. 31	
– Capistrano Valley..... 18	Mission Viejo 3
– El Toro 9	Dana Hills 8
– San Clemente..... 13	Irvine 5
Week 5, Thurs., Nov. 7	
– Capistrano Valley..... 10	Irvine 6
– Dana Hills..... 10	San Clemente 9
– El Toro 12	Mission Viejo 6
Final Standings	
1. Capistrano Valley.....5 - 0	
2. Dana Hills.....3 - 2	
3. San Clemente.....3 - 2	
4. Irvine2 - 3	
5. El Toro2 - 3	
6. Mission Viejo.....0 - 5	

First, Mission Viejo's winless record deserves comment. It wasn't for a lack of good swimmers enrolled in the school. They would proceed to win the swimming championship in Spring 1992. Prior to that, they had won the championship an amazing 14 years in a row (1975-1988). But those teams were stocked with year-round competitive swimmers committed to the Mission Viejo Nadadores club program, and were not participating on the Diablos' Water Polo team.

Capistrano Valley had done some damage in last year's playoffs and won the league championship this year to enter the post-season as the number two seed at 22-4. Now it begins to get complicated. Dana Hills had a good team, too – ranked 10th in CIF-SS this year, and they had handed Capistrano Valley a league loss in the last week of the 1990 season. Now, they upset number three ranked San Clemente in the final week, 10-9, with five of their goals coming in man-advantage situations. So jammed was the league standings that the Register observed “a Dana Hills loss would have created a three-way tie for third with El Toro (2-3) and Irvine (2-3), necessitating a two-game playoff for the final playoff spot.” That didn't happen, and Dana Hills shot up to the number four seed in the playoffs at 20-4. San Clemente (22-4), though, now third in league as well as in CIF-SS, entered the playoffs unseeded. And so, for the second year in a row, a team that had been at or near the top all year was forced to play in the Wild Card round, scheduled for Wed., Nov. 13.

This left number six ranked El Toro out – their downfall coming from Irvine in the third week of League, who beat them by a goal scored in the last minute of play. Like last year, six leagues, three teams each for a total of 18 playoff teams, and that's the end of the conversation. Well, the conversation certainly continued in the papers. In its Fri., Nov. 8 edition, the Register's Steve Fryer wrote a column under the headline, “Water Polo Needs New Playoff Plan; Format Punishes Strongest Leagues.” Fryer wrote, “A good team with good players is not going to be in post-season play. This mess could be corrected if the 4A playoffs involved 32 teams, instead of the current 16 (sic) team format. The CIF-Southern Section council voted down a proposal last month in which each 4A league would have four playoff participants instead of three.” (This would have brought the entrant total to 24 not 32.) The story quoted San Clemente coach Steve Yancey saying, “Why is it that the best Water Polo division in the nation has only 16 (sic) teams in the playoffs?” Fryer continued, “El Toro coach Don Stoll said his team has played well enough to earn a clear path to the playoffs. ‘We've beaten three league champions,’ Stoll said. ‘El Dorado (Empire League), Villa Park (Century League) and Sunny Hills (Freeway League).’” Stoll could have also mentioned – had he known at the time – that his Chargers beat visiting Newport Harbor, 7-6, the very day the story appeared; the Sailors were going in as the number two team from the Sea View League.

Be all this as it may, El Toro became only the second team in playoff history to win a championship and then not qualify for the following year's playoffs. The only previous instance was the 1953-champion Whittier Cardinals – and only two teams total were admitted to the 1954 “tournament.” (The 2008-champion Foothill would be the only other case where this happened in subsequent years.) Fryer was certainly right in saying it was time to expand the playoffs. Down in 2A, their tournament was in its fourth year of having well over 32 teams participate – 39, in fact, last year – and 3A was in its ninth year of having 32 or more participants. About the only thing “routine” in the 1991 tournament was once again Moore League champion Long Beach Wilson (17-8) – appropriately seeded third (it seems like every year!).

San Clemente began their playoff run by winning their Wild Card game against Esperanza, 13-2. (How unlucky can you be? Esperanza lost to Corona del Mar under the exact same circumstances last year!) The Tritons then won their Sweet 16 game on Fri., Nov. 15, defeating Sunny Hills, 14-3. For the Lancers, it was their very last premier-level playoff game, after qualifying 25 years in a row (and 26 years total going back to 1965). This year marked the end of another long streak for Sunny Hills. On Oct. 17 at Independence Park, in the second week of Freeway League competition, Buena Park defeated the Lancers, 7-6, for their first league loss since 1969, and stopping their winning streak at 120 games.

Even though not all the best teams were in the playoffs this year, the quarter-final games, played on Tues., Nov. 19, were among the best set of four in the tournament's history. The total margin of victory for the four games was only six goals, the lowest thus far, and has been equaled or surpassed only once – five goals total in 2017. The top two South Coast League teams narrowly advanced – Capistrano Valley over El Dorado, 12-9, and Dana Hills over Villa Park, 6-5. Long Beach Wilson then once again confronted Newport Harbor at Belmont Plaza, in a game in which both teams were rather short-handed. Barnett, the legendary disciplinarian, had suspended two of his starters for fighting in the Sweet 16 victory over Foothill and benched two others for one match for skipping practice the next day. “Sometimes you have to do without,” Barnett told the Daily Pilot. Long Beach Wilson, though, had their own problems. Their top scorer was Luke Phair, who had scored three goals in last year's final game. The Daily Pilot reported, “Phair suffered a ‘freak accident’ that required stitches in his shooting hand,” which led the Bruins to attempt to use him as a decoy, but one who really couldn't contribute offensively. The story said, “Long Beach Wilson High controlled every corner of the pool,” but apparently only narrowly so as the game was close throughout. Newport Harbor led 3-2 after the first period; then the lead changed hands to a 6-5 advantage for Long Beach Wilson at half-time. The Sailors came back to tie the score, 9-9, at the end of three periods, and the score remained tied at the end of regulation, 10-10. The Bruins then managed one goal in overtime for the 11-10 triumph.

The remaining quarter-final game was played at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, in the fourth encounter between Corona del Mar and San Clemente this year. It was also a rematch of their quarter-final game of last year, won by the Sea Kings by a single goal. Corona del Mar's only two defeats this season had been an 18-8 setback to Long Beach Wilson on Fri., Oct. 25 during the Nor Cal tourney; and its season opener, an 8-7 overtime loss to San Clemente, played Wed., Sept. 12 – at Saddleback College. Since that initial loss, the Sea Kings had come back to beat the Tritons twice – 13-6, in the final match of the South Coast Tournament, held Sat., Sept. 28; and 14-10, in the finals of the North Orange County Tournament, on Sat., Oct. 19 (San Clemente had led this contest, 6-5, at half-time). This accounts for San Clemente's four season losses, including the two losses in league. The Daily Pilot's game report said Corona del Mar “scored nearly at will in the first quarter, building a 6-3 lead (at period end). But things became progressively more difficult for CDM as the late afternoon wore into early evening....The Sea Kings managed only seven more goals through the next three periods and overtime.” Indeed, the Tritons had tied the score, 7-7, by half-time,

and built a 10-8 lead at the end of three periods. Then, it seemed that San Clemente just couldn't quite put away their opponent – Corona del Mar “appeared dead on a number of occasions in the late going, only to resurrect its hopes with a series of clutch plays.” San Clemente, for instance, had an 11-10 lead and took possession of the ball with only 54 seconds remaining. But the Tritons then allowed the Sea Kings to steal it with 30 seconds left, and they tied it up at 11-11 with just 18 seconds to play. Going into overtime, it must have seemed to Tritons fans that the nine-time CIF-SS champ was going to find a way to beat them in the end. Instead, San Clemente didn't let history intimidate them and out-gunned Corona del Mar in a busy overtime period to win, 14-13. The Daily Pilot quoted “an emotionally drained San Clemente coach Steve Yancey” saying, “Just like a championship fight, these were two heavyweights going blow-for-blow and punch-for-punch.” As the remainder of the tournament would bear out, it really was the 1991 championship fight.

For the second year in a row and third time since 1983, the number one seed had been beaten in the quarter-finals. Corona del Mar's season had ironically begun and ended with overtime losses to San Clemente in the same pool. The banner headline for the Daily Pilot's stories involving its two service area teams read “Black Tuesday.” Indeed, it was. For the first time since 1963, neither Newport Harbor nor Corona del Mar would be playing in the semi-finals. In their place, three teams from the South Coast League would be joining Long Beach Wilson in the Final Four. And, for the second year in a row also, the team functionally eighth-seed was now in the driver's seat.

The semi-final games were moved back to a Friday for the first time since 1987, played Nov. 22 at Belmont Plaza. San Clemente suddenly found themselves breezing. The Register used the word “crushed” to describe how they dealt with Dana Hills, in their first and only appearance in a semi-final game. “The Tritons seized the advantage mid-way through the first quarter,” the Register reported. “With the game tied at 1-1, Sean Lane scored two of his game high seven goals in 28 seconds, the second coming with 1:59 left. (Eventual Player of the Year) Jeremy Laster scored 33 seconds later to make it 4-1. Dana Hills never got closer than three goals the rest of the way.” The game was over by the end of the third quarter, with San Clemente ahead, 13-6, and strolled to a 16-8 win. Capistrano Valley had a much tougher time with Long Beach Wilson. “The lead seesawed and tied seven times, before the Cougars went ahead to stay on Jeremy Braxton-Brown's (South Coast League Player of the Year) goal from two meters at the 2:10 mark of the fourth quarter.” It's possible that the Bruins were again with only limited services from the injured Luke Phair, though there was plenty of offense from both sides, Capistrano Valley eventually triumphing, 13-12. (In fact, Long Beach Wilson's losing total of 12 goals has only been equaled in the semi-finals once since then, by Corona del Mar in 2005.)

Amazingly, the CIF-SS finals featured two teams playing in their first final game, the first time this had occurred since the inaugural game of the tournament in 1952. And, it featured two South Coast League teams – which meant for the first time in three years, the two combatants had actually faced each other earlier in the year. With the final game scheduled for Wed., Nov. 27, it would be just one day shy of five weeks

since that prior meeting in Week 3 of league. The Register's preview story said the Tritons had built a 3-0 lead in the league game, before apparently going to sleep and not knowing what hit them when they woke up with a 9-5 loss. There would not be a recurrence in the game played the night before Thanksgiving. The Register says the first half was "a somewhat sloppy, defensive oriented game." Capistrano Valley had tied the game at 1-1 with 3:46 left in the half. However, Braxton-Brown had saddled himself with two fouls by early in the second period, and he had a restrained rest of the game, finally fouling out late in the fourth quarter. San Clemente capitalized by going ahead 3-1 at the intermission. Both teams suddenly turned on the jets in the third period for a combined six goals and a 6-4 San Clemente lead by the end of the quarter. The Tritons' Bryce Matthews scored all three of his game-high three goals that period. San Clemente then outscored Capistrano Valley by two in the fourth quarter to win comfortably, 9-5, a perfect reversal of the league outcome.

What an achievement by San Clemente! Like Whittier in 1955 and Corona del Mar in 1982, they had to play in an abbreviated first round, and came on to win it all. They remain the last team to have done it and the last team to win five games in a single tournament. And, 1991 was the last year to feature all four of the "Big Four" in the tournament, the Tritons even beating two of them (Sunny Hills and Corona del Mar). In fact, every team that had played in a final game since 1974 participated in this tournament, with the exception of Mira Costa (1977), who were now down in 3A; and El Toro (1990), who San Clemente had taken care of in league. Finally, what a perfect tour of revenge – beating Corona del Mar in the quarters, who had handed San Clemente two of their losses (not to mention ending their season in 1990); then beating league rivals Dana Hills and Capistrano Valley in the next two games to have the last laugh on the only other teams to have defeated them. San Clemente had never played 4A until last year. Now they were its champions.

San Clemente hadn't come out of nowhere, of course. They had an apprenticeship in 3A going back to 1978, finishing second twice. San Clemente and El Toro were not the only schools successfully hopping up in levels. Harvard, the 1988 2A champ, had taken a promotion and won the 3A title in the game played immediately before San Clemente vs. Capistrano Valley got underway. The coach of these Harvard champions was Richard Corso, who next year would be named Bill Barnett's successor as U.S. Olympics Team coach. The Harvard Wolverines would soon be making noise on the 4A level. The proof of the nurturing value of multi-tier competition was one more reason why it was time to expand the tournament to levels beyond just three. The tripping up of Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar in the quarter-finals, and the demotion awaiting Sunny Hills after this year, were among the many signs this era in tournament history was drawing to a close. Even six-minute quarters would be gone in 1994. The advancing excellence of Southern California high school Water Polo meant its teams could handle seven-minute quarters, just like college and national teams.

CHAPTER IX

Renewed Growth and Fragmentation, 1992-2005

Introduction to the Millennial Era

The Baby Boomers (1946-1964), who we remarked on in our coverage of the 1961 season, were well out in the world by now. The CIF-SS final of 1982 must have been the last Water Polo game that the Baby Boomers ever participated in. If so, they went out with a bang! The succeeding demographic of “Generation X” covers those born between 1965-1980, and “Millennials” follow from 1981-1996. So, high school Water Polo would exit the century with one cohort and enter the new millennium with another.

Like 1961, this next era of Water Polo (1992-2005) began with a clear change in playoff tournament structure. A fourth division of competition was created in 1992, and 4A was renamed Division I (Roman numeral), and the other divisions were also renamed correspondingly.

Additional broadening of competition came quickly. Starting in 1992, the number of levels doubled in size, from three to six, in just three years. In 1994, Divisions V and VI were created. With six levels, league and subsequent post-season tournament competition was arranged in large part geographically, with Division I carrying “First Tier” schools from Los Angeles and Orange counties; Division II with “Second Tier” Orange County schools; Division III with “Second Tier” Los Angeles County schools; Division IV with schools from San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties; Division V with schools from Riverside and San Bernardino counties; and Division VI with “Third Tier” schools from throughout the section. The division structure continued to generally reflect relative strengths in terms of talent and facilities, from Division I on down. (Appendix VI shows CIF-SS Water Polo teams “On Their Way” in this new era, with league alignment in all six levels and Division I playoff entrants in 1995 and 1996.)

Yet, this arrangement seemed to fragment or geographically divide up the vast Southern Section. And, there was some talk at the time that the section might eventually split up, or at least some sort of new Orange County “super section” might be formed.

As many as six of the eight winningest teams in CIF-SS have met in a single quarter-final, all in this era. This occurred seven times: 1992-94, 1998, 2002-04. Downey (last tourney, 1982) and Sunny Hills (1991) did not participate in any of them. El Toro emerged with the title two times (1992-93) and Long Beach Wilson five times (1994, 1998 and 2002-04). Other members of the All-Time Elite Eight include Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar, Harvard and Foothill. Helping to enable this was that the tournament was unprecedentedly stable from 1992-2007 with 16 teams each year.

The top division reduced its league count back down to five in 1992, allowing a fourth place entrant from a particularly tough league, and eliminating some of the problems of the previous few years. The five leagues were Century, Mission, Moore, Sea View and South Coast. Mission was the promoted league from 3A, bringing in three excellent private school programs – Harvard, Loyola and Crespi. Demoted to 3A were the Empire and Freeway leagues, taking with them El Dorado and Sunny Hills, respectively.

Harvard became the first private school to win a playoff game in 1992. From 1967 to 1973, four private schools entered the playoffs – Lausen (1967), Servite (1968-70, 1972-73), Notre Dame (1971) and Harvard (1973). None of these entrants won a single game. In 1974, of course, these schools started playing in the lower divisions. This began with Servite in 1974 in 3A, when they reached the semis, and then in larger numbers starting in 1975 (Bosco Tech, Norte Dame and Loyola joining Servite in that year's tournament). From 1974-1991, not a single private school participated at the top level. Harvard not only ascended to this level in 1992, but was notably successful immediately (Crespi and Loyola also joined that year, still losing in the first round). It would not be until 1996 that a second private school (Loyola) would record a win. So, it took 30 years of struggling before these programs broke through against large public schools. Ironically, private schools would win the championship 10 years in a row from 2010-2019, leading some to wonder if it was really very fair to force public schools to compete against privates!

Long Beach Wilson had an amazing run during this period, with 10 championships in 12 years (1994-05), bringing them to 11 titles total, second highest in the playoff era. This was more dominant than the other great run by a Long Beach school, Long Beach Poly – nine titles in 11 years from 1912-22. During their 1996-99 reign, they were led by an incredible player, Tony Azevedo. And, their five titles in a row from 2001-05 was a playoff record; in fact, it was the longest since Fullerton's run of six in a row from 1931-36 (and eight in 10 years, 1931-40). Like these two ancient comparisons, the Bruins did it under the guidance of more than one coach.

Long Beach Wilson's dominance was made easier two of those championship years when Corona del Mar took a demotion to Division II from 1999-2001 (the Bruin's won titles in 1999 and 2001, Newport Harbor in 2000). The Sea Kings got to the finals in 1994, then finished no higher than the quarters from 1995-1998, failing to qualify at all in 1997. Still, Corona del Mar was an oversized program for Division II – they won the title all three years they were down there, winning the 2001 title (John Vargas' last year at CDM) with absurd ease – by 12 points against Esperanza in the final game. (This remains the second highest final game margin on any level, surpassed only by Riverside Poly's 17 point triumph over Palm Desert in the Division V final of 2000.)

This combination of the rise of Harvard, the dominance of Long Beach Wilson and Corona del Mar's absence from Division I led to Orange County schools being excluded from the finals for three out of six years – 1998, 2001 and 2003. When it happened in 1998, it was the first time since 1962 – 36 years! – that an Orange County school wasn't in the finals.

Mainly, though, the quick expansion from three to six divisions allowed the playoffs to continue to grow, going over 100 teams total (102 to be exact) for the first time in 1995.

And, Girls Water Polo was born during this era. On Nov. 21, 1995, a final game preview story in the Register profiled Robin Beauregard, a junior, and a starting field player with Marina (which would be defeated by Costa Mesa in the Division II championship). Beauregard was an example of a phenomenon happening in several programs by the mid-90s – females joining the (traditionally) Boys team. The very next year, Beauregard and her like-minded sisters would be “Going Their Own Way” (read the Los Angeles Times headline on Nov. 12, 1996). The first “unofficial” Girls Water Polo competition and championship was held in 1996-97 and “official” competition commenced in 1997-98. The season was played as a “Winter” sport in the Southern Section (contrary to Northern California sections, where it is played in the Fall simultaneous with the Boys). I think official competition could have begun a few years earlier, given that females were competing on club teams going back to at least the late 1970s. Interestingly, the sport for the girls had evolved just as it had originally for the boys – on the club level. The original club league for the guys was formed in 1908, four years ahead of its arrival on high school campuses in 1912.

In an interview with me in September 2020, Foothill Head Coach Jim Brumm ran through a long list of outstanding coaches active in this era. (Of which, he was certainly one. Brumm was a co-founder in 1994 along with Long Beach Wilson coach Ricardo Azevedo of the important Southern California Invitational. This tournament contributed significantly to the rising frequency of intersectional competition throughout the period.) Brumm concluded by saying, “It was a great time in Water Polo. I feel blessed to have been a part of it.” Indeed it was, as we will now see.

Housekeeping: Two “Footnotes” to the Reader

Since I am not footnoting, I need to use this opportunity to alert the reader to two style standards I am adopting.

First, Los Angeles County seemed to get the upper-hand on Orange County during this era, but in one important way the latter triumphed over the former. The pool at Heritage Park in Irvine was widely used during this period and in 2004 it was greatly expanded and renamed the William Woollett Jr. Aquatics Center. The upgraded site quickly surpassed Belmont Plaza in Long Beach as the premier showcase for high school Water Polo. Because of its prominence and name recognition today, I will refer to this complex as the “Woollett Aquatics Center” throughout this era, even though the rededication didn’t take place until 2004.

Second, a merger was announced in October 1989 between Harvard School for boys in Studio City and Westlake School for girls in Holmby Hills. Complete integration and coeducation began in the fall of 1991, with the merged institution becoming known as Harvard-Westlake. However, for consistency sake with prior

references in this book and in my statistical recordkeeping – as well as brevity – I will continue to refer to the school as Harvard.

Now, let's turn our attention to the eventful 1992 season.

1992

The problem of certain leagues overpopulated by strong programs – resulting in deserving teams left out of the playoffs – came to a head in 1991. The solution was to create a fourth division of play, allowing the newly christened Division I to reduce to five leagues. With five leagues contributing to a 16-team tournament, there was now a slot for one strong fourth place team.

There certainly were other reasons why CIF-SS would expand divisional play, but a 1992 season preview story in the Los Angeles Times credited the lion's share to the "loaded leagues" issue – and to El Toro Coach Don Stoll as a prime mover. Its story of Sun., Sept. 13, reported:

"That string (of divisional titles) was broken last year when El Toro didn't make the playoffs despite being the fifth-ranked team (in Orange County) in the division at the end of the season. Because of the Water Polo playoff system, that ranking was irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was that the Chargers finished fourth in the South Coast League. Stoll thought allowances should be made for the defending champion and took his case to the Southern Section. He met with officials, whom he said told him that his team deserved to be in the playoffs but that the rules wouldn't permit it. The same week, the section ruled that certain highly ranked cross-country teams that finished out of the running in their league would be allowed to advance to the sectional championships anyway. 'That really fried me,' Stoll said. Section officials told Stoll that adding an extra Water Polo team to the playoffs would add expenses for officials and transportation, something that wasn't an issue when adding a seven-member cross-country team to a championship race. Largely because of Stoll's urging, the section added another Water Polo division this season, and now there is room for one wild-card team in the Division I draw."

The story also quoted senior goalie Jason Murray saying, "Walking into Belmont Plaza for the finals last year was terrible. It was the worst feeling I've ever had. It just really ate me up inside. So hopefully, we'll be able to get back there (as competitors) this year." Certainly, El Toro seemed determined to leave nothing to chance about getting in. The Chargers finished the regular season 26-1 and undefeated in the South Coast League to enter the playoffs as the number one seed.

The South Coast League continued to be Division I's toughest – in fact, the second place team, Capistrano Valley, was the second seed in the playoffs with a 22-2 record. El Toro and Capistrano Valley accounted for each other's only defeats – first, El Toro beat Capistrano Valley, 11-6, on Sat., Oct. 3, in the final game of the Villa Park Tournament; then, Capistrano Valley returned the favor, 13-12, on Sat., Oct. 17, in the final game of the North Orange County Tournament. Finally, El Toro won the crucial

league game in a terrific defensive duel played on Thurs., Oct. 22, at Saddleback College. This third contest was reminiscent of their epically low-scoring semi-final game in 1990. Trailing 3-2 at half-time, El Toro scored twice in the third period and held Capistrano Valley scoreless in the second half for the win, 4-3.

Finishing first and second in the South Coast League was no easy thing. It produced the inaugural “At-Large” entrant to the restructured playoffs, with fourth place Dana Hills qualifying. There was also, of course, defending champ San Clemente to contend with but, boy, were they having a star-crossed season! El Toro beat the Tritons, 10-9, on Thurs., Oct. 15, at El Toro. The score was tied 9-9 at the end of regulation, and two scoreless three-minute overtime periods ensued. The Chargers finally won it 1:32 into sudden death. Capistrano Valley’s 11-10 victory over the Tritons was even more dramatic, played Thurs., Oct. 29, at San Clemente. The game was tied at 8-8 at the end of regulation and 10-10 after the two overtime periods – then no scoring in the first sudden death period. Finally, the Cougars won it with just one second left in the second sudden death period. After playing this lengthy and draining game, the Tritons hopped on an airplane to San Jose the next morning to play two games that day and two the next at the Northern California Invitational. It must be said they handled the adversity well – finishing third. In addition to the two league heartbreakers, the Tritons were bested by Sea View League champ Corona del Mar, 8-7, in yet another sudden death thriller. This one occurred in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament on Fri., Sept. 25, at Tustin High School. It being tournament play, they went straight to sudden death – the Sea Kings winning it at the 1:15 mark. And there’s more. After a 10-5 loss to Capistrano Valley in the semi-finals of the Villa Park Tournament, the Tritons faced off in the third place game against Poway, who would go on to win the 3A (top division) crown in CIF-San Diego Section. This contest didn’t go into overtime, but San Clemente did lose 8-7 on a goal at the buzzer! The Tritons ended up settling for third place in league – and fifth seed in the playoffs – with a 20-7 regular season record.

It was actually the case that all three of the top teams only lost to each other, as Mission League champion Harvard entered the playoffs at 25-2 and seeded third. The two defeats for the Wolverines came against Capistrano Valley, 8-7, on Sat., Sept. 19, in the final game of the Long Beach Millikan Tournament; and against El Toro, 12-11, on Oct. 17, in the semi-finals of the North Orange County Tournament.

It was the first appearance for Harvard in the premier division playoffs since their one and only prior game – a first round loss in 1973. They qualified for either the 3A or 2A tournaments every year except 1985 from 1978-1991, winning a title at each level, including the 1991 3A championship that led them back to Division I after all these years. Building the team into a top-flight program was Richard Corso, who began coaching Harvard in 1986. A story in the Nov. 19, 1997, Los Angeles Times described him as “a water polo hard-liner and strict disciplinarian known for his Bobby Knight-like antics at poolside.” He would remain at the school through 2005. On Wed., Aug. 26, Corso was named coach of the U.S. Olympics team for the 1996 games, becoming the third person to lead the country’s Olympics Water Polo effort while also coaching a CIF-SS high school team. The men’s Water Polo tournament at the 1992 Summer

Olympics was held from Aug. 1-9 in Barcelona, Spain. Reigning world champion Yugoslavia had qualified for the tournament, but since it had formally dissolved in the interim, it didn't participate. Italy ended up winning the Gold Medal, 9-8, over Spain. The United States, coached for the second time by Newport Harbor's Bill Barnett, finished fourth. The U.S. lost the Bronze Medal game, 8-4, to the "Unified Team," comprised of 12 of 15 republics that until 1991 had made up the USSR. A changed world, indeed!

The Mission League – the new league in Division I this year – comprised five elite, Los Angeles-area private schools, each of which would send teams to the playoffs in this era – Harvard of Studio City (1992-05), Loyola of Los Angeles (1992-00, 02-05), Crespi of Encino (1992-96, 98-04), Notre Dame of Sherman Oaks (1994, 97, 01) and Alemany of Mission Hills (2005). Just the names sound expensive!

The first round of the playoffs was played on Fri., Nov. 13, and is notable for the fact that Harvard beat Sea View League third-place team Tustin, 15-11, in a game played at Harvard. It made the Wolverines the first private school to win a playoff game since these schools first started trying in 1967. What was so hard about that?

The quarter-finals were played on Tues., Nov. 17, and featured a truly stellar line-up – six of the eight all-time winningest programs in the history of the tournament, plus the two 1991 finalists. Not surprisingly, it was a great quartet of games, including two upsets.

El Toro faced Newport Harbor, the second place Sea View League team, in a case of very changed circumstances from their only prior playoff meeting 10 years earlier. Back in 1982, the Sailors were just a year removed from a championship; now it was the Chargers who came in a year separated from a title. The Sailors had won that semi-final game a decade ago, but much more recently El Toro beat Newport Harbor, 7-5, while visiting the Sailors on Fri., Nov. 6, the last day of the season. Returning to Newport Harbor's pool just 11 days later, any changed circumstances were again all in El Toro's favor. The Chargers jumped out to a 3-0 lead and never looked back. They had an 11-4 lead by the end of the third quarter, and coasted to a 13-7 win, with five goals contributed by Dan Mathot (younger brother of J.P., the 1990 Player of the Year).

Much closer was Harvard's game against Foothill, the Century League champ, played at Harvard. The Wolverines trailed 4-3 at half-time, and the score was tied after three periods, 6-6. Harvard narrowly pulled ahead in the fourth, but Foothill's David Hay scored with 1:25 left in the game to tie it again, 9-9. A busy overtime ensued, with Harvard's Ryan Salceda and Jim Toring, the eventual Player of the Year, tossing in three goals between them for the victory, 12-11.

Which brings us to the first of two upsets. Fourth-seeded and Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson (21-4 entering the playoffs) had accounted for two of San Clemente's seven losses. In their only meetings, the Bruins won, 15-13, in a non-league game played at Belmont Plaza on Sat., Oct. 10; and then, 12-10, in the semi-finals of the Northern California Invitational on Sat., Oct. 31. (The Bruins were beaten in the

tourney finals by Palo Alto, 13-9, who were on their way to winning the CIF-Central Coast Section Division II championship.) The Tritons had surrendered 27 goals in these two losses, but at El Toro's pool this afternoon, San Clemente decided to turn on the defense – and to win a close one for once! The Tritons focused on stopping the Bruins' top two scorers, Ben Blaber and Pat Cochran, who had combined for 22 goals in the previous games. Blaber was held to one goal, Cochran two, by strong efforts by their defenders, Tim Hornig and Phinney Gardner, respectively. San Clemente built up a 5-2 lead with 4:23 left in the match before Long Beach Wilson managed to close the gap to 5-4 with 1:24 remaining. But two final possessions by the Bruins went unconverted, and suddenly the Tritons were making a real title defense.

The even bigger upset involved Corona del Mar and Capistrano Valley – though if one were to compare championship totals (nine to zero), perhaps it can't really be looked at that way entirely. Corona del Mar started their season in unusually rocky fashion. They lost their first two games, both at home, to Foothill, 9-8, on Thurs., Sept. 17, and El Toro, 12-4, on Tues., Sept. 22. But that's not all. Immediately after the Foothill game, John Vargas – responsible for more championships than any other Sea Kings coach – announced his resignation, effective at the end of the season. The Daily Pilot story of Fri., Sept. 18 did not seem surprised – he apparently had been thinking aloud for a while about wanting to live and work in Europe. Well, 10 seasons as a walk-on high school coach is a long time! Ultimately, the plans changed and Vargas was right back in the coach's chair for the start of the 1993 season – a truly lucky thing for Corona del Mar. In the meantime, the rest of the Sea Kings' 1992 campaign became their coach's "Swan Song." Corona del Mar began to turn things around at the South Coast Tournament. A "rejuvenated" (Daily Pilot) Sea Kings defeated Foothill, 6-5, in the semi-finals, and did much better against El Toro in the championship match, losing 8-6, both games played on Sat., Sept. 26 at Newport Harbor. They then quickly returned to Newport Harbor to beat the Sailors, 7-5, in a Sea View League game played Wed., Sept. 30. This gave Corona del Mar a 6-3 record for September and put them well on their way to a 7-0 league championship. They went 10-5 in October and 1-0 in November to finish the season 17-8.

Capistrano Valley had beaten Corona del Mar, 9-6, in the semi-finals of the North Orange County Tournament. But now, exactly one month later in their home pool, the Sea Kings were looking for both revenge and to send their coach out in style. In fact, the Daily Pilot said, "Tuesday's game wasn't really as close as the score." The Register reported, "The Sea Kings never relinquished the lead in the entire game. Every time the Cougars made a run, Corona del Mar answered immediately with a goal to keep the lead at three....The Cougars were shooting with less than 10 seconds on the shot clock most of the game." With a 5-2 half-time lead, the Daily Pilot added, "Using a stifling defense that limited the productivity of Capo's top guns, the Sea Kings were in danger of losing control of the match only once in the second half....The Cougars trimmed the margin to 5-3 midway through the third period." Capistrano Valley then had a man advantage opportunity, but failed to score and that was about it. The Sea Kings moved ahead 6-3 after three periods, and finished up with an 8-5 win.

The semi-finals were played Fri., Nov. 20, both games played at Belmont Plaza.

For Corona del Mar, the situation seemed very similar to their quarter-final match. Harvard had defeated the Sea Kings, 12-6, in the third place game of the North Orange County tourney – played the same day as their loss to Capistrano Valley. But there would be no similar reversal now. As the Register noted, “In the end, Harvard simply overpowered” the Sea Kings. Harvard had a 7-6 lead heading into the fourth quarter, went up 8-6, but Corona del Mar got one back at the 4:38 mark to make it 8-7. Finally, Harvard began to pull away, making it 9-7 with 3:55 remaining; then Jim Toring scored his sixth goal with 1:41 left to make the final score, 10-7. For Harvard, it was revenge for an ancient affront – it had been Corona del Mar who had beaten the Wolverines, 8-1, in their only prior tournament appearance, back in 1973.

El Toro and San Clemente had faced off in the 1988 3A final match; now they were colliding as the premier division champions of the past two years. El Toro took a 10-7 lead into the fourth quarter, when their South Coast League rival staged a rapid comeback. The Tritons knotted the score at 10-10 with still 3:41 left to play, the first time the game had been tied since the first quarter. However, equally rapid goals from Brandon Stout and John Simmons (the third for both) put El Toro back on top, 12-10, with 2:25 to play. Dan Mathot added a final tally (his second) with 47 seconds remaining to produce another semi-final game with a three goal margin – a 13-10 win.

Harvard and El Toro returned to Belmont Plaza on Wed., Nov. 25, five and a half weeks after their only prior meeting this year in the North Orange County tourney semi-finals. Like San Clemente vs. El Toro, the two schools had faced each other once previously in the playoffs, on the 3A level. El Toro had beaten Harvard, 13-3, in the semi-finals of the 1989 3A tourney – recent enough for the seniors of 1992 to remember it. Thus, of the four semi-finalists in 1992, three of them had been playing 3A just three years earlier.

The first quarter of the final game ended with El Toro holding a 5-3 lead, and the Chargers continued to lead at half-time, 6-5. Harvard finally caught El Toro at the end of three, 7-7, and proceeded to move ahead for the first time, taking a 9-7 lead with 3:40 left in the fourth. “But seemingly in command,” said the Los Angeles Times, “the Wolverines failed to score again.” Dan Mathot scored on an extra-man situation at the 2:59 mark to bring the Chargers back within one, and Brent Stoll (the coach’s son, a junior) added a goal with 1:35 left, sending the game into overtime at 9-9. One scoreless three-minute overtime period was played, and the game moved into sudden death – the first time in 10 years a final game went to sudden death, and for only the second time in tournament history. The period-opening sprint between El Toro’s Jay Reaves and Harvard’s Jim Toring resulted in a mid-pool scramble before the ball finally came into El Toro’s possession. Just seconds later, Harvard suffered an ejection to give the Chargers a man-advantage. John Simmons then scored from about seven meters out to win the game 30 seconds into sudden death, 10-9. After being mobbed by his teammates, Simmons reported a surprising level of calculation under the high-pressure circumstances. He told the Saddleback Valley News, “I was looking at the

other defender so that they would think I was going to pass and to give me a little more room to shoot. I think the goalie thought I was going to pass, too, and I caught them by surprise.”

It was El Toro’s second premier division title in three years. In 1990, they had done it the really hard way – coming all the way from eighth seed to the top. This year, even though the Chargers were top seed, it could be said they did it the hard way also – for they had beaten a curse. It had become a rarity in recent years for the number one seed to actually win the title. Since 1979, the number one seed failed to win the title 11 out of 13 years. And – though they hadn’t wanted it this way – they became the first team since Newport Harbor in 1967 to win the title without appearing in the playoffs at all the previous year. (This distinction may also be claimed by the 1990 Chargers, the school having played in the 3A tournament the year prior.)

Unfortunately, the story of the 1992 season ends on a terribly sad note. Tragically, Jim Toring died at 23-years-old on April 20, 1998, of head injuries resulting from being struck by a bus one week earlier in Paris, France, while there competing in a tournament with the U.S. National Team. According to the Los Angeles Times, he had gone on to lead “UCLA to NCAA championships in 1995 and 1996, earning co-most valuable player honors in ’95 and scoring the winning goal in the ’96 final.” The story quoted Richard Corso saying, “When he had the ball in his hands, he was great. When he didn’t have the ball, he was brilliant. At Harvard, he was such a free spirit. He’d come to the pool each day, clap his hands, put up his fists and yell, ‘Let’s go.’ That kind of attitude spread to other kids. He was happy-go-lucky, but when you added water to him, he became a different kid.” Thomas Hudnut, headmaster at Harvard, informed students of Toring’s death during a morning assembly at the school. Hudnut told the Times, “Virtually everybody knew him by reputation and knew he was a great guy and outstanding athletic talent.”

1993

How much excitement and heartbreak can a poor coach’s heart stand? I have heard it observed about the NBA that after the championship is won, the players look happy, the coaches look relieved. By the time this season was through, Don Stoll of El Toro and John Vargas of Corona del Mar could have been candidates for transplants.

We are already several years into the practice that exists today of the best teams – the ones that make the finals – playing about 30 games a year. If “only the last four count” was the thinking, then it was natural to schedule game on top of game to sharpen skills and take the measure of opponents (and videotape them). This led to the proliferation of tournaments, enabling three to five games to be played within two or three days, and frequently resulting in the humbling experience of even very good teams losing twice in one day. In addition to tournaments, season schedules were quickly filled by league games and standalone non-league face-offs – more of which seemed to become necessary as the field of viable competitors continued to mount.

There were five tournaments in the early 1990s that regularly attracted the leading programs, who usually accepted invitations to three of them. In 1993 as in subsequent years, there was no wasting time in getting the tournaments underway. First up was the Long Beach Millikan Tournament, with semi-finals and finals played on Sat., Sept. 18 – just days after the season’s Opening Day, on Tues., Sept. 14. This tournament was attractive because the final day was played at Belmont Plaza, where the CIF-SS finals would be held two months later. It was also enhanced by the presence of Harvard, who won the tournament. Harvard tended to pick this Water Polo fest and bypassed the South Coast Tournament, due to the time and travel commitments required of a school located in Studio City. The South Coast Tournament was the big early pecking-order determiner. Five games were played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 23-25, by each of 32 teams at four south Orange County pools, with the championship rounds at Newport Harbor. Here, Corona del Mar overcame deficits of 6-3 at half and 8-7 after three periods to defeat El Toro, 12-11, for the title. The very next Saturday, El Toro defeated San Clemente, 11-8, to capture the Villa Park Tournament for the second consecutive year – Corona del Mar skipping this one. The Sea Kings, however, were present at the North Orange County Tournament, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 15-16. El Toro passed on this opportunity, so it was the Sea Kings this time who beat out San Clemente for the title, 8-5. The final big tournament was the Northern California (or “State”) Invitational, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 29-30, at De Anza College in Cupertino. This prestigious tournament was typically played the weekend before the final week of the regular season. Corona del Mar won their third major tournament of the year by beating Coronado, 11-9, in the title game. Corona del Mar had defeated Foothill, 10-7, in one semi-final, while El Toro lost in the other, 11-10, to Coronado, the eventual CIF-SDS Division II champion. (This was actually the second time the Sea Kings beat Coronado, having defeated them in the semi-finals of the North Orange County Tournament, 12-7.)

In terms of the leagues, 1993 was a little unusual in that the top five seeds in the playoffs were the five league champions – what one might hope and expect, but often wasn’t the case. El Toro (24-2) was the number one seed after again going undefeated (5-0) to claim the South Coast League title. The decisive league game was played at San Clemente, on Thurs., Oct. 21, where the Chargers defeated the Tritons, 8-6. San Clemente (4-1) took second place in CIF-SS’ toughest league and sixth seed in the playoffs. Capistrano Valley (2-3) took third place – just barely. They finished in a tie with Dana Hills and Mission Viejo, necessitating a three-way playoff. A play-in game led to a final in which the Cougars avenged their earlier league loss to Mission Viejo, beating the Diablos 9-5, on Sat., Nov. 6, at El Toro. Thus, the Cougars advanced as 10th seed in the post-season. Over in the Sea View League, Corona del Mar (24-3) repeated as champion, upending Newport Harbor, 9-5, on Wed., Oct. 6, at the Sea Kings’ pool. Corona del Mar entered the playoffs second seed while the Sailors were seeded eighth. The Sea View League also produced two other entrants – Irvine, third place, and University, fourth (At-Large).

Harvard (23-2) was the third seed, having little trouble going undefeated in the Mission League. This league had the most extensive schedule of the five. It added a sixth team in 1993, St. John Bosco of Bellflower, and the teams played each other twice

for 10 games total. The tone was set the very first week, when the Wolverines beat its usual top competitor, Loyola, 19-6, on Tues., Sept. 21, at the Cubs' pool. Loyola ended up third behind Crespi, which was awarded ninth seed in the playoffs. The Moore League was even less competitive, which fourth seed Long Beach Wilson (22-4) won handily as usual. The Bruins had won the league every year since 1978, except shockingly in 1986, when they finished third. The other Moore League competitors were frankly weak and one wonders where this league might have belonged in the divisional scheme were it not for top-flight Long Beach Wilson. Tournament entrants in this era included Long Beach Wilson (1992-2005), Long Beach Millikan (1992-93, 95-05), Long Beach Poly (1992-95, 97-05) and Lakewood (1994, 96). Other than the Bruins, however, no Moore League team won a single playoff game the entire era. In fact, they came no closer than three goals in their losses.

The remaining league contained a keen rivalry, with fifth-seeded Foothill (17-8) winning the Century League. The key match here was the Knights' 8-5 home victory over Villa Park on Wed., Nov. 3, with the second-place Spartans awarded seventh seed for the playoffs. The rest of the league wasn't nearly as competitive, however. Santa Ana Valley finished in third place, and was the lowest seeded Orange County team in the tournament, condemned to face Harvard in the first round.

Finally, for the busy non-league schedule, the three contests that mattered most in the arranging of playoff seedings were all road-game losses handed to Corona del Mar. The Sea Kings this year had a young team, starting as many as six juniors and no fewer than four, and perhaps their inexperience was exposed on these outings. They lost to San Clemente, 8-7, in overtime, on Tues., Sept. 28; then to El Toro, 10-5, on Tues., Oct. 12 – the Chargers had this game won by the end of the third quarter, leading 9-4; and lastly to Long Beach Wilson, 12-11, in sudden death, on Sat., Oct. 23. Corona del Mar beat all three of these teams in tournament play – El Toro and San Clemente as already noted, but San Clemente additionally in the quarter-finals of the South Coast tourney, 6-5, and Long Beach Wilson in the quarter-finals of the Northern California tourney, 7-6.

First round games of the playoffs arrived on Fri., Nov. 12. The best game was visiting Capistrano Valley's upset of Villa Park, in a 4-3 defensive battle between two schools that had been CIF-SS finalists in recent years. As a result, the South Coast League would be sending three teams to the quarter-finals for the fourth year in a row – every year since the league was promoted from 3A.

The playoffs moved into the quarter-finals on Tues., Nov. 16. As had become their tradition, Newport Harbor and El Toro played each other on the last day of the season, Fri., Nov. 5, with the Chargers winning, 14-6, in their home pool. Exactly like last year, just 11 days later they were encountering each other in the quarter-finals at Newport Harbor. And, like the year before, El Toro got on track quickly – “The visiting Chargers bolted to a 5-0 lead,” according to the Daily Pilot. El Toro won, 15-11, with eventual Player of the Year Bill Pincioli scoring six goals, and Brandon Stout adding five more. Pincioli was an incredible piece of good fortune for El Toro – a member of the Brazilian Junior National Team, whose father had played Water Polo in two Olympiads.

Settling in with an American family, Pincioli sat out the 1992 season to establish eligibility, but he was certainly contributing now. And, for Coach Stoll, he had some additional team members that made this a personally very memorable year. He not only had a son, Brent, a senior, playing in the field, but a second son, Greg, a sophomore, in the goal.

Corona del Mar also got off to a fast start in their quarter-final match against Capistrano Valley at Saddleback College. The Sea Kings were leading comfortably 8-1 by early in the third quarter and cruised to a 15-5 win. Meanwhile, Foothill was playing Long Beach Wilson in the nightcap of a doubleheader at Newport Harbor. According to Stoll, whose El Toro team hung around to scout their next opponent, Long Beach Wilson fairly took over the grounds – having brought with them the school band and a large student rooting section. The Bruins jumped out to a 5-3 lead after one period of play, and that turned out to be the difference as the Knights fell, 9-7. For Foothill, it meant suffering a narrow defeat in the quarter-finals for the second year in a row, while for Long Beach Wilson it meant advancing after being upset by San Clemente in this round the previous year.

And, speaking of San Clemente and upsets in the quarter-finals, they were hatching another one against Harvard, in a game also played as part of a doubleheader, back at Saddleback College. They say defense wins championships and Coach Steve Yancey told the Register, “We just had to do some things defensively and we did. That’s what I’m proud of.” The Tritons had a rough start – trailing 2-0 initially and experiencing “a first period that saw five shots hit posts and their leading scorer, senior Phinney Gardner, on the bench with two early fouls.” Harvard still led 4-3 at half-time, but San Clemente used a man advantage situation to tie the match at 4-4 with 4:59 left in the third. The Tritons scored three more goals in a row to give them a commanding 7-4 lead with 3:24 left in the game, and San Clemente held on for a 7-5 win.

The semi-finals took place on Sat., Nov. 20. The Final Four not only included at least two teams from the South Coast League for (again) the fourth year in a row, but also featured a quartet of former CIF-SS champions for the first time since 1988.

At Newport Harbor, Corona del Mar played its “best game of the season” against San Clemente, Coach Vargas told the Daily Pilot. The Sea Kings never trailed in this fourth meeting between the two teams. Tied 2-2 with 4:40 left in the first half, the Sea Kings went up 4-2. The Tritons made it 4-3 at the 2:02 mark of the second quarter, and then were held scoreless until there was only 1:19 remaining in the game – 12 minutes, 43 seconds of playing time. From the 4-3 half-time lead, Corona del Mar scored four goals in a row to make it 8-3 early in the fourth period, before finally giving up two late goals when the game was already decided. With the 8-5 win in hand, Corona del Mar seemed to be peaking at the right time, as San Clemente’s Coach Yancey could only affirm. He told the Daily Pilot, “When I watched (CDM) against Capo Valley (in the quarter-finals on Tuesday), I thought to myself, ‘They’re right now playing the best in CIF.’”

In the other semi-final game, El Toro and Long Beach Wilson faced each other for the first time this year. The Chargers would have their hands full trying to contain the Bruins' leading offensive threat – Pat Cochran, who would score a game-high five goals before he was through. The meeting was held at Long Beach State's pool, Coach Stoll vetoing Belmont Plaza – he felt the Bruins were just a little too familiar with it as a regular practice and home game location. Yet, the “alternate (neutral) site” proved to have its own challenges. Stoll told me he hadn't scouted the venue the way he normally would, and the sun at that time of day (3:15 p.m. start) did not make things easy on offense or defense. El Toro was also a little less than 100 percent, with some sickness among the players disrupting practice in the days before the game. These factors, perhaps, led to El Toro “playing their worst half of the season, according to...Stoll,” the Register reported. Still, the score was only tied, 3-3, at half-time. The Chargers then finally took control, with Ian Pyka scoring on a pass from Bill Pincirolì just 23 seconds after play resumed. El Toro proceeded to put in five goals in the third period, and built a 10-7 lead by the 3:09 mark of the fourth period. Long Beach Wilson got one back with 2:40 left, but was then held scoreless until there was only :07 remaining. The Chargers triumphed, 10-9.

El Toro, defeated in two tournament games, met up in the final match with Corona del Mar, defeated in three non-league games. Each was a champion of a tough league and each had beaten the other once. The memorable result was rendered at Belmont Plaza on Wed., Nov. 24. (The Register's preview story that day was by-lined by one Dan Albano, in his first year working for the paper. Albano would go on for the next three decades at the Register, performing an invaluable service to Water Polo and other high schools sports as the daily historian of “OC Varsity.”)

During the first half, the Sea Kings' momentum from their semi-final triumph carried over beautifully, while the Chargers appeared to revert to the forgettable first half of their own semi-final. Corona del Mar scored on five of its first six possessions, their march interrupted only by Bill Pincirolì's first goal. The first period would have ended with a four-goal margin except for a Hail Mary-type shot by Brandon Stout with only :03 remaining, making it 5-2. Corona del Mar scored the only goal of the second period, so the Sea Kings did carry a four-goal lead into intermission, 6-2.

What to tell the players in El Toro's huddle? According to the Daily Pilot, Coach Stoll explained, “I use (play) cards here, because if you have 2,500 people screaming after a goal, (my players) can't hear me. But I told them at half-time that I won't use the cards, and just to go out and play and enjoy the game. I also told them that Costa Mesa (had a four-goal lead in the third quarter) in the Division III game, and it lost in sudden death....We're O.K., but we have to start playing.” Stoll told me that his instruction was somewhat more frank, but perhaps established an attainable goal – “I told them I wasn't sure we could win this game, but we are going to win the second half.” The pep talk didn't seem efficacious at first. A defensive miscue resulted in another Sea Kings goal, scored by Neil Hueston, with 4:49 left in the third. Now the Chargers were down by five goals, 7-2, a deficit no team in the finals had ever overcome.

What happened next was head-spinning. After two minutes of trading possessions, Jay Reeves scored for El Toro with 2:42 left in the third. Things began to turnaround on defense also. According to the Saddleback Valley News, “It was Greg Stoll’s point-blank save of (CDM’s) Kevin Tucker’s shot in the third that seemed to spur the Chargers and their crowd back to life.” Goals by Allen Basso and Pincirolì (his second) followed quickly, to make it 7-5 at the end of three. Just like that, El Toro was back in the game. And the rally continued in the fourth – only more so. Brent Stoll scored to make it 7-6, and then Pincirolì scored his third goal with 4:27 to play to tie it. Kevin McIntyre – the sixth Charger to score – gave El Toro their first lead of the game, 8-7, at the 3:42 mark; then, Reeves scored his second goal with 2:54 to play to go up by two. Seven goals in less than six minutes of playing time! Stoll told me, at this point, he turned to his assistant coach and said, “This has happened too fast. There’s too much time left.” Sure enough, to the admirable credit of the Sea Kings, they began a comeback of their own. Corona del Mar’s Thad Buzolich scored with 2:02 to play and Kevin Tucker tied it, 9-9, at the 1:18 mark. The Sea Kings had the ball with :09 left, but could not manage a shot attempt following a time-out.

The game headed into a single three-minute overtime period, in which the score remained unchanged. Stoll told me he said to his players, “This is déjà vu, I already know what’s going to happen – we’re going to win in sudden death, 10-9, just like last year.” He was right about the circumstances – for the second year in a row, the final game was going into sudden death tied, 9-9. He would be proved entirely correct moments later when, just like last year, the game ended on a single possession. El Toro won the sprint, and the ball went into Brandon Stout at two-meters. Following a foul, he tossed it out to Brent Stoll at seven meters, who fired it into the top-left corner of the cage for his second goal. El Toro had won it, 10-9, with only 25 seconds elapsed in sudden death. Stoll’s game-winner seemed to be a product of pure reflex. He told the Register later, “I really just wound up and threw it as hard as I could. I had practiced that shot my whole life.”

It was a heart-stopping finish to a deeply satisfying year for El Toro, and the coach recalls it as his favorite. El Toro became the only team to beat Newport Harbor, Long Beach Wilson and Corona del Mar – the three winningest programs in CIF-SS history – in a single playoff run. But after three premier division championships in four years, Stoll told the Saddleback Valley News, “Don’t look for us here again next year. This is the end of an era at El Toro.” It was also the end of an era for the South Coast League, whose run of four titlists in a row would end here. The Sea Kings, on the other hand, would be back next year to give it another shot. Every great program has a year it looks back on as “the one that got away.” For Corona del Mar, it will always be 1970 – no matter what, including the bitterness of this year’s loss. Their 1993 defeat could be put in the perspective that the Sea Kings staged a late-game comeback and almost sent El Toro home as the ones kicking themselves. And, they were the second seed. But, to lose with a five goal lead with less than nine minutes to play...well, that makes for a long off-season.

1994

Considering the painful way Corona del Mar's season ended the previous year, one would think there was a pent-up need to take it out on someone – anyone – as the 1994 season got underway. Particularly so since they had most of their starting line-up back this year and were the number one team in pre-season rankings. Surprisingly, the Sea Kings started on a flat note. In their season opener on Fri., Sept. 16, at home, Corona del Mar was upset by Foothill, 9-8 in overtime. The Sea Kings let a 7-4 fourth quarter lead slip away as Foothill came back to tie it, 8-8, with 1:14 in regulation. The Knights scored the winning goal 32 seconds into overtime, then denied the Sea Kings in an extra man advantage with 1:10 left to preserve the victory. Perhaps it was Foothill who had the more immediate need to punish someone – they had lost their own season opener in overtime as well, 7-5, against San Clemente just three days earlier. In any case, this match-up was the first of eight games that figured the most prominently in arranging the top four seeds for the playoffs.

Next came the final match in the South Coast Tournament played Sat., Sept. 24, at Newport Harbor, between Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson. The Bruins had been bubbling under among leading contenders for years. But, with eventual Player of the Year Pat Cochran now a senior, the Bruins seemed ready for a serious run at the title. As the Daily Pilot observed following the game, "It appears that Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson are on a collision course to meet in the CIF-Southern Section Division I final in November." In the semi-final games, Corona del Mar defeated San Clemente, 11-8, while Long Beach Wilson beat Servite, 15-7. (The Friars, an eventual Division II finalist, got there by beating Foothill, 11-8, in the quarter-finals. In the third place game, Servite fell to San Clemente, 9-7.) In the championship game, the Bruins had a 3-1 lead in the first quarter, but the Sea Kings dominated thereafter, building a 9-5 lead by early in the fourth quarter. Long Beach Wilson began to put points on the board again late in the game, the last with :04 left, for a 10-9 final score favoring Corona del Mar. It was the Bruins' first loss of the season, and coach Ricardo Azevedo spoke prophetically to the Daily Pilot, "I told (John Vargas) we'll probably face each other four or five times this year, but the important one will be the last time." The Register concluded, "For all those who jumped up with hope after Corona del Mar lost its season opener about a week ago, sit down. The Sea Kings are still the team to beat."

Yet, Corona del Mar then proceeded to lose at home just three days later when they again faced San Clemente in a non-league game. As coach John Vargas told the Daily Pilot afterwards, "It's hard when you're dealing with high school kids. They all read the paper about how great we are, and we're not." The Sea Kings held the lead after a wild first quarter, 6-5, but were then contained for the rest of the game. San Clemente led 10-8 after three periods, and the Sea Kings got no closer, as the Tritons posted a 13-10 win. Perhaps the Tritons just wanted this more than on the previous Saturday. Azevedo's own words to the Daily Pilot were again prophetic: "Foothill and San Clemente are real good, and I think any of the four of us can beat the other on any given day."

Long Beach Wilson got a rematch of its own against Corona del Mar on Sat., Oct. 8, in what would turn out to be the Sea Kings' third loss of the season – all at home. And, perhaps more worrisome, Corona del Mar for the second time coughed up a fourth quarter lead. The Bruins trailed, 7-6, after three, but then put up four goals during the final period to win, 10-9.

The fifth consequential match-up of the year took place at Saddleback College on Tues., Oct. 11. San Clemente surprisingly dominated Long Beach Wilson, building leads of 7-1 at half-time and 8-4 after three periods. The Bruins pulled to within 8-6 with still 5:56 left in the game, but were then shut down by the Tritons' exceptional – and at 6-feet, 9-inches, exceptionally large – goalie, Gabe Gardner. San Clemente went on to win, 10-6.

San Clemente was denied a chance to play Long Beach Wilson again just four days later, when Corona del Mar defeated the Tritons, 7-5, in the semi-finals of the inaugural Southern California Invitational, held at Long Beach State. It was the third meeting between the Sea Kings and the Tritons – Corona del Mar being responsible for San Clemente's only two losses of the season. A day earlier, the Sea Kings beat Foothill, 8-6, in the quarter-finals, avenging their season-opening loss. Long Beach Wilson, meanwhile, beat Coronado in the other semi-final, 16-10. (Coronado would go on to win the Division II title in CIF-SDS – but not before San Clemente defeated them in the third place game here, 15-8.) This set up the sixth key match of 1994 – and the second “third-meeting” on the same day for the Sea Kings, this time with Long Beach Wilson in the finals. Perhaps the Bruins were aroused by their loss to San Clemente earlier in the week, because they came out smoking against Corona del Mar – leading 3-0 after the first period, 6-2 at half-time and 9-2 after three periods. They then cruised to an 11-6 tournament championship.

Yet, Long Beach Wilson proceeded to lose a non-league game played at home nine days later, on Mon., Oct. 24. Visiting Foothill won a “defensive titanic,” 15-14. The Bruins trailed by two with just 50 seconds remaining in regulation, but scored twice in 35 seconds to force overtime. Finally, with 1:30 left, Foothill's Brian Brown converted a penalty shot for the victory.

The eighth key game of the regular season matched Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson for the fourth time, in the finals of the Northern California Tournament at Stanford University on Sat., Oct. 29. The Sea Kings defeated Foothill again, 9-4, in one semi-final, while the Bruins dispensed Clovis West in the other, 11-6. (Clovis West of Fresno, the eventual CIF-Central Section Division I champ, would defeat Foothill in the third place game, 13-12 in overtime.) On this day, Corona del Mar was the aroused team, going in front of the Bruins 3-1 at the end of the first period, extending the lead to 6-2 at half, and holding that margin after a scoreless third period. The Sea Kings' James Palda scored one goal in the fourth to give them just enough to hold off a late Long Beach Wilson surge to win, 7-6. The season series was now knotted at two games apiece going into the playoffs, with Corona del Mar reaping the benefit of having the most recent victory.

These eight battles led to Sea View League champion Corona del Mar (19-4) seeded number one; South Coast League champ San Clemente (23-2) at second; Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson (20-4) at third; and Century League champ Foothill (19-5) at fourth.

First round games were played on Thurs., Nov. 10, the best of the set being the match between defending champ El Toro and Villa Park, the Century League's second place finisher. El Toro was rebuilding after a string of championship seasons, but still riding a 22-game playoff winning streak (i.e., 3A championships in 1988 and 1989, and 4A/Division I titles in 1990, 1992 and 1993 – not qualifying in 1991). In the midst of "reloading," El Toro had been moved over to the Sea View League. As Coach Stoll wrote to me, "Leagues were formed based on the strength of the schools' football team. All other sports would follow no matter what strength there was in each sport." The Sea View League had too many strong football teams, and needed to reorganize. Thus, "El Toro was the furthest team up the freeway in the 1993 South Coast League, so we were the closest to the Sea View League schools." Of course, this weakened the South Coast League, while reestablishing the Sea View League as the toughest in Water Polo. El Toro finished third in league play and their 16-10 regular season record included a road loss to Villa Park, 8-5, on Oct. 24. Playing at Corona del Mar today, however, the Chargers built an 8-4 lead with four minutes left in the fourth quarter. Villa Park rallied for three goals, the final one coming with 1:05 to play, making it 8-7. Villa Park regained possession with 30 seconds remaining but El Toro came up with a steal with :07 left to secure the victory. As was often the case in the first round, this highly competitive game was a lonely statistic – no other match was closer than an eight-goal margin.

So, there were three Sea View League teams in the quarter-finals this year, with the Elite Eight in action on Tues., Nov. 15. Newport Harbor was the league's second place entrant, matching up against San Clemente. Like their quarter-final encounters with El Toro the previous two years, the Sailors hosted San Clemente on the very last day of the season, Fri., Nov. 4, and lost badly, 13-3. For the third year in a row, then, the Sailors were at home against a quarter-final opponent from the South Coast League that they had just seen 11 days earlier – and the results were once again the same. The Sailor gave the Tritons a much better game this time, trailing only 4-3 midway through the third quarter. But, San Clemente then proceeded to score five straight goals to make it 9-3 with less than two minutes remaining in the game. The Tritons closed out the victory, 10-5.

El Toro, meanwhile, was at home against Long Beach Wilson, in their first meeting of the year. Defending champs never go down easily and this battle turned out to be the toughest in the round. In fact, says the Los Angeles Times, it was "an intense game that culminated with a poolside shoving match that had to be broken up by the coaches." The Bruins jumped out to a 3-0 lead and still led 7-4 with less than two minutes remaining in the game. But the Chargers' Allen Basso scored three goals – on four-meter penalty shots at the 1:51 and 1:16 marks, and he "then stole the ball at mid-pool and broke away for the tying goal with 25 seconds left." That penalty shot at 1:16

also resulted in the fouling out of one of the Bruins' leading players, Matt Aramato, so they seemed in peril with the game knotted at 7-7 and headed for overtime. But, "the Chargers seemed to have nothing left in the overtime as Wilson's Adam Wright scored on the opening possession and Pat Cochran secured the game on a penalty-shot goal with 49 seconds left." This final, third goal in overtime gave the Bruins a 10-7 victory and avenged their semi-final loss to El Toro the year before.

Corona del Mar turned out to be the only Sea View League team to survive the quarter-finals, doing so in the least competitive match. Trabuco Hills, in their first playoff tournament, was the second place representative from the South Coast League. The Mustangs played both host and victim. They came out playing tough defense, with the Sea Kings leading only 3-1 after the first period. But, Corona del Mar's lead went to 8-4 at half-time and 13-4 after three periods. The Sea Kings cruised to the 16-7 win, playing their substitute goalie the entire second half.

The remaining quarter-final game pitted Foothill against fifth-seed and Mission League champion Harvard – so, like last year, the top five seeds were also the five league champions. The Mission League distinguished itself this year by placing the At-Large entrant – Notre Dame (SO). It was the only time in this era that either of the two Los Angeles County-based leagues contributed a fourth-place team to the tournament. In the game played at Harvard, the Wolverines were plagued by foul trouble the entire time. They faced 15 extra-man situations, surrendering only five goals in these instances, as well as three four-meter penalty shots, their goalie managing to block one of them. As the Los Angeles Times reported, "Most of the Knights' shots were finding everything but the back of the net in the first three quarters." Harvard actually led, 7-5, early in the third quarter. But, by the middle of the fourth quarter, two key Harvard players had fouled out, and resistance began to collapse. Foothill went ahead 9-8 with 4:06 left in the game, and added another soon after. Harvard got to within 10-9 at the 1:15 mark, but that turned out to be the final score.

So, the top four seeds proceeded intact to the semi-finals, played Sat., Nov. 19.

Corona del Mar faced Foothill for the fourth time this year at Tustin High School. Like their most recent contest, played exactly three weeks earlier at Stanford, Corona del Mar "controlled the entire contest," according to the Register. The Sea Kings led 2-1 after the first period, 4-2 at half-time and 5-2 after three periods. James Palda made it 6-2 with 3:56 left in the fourth quarter. Then, "Foothill did mount somewhat of a rally, Brian Brown scoring his second of three goals at 3:29 of the fourth quarter putting the score at 6-3. Brown was then awarded a penalty shot with 2:06 to play that could have brought the Knights to within two, but he missed, hitting the right post." A final tally by Foothill in the remaining time brought the final score to 6-4. The Sea Kings now had a chance to win the title after last year's heartbreaker, and they seemed determined to do it with a core unit. The Daily Pilot noted, "The Sea Kings used no substitutions the entire 28 minutes" (seven minute quarters having been inaugurated this year).

A straight shot 17 miles south on the 5 freeway, San Clemente was taking on Long Beach Wilson at Saddleback College, in their second meeting of the year. But that four-goal triumph by the Tritons six and half-weeks earlier in the same pool was no template for this close, tense game, played “In front of an overflow crowd of about 1,500,” said the Register. Long Beach Wilson started out with a 2-0 lead, but San Clemente caught them at 3-3 at half-time, and the score was tied again 5-5 at the end of three periods. The Bruins’ Micah Miller scored on a man-advantage with 3:59 left in the fourth, but the Tritons’ Andy Bailey netted his match-high fourth goal with 2:02 remaining to tie it up once more, 6-6. However, Long Beach Wilson drew two more kickouts to seal the Tritons’ fate. Although the Bruins failed to convert either of the chances, goals shortly followed. Keith Feldman and Rick Westberg scored at 1:08 and :08, respectively, to give the Bruins the 8-6 victory. It was an impressive team win for Long Beach Wilson – the team’s usual goal manufacturers, Pat Cochran and Adam Wright, combined for only one goal.

The final game arrived on Wed., Nov. 23, played “in front of a standing room only crowd at Belmont Plaza,” said the Daily Pilot. Unlike the wild swings of last year’s game, this was a consistently close game – tied eight separate times, and with the lead changing hands four times. Long Beach Wilson held the initial leads, finishing the first quarter ahead, 4-3. Early in the second quarter, the Sea Kings’ Thad Buzolich scored from the hole to tie it, 4-4, then Adrian Strelzow scored with 5:17 left on a man advantage, giving Corona del Mar its first lead, 5-4. The Bruins’ Adam Wright scored on a lob shot to give Long Beach Wilson the lead again, 6-5. The Sea Kings’ Adam McFarland then scored from the hole and James Palda added a goal during another man-up situation with 1:03 left to give Corona del Mar a 7-6 half-time lead.

Third period scoring started fast with the Bruins’ Pat Cochran tying it for the seventh time, 7-7. Then, reports the Los Angeles Times, “The Sea Kings appeared to have gained a little control early in the third quarter, taking a 9-7 lead, the only two-goal margin in the game. Adam McFarland, who scored four goals, put the Sea Kings ahead, 8-7, with 5:35 left in the quarter and then Jeff Marchiorlatti scored at 5:19.” Eerily, it was just about at this mark (4:49 in a six minute quarter) last year that Corona del Mar had built their five goal lead against El Toro. And, like last year, the Sea Kings’ opponent rallied; unlike last year, though, Corona del Mar put no more points on the board. Pat Cochran scored two more goals this quarter (of his four total), including a shot from six meters with 49 seconds left in the third to tie it at the break, 9-9. Long Beach Wilson’s Keith Feldman then scored on an assist from Adam Wright (who scored three goals himself) with 5:19 remaining in the game for the fourth and final lead change, making it 10-9. Corona del Mar had one more good chance to tie, but were denied on a man-advantage situation at about the four-minute mark. The game ended on a trues of true Hail Mary attempts. The Sea Kings regained possession with :03 remaining and called time out. According to high school rules, though, play had to resume with the ball in the goalie’s hands. CDM’s Doug Jetton had to fire a length-of-the-pool pass toward the Long Beach Wilson cage, but a field player, Richard Westberg, batted it away and the Bruins held on. For the third year in a row, the final game was decided, 10-9. Long Beach Wilson had won the ultimate rubber match in this fifth

meeting between the two schools – and it was Ricardo Azevedo’s first title in his five years of coaching the Bruins. “We’re a very good second half team,” Azevedo told the Daily Pilot. “In the last four or five years, I don’t think we’ve lost one game in the second half.”

In some ways, the Sea Kings’ recent experience was a case of things evening out. Corona del Mar had won the championship in its first five trips to the finals, and nine of their first 11 – way above average. Now, they had lost two years in a row in maddening fashion – relinquishing five- and two-goal leads in the third quarter to lose by one goal both years. Yet, Coach Vargas could tell the Los Angeles Times, “I think we played a good game but they were better. I don’t have a problem with the way the guys played. I have a problem with the outcome.” For Long Beach Wilson, however, they had gotten to the top for only the second time in their history. Since their first title in 1981, they had finished in the finals once, semis seven times, quarters three times and Sweet 16 once. They were on the cusp of getting something really big underway – way above average as well.

1995

There have only been 13 champions in the first 68 years of the tournament (1952-2019). A new champ just over every five years. And, a total of 136 schools have participated in the tournament in that time; thus, less than one in 10 have won it. Foothill of North Tustin didn’t have to wait the longest for its first title, but it did take a long time – 28 years from the Knights’ first tournament appearance in 1967. They had a legendary swimming program, founded by Tom DeLong. Under DeLong, Foothill won CIF-SS championships in 1971-74 and 1989, bookending Mission Viejo’s 14 titles in a row (1975-88), and finishing second four times during that stretch. Yet, they hadn’t produced distinctively great Water Polo teams or players – the goalie John Gansel (1973-76), later with Stanford, being a notable early exception. They had never gotten to the finals and only as far as the semi-finals twice (1984 and 1994). They spent 1976-1982 in 3A, where they did make the finals once – losing to their Century League competitor, Villa Park, in 1981. In 1987, Jim Brumm became the third Foothill Water Polo coach (following DeLong and Dave Simcox), and legendarily has stayed in the post into the 2020s. In 1995 they had the right coach, for sure, and a tradition of aquathletics excellence. Yet, many fine programs have never won the title and perhaps Foothill might remain one of them. The Knights were in the hunt again this year – even the favorites – but they were going to have to get past at least three other schools set for good years, three-time champ El Toro, two-time champ Long Beach Wilson and archrival Villa Park. Let’s take a chronological look at the triumphs and set-backs of these four programs during the regular season.

Foothill opened the season as the top ranked team, which often doesn’t mean much. In this case, they validated their standing, winning their Opening Day match, Tues., Sept. 12, against San Clemente at Saddleback College, 17-10. The Knights trailed 6-2 with 4:31 remaining in the first half, but pulled to within 7-6 at intermission, and then left the Tritons in the dust in the second half.

Villa Park got off to a fast start also, winning the Long Beach Millikan Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 14-16. The Spartans had a venerable coach of their own, Jeff Ehrlich, now in his 22nd year coaching Villa Park. On the first day of the tournament, he picked up his 400th career victory. On the tournament's last day, played at Belmont Plaza, the Spartans defeated eventual Division II quarter-finalist Los Alamitos in the semis, 11-5; and then Harvard in the finals, 7-6. Ehrlich told the Register about a week later, "This is one of the best teams I've ever had."

The South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 21-23, further validated Foothill as the team to beat. First, though, El Toro had a rough tourney – on Thursday, they lost their second round game to Los Alamitos, 8-3, then lost the ninth place game to eventual Division II finalist Marina, 11-10. Long Beach Wilson got to the semi-finals before losing to Newport Harbor in sudden death, 7-6. Foothill beat Villa Park in the other semi-final game, 9-6. The Bruins would defeat the Spartans in the third place game, 8-7. Foothill then convincingly defeated Newport Harbor in the final match at the Sailors' home pool. With only a 6-5 lead after three periods, the Knights pumped in five goals in the fourth quarter to pull away for the victory, 11-8. (This turned out to be the only meeting of the year between Foothill and Newport Harbor. They were scheduled to play on Fri., Oct. 20, but the game was cancelled due to the tragic death the day before of 14-year-old Gray Lunde, a freshman at Newport Harbor. According to the Los Angeles Times, Lunde "died after suffering an apparent heart attack during practice....He collapsed after climbing out of the pool....The probable cause of death is a congenital heart defect, said Maureen Mazzatenta, Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian spokeswoman." There was a prestigious frosh-soph tournament in its third year of competition in 1995, played at Newport Harbor the weekend while Varsity teams were out-of-town at the Nor Cal Tournament. It was immediately renamed in Lunde's memory.)

Long Beach Wilson and Foothill had just missed each other at the South Coast Tournament. But, a non-league game played the following week, Wed., Sept. 27, once again stamped Foothill as number one, with the Knights visiting the Bruins and beating them, 14-9.

On Sat., Sept. 30, Villa Park collected its second tournament championship of the year – winning its own tourney for the first time since 1982. (The event was renamed "Villa Park Classic" in 1994 and expanded this year from 24 to 32 entrants.) The Spartans defeated eventual Division II champion Costa Mesa in the semis, 11-10, then beat eventual Division II semi-finalist Servite in the title game, 15-8. Servite had beaten El Toro in the other semi-final game, 12-10. It was the third loss of the season for the Chargers – all against Division II teams. They did start to make amends that afternoon, however, defeating Costa Mesa in the third place game, 11-8. The Chargers would go even further in the right direction just four days later at home. El Toro defeated Newport Harbor, 6-4, scoring twice in the fourth period to break up a 4-4 tie after three periods. It was the first Sea View League game for both, and it turned out to be the match that decided the championship.

Another big tourney was then on tap, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 13-14. In fact, in only its second year, the Southern California Invitational had ascended to the middle engagement of what became the “Big Three” Water Polo fests of the year – South Coast preceding it, Nor Cal following it. After its introduction at Long Beach State the previous year, the tourney was moved to Woollett Aquatics Center in Irvine. (The North Orange County Tournament, played on the same weekend, was fading in significance. It was won by Newport Harbor, which hosted the final game and beat Capistrano Valley, 13-7, for the title.) At the Southern California Invitational semi-finals, Foothill defeated El Toro in overtime, 5-4, and Long Beach Wilson edged San Clemente, 11-10. The Tritons would go on to hand the Chargers their second overtime loss of the day in the third place game, 9-8. The Bruins then proceeded to upset the Knights in their second meeting of the year. Foothill led, 5-3, at half-time, but Long Beach Wilson moved ahead after three periods, 8-7. The Bruins made it 11-9 with 1:29 remaining and finished it out with another 11-10 win. Five weeks into the season, the championship race suddenly seemed wide open. Still, Foothill’s Coach Brumm looked on the bright side, telling the Register, “I think the kids can bounce back. I like these kids and they work hard. It’s good in the sense that they could see that we could get beat.” And, the Bruins themselves would be humbled by Villa Park just two days later at Belmont Plaza. Long Beach Wilson built a 7-2 lead in the second quarter, and still had a one goal lead with less than three minutes remaining in the game, but the Spartans ended up stealing it from them by the same final score, 11-10.

Exactly one week after its win against Long Beach Wilson, Villa Park became the third leading contender in nine days to get a lesson in humility. Playing at El Toro on Mon., Oct. 23, the Chargers knocked off Villa Park, 9-6. The Spartans took a 2-1 first quarter lead, but were then held scoreless well into the third period, by which time the Chargers had built a commanding 8-2 lead. El Toro, it could be said at this point, was definitely back after a rebuilding year in 1994.

The last tournament of the regular season provided the platform for the third meeting of the year between Foothill and Long Beach Wilson. The California State (Nor Cal) Tournament was held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 27-28, with the Knights and Bruins facing off in the final game, played at West Valley College in San Jose. The two teams first had to get past a couple of superior northern competitors in the semi-finals – Foothill defeating Miramonte, 11-6, and Long Beach Wilson beating San Jose-based Bellarmine Prep, 9-5. (Miramonte would claim the CIF-North Coast Section title – all teams playing on one level until 2010; and Bellarmine would wind up CIF-CCS Division I champs. This made for an interesting third place game, Miramonte emerging victorious, 13-9.) The final match turned out to be similar to the first encounter between Foothill and Long Beach Wilson, with the Knights winning its second tournament of the year rather comfortably, 14-10. And so the season seemed to be wrapping up as it started – confirmed when Foothill visited Villa Park on Wed., Nov. 1 for their second meeting of the year, this time to decide the Century League championship. Foothill never trailed, and were only tied once, at 1-1 with 4:31 left in the first quarter. From there, Foothill moved out to an 8-1 lead by early in the third quarter, and coasted to an 11-4 victory. “They’re definitely the No. 1 team,” is all Villa Park’s Coach Ehrlich could tell the Register.

The eight weeks of regular season play yielded Century League champ Foothill (23-1) as the playoffs' top seed; second, Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson (21-4); third, Century League second place representative Villa Park (23-4); and fourth, Sea View League champ El Toro (21-5).

The tournament kicked off with first round games played Thurs., Nov. 9. The best game of the set pitted two schools that had recently been to the finals – Mission League champion Harvard at home against Corona del Mar, the Sea View League third place representative. Harvard won 11-6, but was seeded eighth – very low for a league champion – so the victory only entitled them to a date with Foothill. The other game worth noting featured South Coast League champion San Clemente vs. Santa Margarita, the fourth place team (At-Large) from the Sea View League. San Clemente was also seeded low for a league champion – at seventh and in line to play Long Beach Wilson next. Their ranking was odd in that Capistrano Valley, the second place South Coast League team, had the apparently more favorable position at fifth seed. But, the schedulers must have noticed how well fourth-seed El Toro had been playing lately (undefeated since those two overtime losses on Oct. 14). San Clemente easily beat Santa Margarita, 19-5, at Saddleback College. What distinguishes this game is that it was the Eagles' first tournament – another private school entering the picture. It was the second year in a row that four private schools had made it into the Sweet 16, though Harvard continued to be the only such school to record a win.

Quarter-final games were played on Tues., Nov. 14. And, in fact, Capistrano Valley did draw the hotter opponent in El Toro. The Chargers had beaten the Cougars on Fri., Oct. 6 at Saddleback College, 13-7. Now, in the same pool, El Toro jumped out to an 11-0 lead with 1:54 left in the first half and took it easy from there, winning again 13-7. San Clemente gave Long Beach Wilson a tougher game, as part of the doubleheader at Saddleback. Adam Wright, the eventual Player of the Year, pumped in six goals to lead Long Beach Wilson to a 13-8 victory. The Bruins had ended the Tritons' season for a second year in a row. Meanwhile, much to Foothill's annoyance as the top seed, the Knights were forced to play Harvard at the Wolverines' pool. This was the third time in four years the two schools were meeting in the quarter-finals. Foothill made sure to cancel any home-pool advantage by jumping out to a 7-1 lead early and never let Harvard threaten thereafter. The Knights' Jeff Pflueger, a junior, scored seven goals, and sophomore Robby Arroyo added five for the widest victory margin in the round, 15-7.

This left Villa Park to face Newport Harbor, the second place Sea View League representative, at the Sailors' pool. Newport Harbor came into the playoffs 19-5 and had been ranked second in the two weeks following the South Coast Tournament. As previously noted, they had been defeated by Foothill and El Toro, but their only other losses were to Long Beach Wilson (11-10 on Tues., Sept. 12, at Belmont Plaza, and 16-12 on Fri., Oct. 27, in the quarter-finals of the Nor Cal Tournament), and to Coronado, 13-12 in sudden death, on Sat., Sept. 30, at Newport Harbor (Coronado was on its way to its third straight Division II title in CIF-SDS). The Sailors were loaded with nine seniors this year, and five of them dyed their hair blue (the school color) prior to the

playoffs in a gesture of commitment. And, Newport Harbor led most of the way – 4-2 after the first period, 5-4 at half-time and 6-5 after three periods. Villa Park’s Kyle Baumgarner opened scoring in the fourth quarter with his third goal of the game to tie it, 6-6. Newport Harbor’s Chris Richardson scored his fourth goal to give the Sailors the lead, 7-6, with 4:44 remaining. But, the Spartans’ Brian Pharris tied the score at 7-7 with 3:04 left, and he scored again at the 2:20 mark to make it 8-7. Newport Harbor had a final good opportunity with a man-advantage situation commencing at 1:06, but could not convert, leaving 8-7 as the final score. Back in 1983-1988, Villa Park had finished in the quarter-finals a record six times in a row, with Newport Harbor being responsible for beating them the final two times. Now, the Sailors – holder of so many playoff records – had finished in the quarter-finals seven years in a row (1989-1995), Villa Park delivering the latest blow. But, ending the season short of a program goal had already been put in the saddest perspective for the Sailors, with the death of their freshman teammate less than four weeks earlier.

The semi-finals were held on Sat., Nov. 18, as a doubleheader at Tustin High School, with Foothill playing El Toro at 1:30 p.m. and Long Beach Wilson battling Villa Park at 3:15 p.m. The contests took place, said the Saddleback Valley News, “before an overflow crowd of about 1,500.”

The Foothill-El Toro game was in several ways a repeat of their match played exactly five weeks earlier at the Southern California Invitational – the Knights shut out the Chargers in the first half, took an early lead and held off a late rally to gain the victory in a low scoring affair. They never trailed in either match. Foothill led 1-0 at the end of the first period, and 3-0 at half-time. El Toro finally got on the board with 4:59 left in the third period to make it 3-1, but Foothill’s Robby Arroyo scored on a man-advantage situation just 14 seconds later. El Toro then scored twice, the second with :41 left in the quarter, to close to within 4-3 at the end of three periods. But, Arroyo scored the first two goals of the fourth to make it 6-3 Knights with 5:06 left in the game. El Toro got the last two tallies to make it close, but Foothill hung on, 6-5. Foothill was now the sixth “new” team to gain the finals in the last seven years, after not a single first-timer had entered in the previous seven.

Villa Park and Long Beach Wilson had split their two prior meetings, both decided by one goal. Like the immediately prior semi-final game, this nightcap to the doubleheader had a narrow final margin, but perhaps wasn’t as close as one might think. Villa Park never trailed. With the game tied 3-3 at half-time, the Spartans moved out to a 6-4 lead after three periods. The two teams then played even in the fourth period, giving Villa Park an 8-6 victory. The Spartans owed their success to bottling up the Bruins’ Adam Wright, who was shut out for the first time this season. According to the Los Angeles Times, “Villa Park went at Wright with at least five defenders, two of whom received three kickouts and were ejected from the game. But Wilson, which usually scores on 65% to 70% of its six-on-five opportunities, converted only one of nine. When the Villa Park defense sprung a leak, goalkeeper (Jon) Pharris was there to plug the hole.” Meanwhile, Peter Cornue poured in six goals for Villa Park, which was

headed for only their second appearance in the finals, and their first since kicking off this current trend of “first-time” finalists in 1989.

With an all-Century League final game on tap for Wed., Nov. 22 at Belmont Plaza, the Register could not resist labeling it “The Battle of the Century.” Besides, the new millennium was only five years away – it was so topical! But it was really a “Battle of the Neighborhood” as only 5.2 miles separated the schools. It was the closest distance between two finalists – other than Newport Harbor vs. Corona del Mar – in tournament history. Foothill had beaten Villa Park by margins of three goals and seven goals, the latter occurring just three weeks to the day prior. (As if they were not already familiar enough with each other, it was the first time since 1984 that two finalists had met that recently.) The Knights, though, had an age-old difficulty – trying to beat a good team three times in a row, and to get motivated when the first two encounters were rather easy wins.

And, indeed, in the words of Foothill’s leading scorer that night, “In the first half it was all them” (Los Angeles Times). Villa Park led throughout the first half, shutting out the Knights in the second quarter, to go into intermission with a 4-2 advantage. Foothill’s Scott Hay scored a man-advantage goal at 5:57 in the third to make it, 4-3. Then, the Knights’ Brian Brown went on a tear, scoring their next three goals. The third of these made it 6-5, giving Foothill its first lead of the game. Villa Park’s Aaron Waldrip tied the score at 6-6 with 1:37 left in the third, but Brown scored two more goals in the quarter, his fifth one with only :05 remaining. Foothill had scored six times total in the third quarter, to go from two goals down to two up, 8-6. The Spartans’ Peter Cornue scored in the first minute of the fourth quarter to bring them within one. But, Villa Park could not find the back of the net again despite several near misses, including a last shot attempt with :20 remaining, following a timeout. Foothill hung on for their first championship, 8-7.

It had taken Foothill a long time but they had finally gotten to the mountain top. They were no longer known only for having a great swimming program. In fact, having finished in the semis last year and now champions, they had initiated a Golden Age. The Knights would record four more final game appearances and three more semi-final finishes through 2005, not to mention a second title in 2008. They would also collect the second most total playoff wins during the next 10 years. These achievements are somewhat hidden by another school having their own Golden Age at the same time, Long Beach Wilson. Yet, the Knights could also claim the distinction of being the only team to beat the Bruins in the playoffs during their coming decade of dominance.

After the recent opening up of the competitive landscape (again, six “new” finalists since 1989), that landscape would close off abruptly. For 10 years in a row starting in 1996, not a single first-time team would appear in the finals – a tournament record. In fact, only six teams total would appear from 1996-2005. After next year, there wouldn’t even be a first-time semi-finalist during this period. Winning a championship – or even coming close – is reserved for very few in this game.

1996

Who is the greatest player in the history of CIF-SS Water Polo? In covering the 1969 season, I made a case for Corona del Mar's Bruce Black. Another great player that must be considered is Bob Saari, son of the legendary El Segundo coach, who won Player of the Year honors three straight years, 1963-65. But another coach's son arrives on the scene this year, Tony Azevedo, son of Long Beach Wilson's Ricardo Azevedo. The younger Azevedo made an immediate impact, starting on Varsity his freshman year. Long Beach Wilson would win the title all four years he played, and he remains only the second person to win Player of the Year honors three years in a row (1997-99). Most observers would probably point to Tony Azevedo as the best player ever, and the credentials already mentioned make that assessment difficult to argue against.

Like 1994, this season basically boils down to four regular season contests between two schools that split the meetings, setting up another "ultimate rubber match" in the finals. Long Beach Wilson was again one of those teams but, instead of Corona del Mar, their rival now was defending champ Foothill. Unlike 1994, the two finalists owed their losses to no one except each other.

The four battles played out primarily in the "Big Three" tournaments.

First up was the South Coast tourney, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 26-28, at Newport Harbor. In the semi-finals, Foothill beat San Clemente, 8-7, while Long Beach Wilson defeated Costa Mesa, 17-8. Costa Mesa took third place by edging San Clemente, 10-9 in overtime (Costa Mesa would finish in the quarter-finals of Division II). In the final match, Long Beach Wilson led 6-4 at half-time and 7-6 after three periods. But, according to the Los Angeles Times, "(Foothill's) Matt McPherson drew a four-meter penalty shot, which (Jeff) Pflueger converted to tie the match, 7-7, with 5:30 left. At (4:20 remaining), McPherson scored...to give Foothill its first lead of the match (8-7)." That turned out to be the final score. Did I say that Tony Azevedo made an immediate impact? He accounted for two of the Bruins' goals, both in the second quarter. In addition to Azevedo, the Bruins were particularly strong in the cage this year with Nick Hill, who would go on to be Player of the Year – the first goalie so honored since 1987 and only the third to-date.

The next match-up took place at the Southern California Invitational, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 4-5, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Not only had this tourney established itself as a "major" remarkably fast, but the Irvine complex was now clearly a key venue. In the semi-finals, Long Beach Wilson took care of Los Alamitos, 12-10, and Foothill handled Harvard, 11-5. In the third place game, Harvard beat Los Alamitos, 10-7 (the Griffins would finish in the semi-finals of Division II). Then came the title contest. According to the Register, "Foothill took a 2-0 lead early in the second period but...Long Beach Wilson tied the match, 4-4, at half-time and scored the first two goals of the third for its first lead. Foothill (came back) to tie the match, 6-6, with 5:52 left (in the game). From there, the finale was tied at 7-7 and 8-8 before the Bruins put the match away. With 59 seconds left, Tony Azevedo scored the game-winner." Final score, 9-8.

The third face-off was played Tues., Oct. 15. The Register reported, “(The Knights’) Matt Ellis scored with 10 seconds left to send the game into overtime and Robby Arroyo scored the game-winner in sudden death to lift Foothill to a 13-12 nonleague Water Polo victory against host Long Beach Wilson.”

The teams met up a final time at the Nor Cal tournament in San Jose, played Fri.-Sat., Nov. 1-2. In the semi-finals, Foothill defeated Costa Mesa, 9-5, and Long Beach Wilson beat Harvard, 9-4. The Wolverines ended up third, handling Costa Mesa, 11-5. In the final match, Long Beach Wilson pulled out a 9-8 overtime triumph, the fourth one-goal game between the two schools, and the second straight in overtime. This enabled the Bruins (23-2) to grab the number one seed in the playoffs; Foothill took second seed, finishing with an identical regular season record.

To comment briefly on the other Water Polo fests – the Villa Park Classic was held the same weekend as So Cal, but still managed to attract a strong field. Villa Park claimed their own tourney for the second year in a row, winning 9-4 in the title game against Laguna Beach, which eventually finished second to El Dorado in Division II. The Long Beach Millikan Tournament culminated on Sat., Sept. 21, at Belmont Plaza. Loyola and Villa Park were surprisingly defeated in the semi-finals by Bonita and Capistrano Valley, respectively. Bonita then won the final over the Cougars, 9-7. Bonita was a Division VI team, and would finish as a semi-finalist in that playoff’s third year of existence. Capistrano Valley would finish in a three-way tie for second in the South Coast League – fourth place after a coin flip went against them. Lastly, the North Orange County Tournament was now a playoff tune-up for lower division competitors. The final game was played on the very last day of the season, Sat., Nov. 9, with Servite defeating La Serna, 10-8, at El Dorado. Servite would be a semi-finalist in Division II while La Serna finished in the semis in Division III.

Foothill bookended its regular season rather elegantly. On Opening Day, Tues., Sept. 17, the Knights defeated El Toro in the Chargers’ pool, 10-7. El Toro would go on to win the Sea View League crown and claim the third seed in the playoffs. And, on Wed., Nov. 6, host Foothill beat Villa Park, 11-8, to wrap up their fifth Century League championship in a row. The second-place Spartans would be seeded fourth in the playoffs – making it two years running that the league had placed two teams among the top four seeds.

Long Beach Wilson started its season on the same day as Foothill, on the road at Newport Harbor, winning 7-4. The Bruins then proceeded to uneventfully win the Moore League title for the 10th year in a row, and 18th time in the last 19 years. For the Sailors, though, it was the beginning of a long year that would result in the school missing the playoffs for the first time since 1966 – ending a string of 29 straight appearances, just two short of Downey’s then-record. As the Los Angeles Times explained in a Tues., Nov. 5 story, “The Sailors (10-13 [on the season], 1-3 in the Sea View League) have only two games left and cannot finish better than fourth in league. One At-Large bid to the Division I playoffs will be awarded, but a team must have at least a .500 record to be eligible for consideration. . . . The 1996 Sailors sealed their

fate Friday and Saturday when they went 1-3 at the Cal State Invitational in Northern California.” Newport Harbor proceeded to win their final league game against host Woodbridge, 20-8, on Wed., Nov. 6, to secure fourth place (2-3). Ironically, their last game of the season was played on Fri., Nov. 8 at home against Capistrano Valley – who did get the At-Large bid. If the Sailors had won just one of its 13 losses, that contest with the Cougars would have been a truly intense one. As it was, it was meaningless, and Capistrano Valley won anyway, 6-5. Coach Barnett, as ever, provided a frank assessment, “We lost our playoff spot in several games throughout the season. Games that we had an opportunity to win and we just basically gave away. Of all the games we had, we have beaten ourselves in every one except three. In one form or another, we always find a way to louse it up.”

Harvard was also having a trying year, though they once again had the full attention of their coach. Richard Corso was the head coach of the 1996 U.S. Olympics team, the Water Polo tournament taking place July 20-28 in Atlanta, Georgia. Spain beat Croatia, 7-5, to win the Gold medal. The U.S. had lost in the quarter-finals to Spain, 5-4, then suffered another tough loss to Greece, 7-6, in a fifth-place semi-final. The U.S. finished in seventh place with a 12-8 win over Serbia and Montenegro (FR Yugoslavia). Back on the high school level, Corso’s Wolverines lost at home to Loyola, 5-4 in overtime, on Wed., Oct. 23. It was Harvard’s second-only Mission League loss in nine seasons. And, it was the circuit’s deciding game as Mission League teams played each other only once this season. League champ Loyola (5-0) entered the playoffs as the fifth seed, while Harvard (4-1) finishing second and was seeded seventh.

Back on Tues., Sept. 10, Corona del Mar coach John Vargas was announced as Corso’s successor as U.S. Olympics Team head coach for the 2000 games. This made three coaches in row – and four consecutive Olympics cycles – of teams led by CIF-SS Water Polo coaches. And, counting Urho Saari in 1952 and 1964, six Olympics teams would now be coached by men also busy with high school programs. Of course, this also meant the Sea Kings were embarking on a period experienced by Newport Harbor and Harvard when their coaches had been similarly honored and burdened. Corona del Mar finished second in the Sea View league, and entered the playoffs as the eighth seed.

The first round of the playoffs, played Thurs., Nov. 14, was an unusually interesting Sweet 16. First of all, it featured the only contests decided by one goal in the entire tournament – two of them. Corona del Mar needed overtime to beat Mission Viejo, the second place South Coast League representative. Greg Strelzow scored with 1:39 left in the first overtime to lift the Sea Kings past the Diablos, 8-7, at Trabuco Hills. The other one-point affair was Loyola vs. Santa Margarita, third place in the Sea View League. Brandon Joffe scored for visiting Santa Margarita to tie the game with 21 seconds to play, 8-8, but Loyola’s Matt Miles came back with the decisive goal on a penalty throw with only nine seconds left. The Cubs won, 9-8, to become only the second private school in history to win a playoff game. The tournament, thus, featured four private schools for the third year in a row and this game marked the first time two private institutions had ever faced each other. An additional interesting match involved

Foothill, who drew a tougher opponent than they should have as the second seed. Capistrano Valley had given the visiting Knights a tough game on Tues., Sept. 24. The Cougars had trailed only 4-3 in the fourth quarter, before Foothill pulled away for a 6-3 victory. Now, at Tustin High School, Foothill got past Capistrano Valley, 11-7.

The quarter-finals were played on Tues., Nov. 19, and included two upsets. The top two seeds advanced, though not without being challenged. Long Beach Wilson visited Corona del Mar and met a spirited opponent. The Bruins had played the Sea Kings at Corona del Mar in a non-league game on Sat., Oct. 12. The Bruins had led that game 11-3 after three periods and cruised to a 13-5 win. On this day, though, it was a case of the Bruins gradually wearing down their foe over a full four quarters, triumphing 11-6. Meanwhile, Foothill met Harvard at Tustin High School and had a similar experience. The Knights had beaten the Wolverines in the semi-finals of the Southern California Invitational, leading 10-4 after three quarters back then, and coasting to a six-goal victory. Today, they needed four goals in the fourth period to break open a tight game and win, 9-4.

As to the upsets, Loyola absolutely shocked Villa Park. Villa Park had beaten Loyola, 12-9, in the third place game of the Long Beach Millikan Tournament. Today, however, Loyola became the first team since 1973 to win a Sweet 16 game by only one goal, and then advance past the next round. The visiting Cubs led by one at the end of the third quarter, then scored three goals in the first two minutes of the fourth to establish a four goal lead, which they maintained to a 12-8 victory. Lastly, El Toro faced South Coast League champ and sixth seed San Clemente at the Chargers' pool. It was the first meeting of the year between the two CIF-SS championship teams of the early 1990s (though the Tritons were now being led by first year coach Marc Parker, who would remain in this post through 2015). As the lead paragraph in the Register story reported, "The one team Division I Water Polo coaches thought could be a dark horse in the playoffs was San Clemente, mostly on the strength of the Tritons' powerful offense." Indeed, the Tritons led from start to finish behind a balanced attack, converting five of seven man-advantage situations and getting goals from six different players. San Clemente built a 12-8 lead with 4:54 remaining in the fourth period, then closed it out 14-11, winning the shoot-out El Toro's coach Don Stoll had hoped to avoid.

The semi-finals arrived on Sat., Nov. 23, the games held 80 miles apart between two Orange County teams at Saddleback College and two Los Angeles County teams at Pepperdine University.

Foothill had narrowly defeated San Clemente in the semi-finals of the South Coast Tournament exactly eight weeks earlier. Now, the Knights succeeded where El Toro had failed four days earlier, managing to stifle the Tritons' high-scoring offense. According to the Los Angeles Times, "San Clemente had tied the score, 3-3, on Jordan Hewko's goal early in the second half. And, for the first time, it appeared as if San Clemente was gathering confidence against the second-seeded Knights." But then, reported the Register, "Foothill went on a 4-0 run to seal the victory. Jason Korengold's

skip shot broke the tie with 4:09 remaining in the quarter and, after a San Clemente turnover, Jeremy Katz scored 25 seconds later to make it 5-3...Ryan Carroll gave Foothill a three-goal lead...with 3:14 to go, and Matt McPherson ended the scoring binge with a 6-on-5 goal." Now with a 7-3 lead deep into the third quarter, Foothill played even the rest of the way, winning 9-5.

Long Beach Wilson and Loyola tangled earlier in the day – much earlier, leading to a memorable headline and subhead in the following day's Long Beach Press-Telegram. "Bruins Wake Up and Smell a Spot in CIF Finals," the headline ran, followed by "Somnambulant Start; Spectacular Finish." Somnambulant? It means sluggish, sleepwalking – talk about word power! "Playing an early morning game for the first time this year, the Wilson High Water Polo team needed a wakeup call on Saturday. And the Bruins' opponent, Loyola,...gladly obliged....The Bruins left Wilson at 6:30 a.m. for a game that began at 9 a.m. And the early starting time seemed to bother Wilson." In fact, the Cubs jumped out to a 3-0 lead with less than five minutes gone in the first period. The Bruins' coach Ricardo Azevedo called time-out and the game began to turn around, though Loyola still led 3-1 at the end of the period. By the 2:27 mark in the second quarter the game was tied, 4-4. "The Bruin then scored three goals in the final 54 seconds of the period...to take a 7-4 lead. The lead was 11-6 after three periods and the Bruins were able to coast to the win. (Tony) Azevedo scored a game-high six goals." Final score, 13-8. This game needs to be remarked on in one other respect. The 1996 quartet of semi-finalists was the first since 1978 that included two schools from outside Orange County, and the first since 1977 to feature two teams from Los Angeles County. And, not since 1972 had two schools from Los Angeles County faced each other this deep in the playoffs. It signaled a crack in the now 30-plus years of Orange County dominance.

The final game got underway at Belmont Plaza on Wed., Nov. 27, with the Register observing that the contest "between Foothill and Long Beach Wilson is a tremendous matchup. They have interchangeably been ranked either No. 1 or 2 in the division all year." Yes, they had split four games, all decided by one goal. But this fifth game turned out to be somewhat one-sided.

Long Beach Wilson never trailed or were tied, establishing an early 3-0 lead and extending it to 5-1 with 2:32 left in the half. Foothill finally got going, scoring twice in the last two minutes before intermission to make it 5-3. Then, Foothill's Jeff Pflueger scored on an extra-man situation in the first 30 seconds of the third quarter to cut the lead to one. But, the Bruins also converted an extra-man opportunity at the 3:12 mark to make it 6-4 at the end of three periods. Foothill got within one once more when Scott Miller scored with 5:01 remaining in the fourth quarter, but just 20 seconds later Peter Joseph scored to reestablish a two-goal cushion for the Bruins, 7-5. Long Beach Wilson then added one, and Foothill got one back, with no further scoring in the last three minutes. Finally tally, 8-6. Both coaches cited the Bruins' success – and the Knights' lack thereof – in extra man situations as spelling the difference. Foothill only converted three of 10 opportunities. "Wilson played a hell of a game," Foothill's coach Jim Brumm told the Register, while adding to the Times, "What can you say? We just didn't put the ball in the goal when we had to."

Long Beach Wilson certainly had players that could put the ball in the goal, among them a freshman. With now three titles total to their credit, the Bruins would double that count before their prodigy left the school.

1997

The year that followed, 1997, was the sequel to the year that preceded it. Both Foothill and Long Beach Wilson had their star players back – Robby Arroyo for Foothill, who as a sophomore led the Knights to the CIF-SS championship in 1995, and Tony Azevedo for Long Beach Wilson, who was only a sophomore now. These two standouts would share Player of the Year honors in the season to come. Both the Knights and the Bruins basically again only lost to each other – except San Clemente seemed to have Foothill’s number in the early going. But, that wound up not mattering in the playoffs. And, Foothill and Long Beach Wilson faced each other again in the finals, but this year’s game would be far more interesting than last year’s anti-climactic “ultimate rubber match.”

The first match between the two schools was envisioned to take place at the South Coast Tournament, but that’s not how things transpired. Arroyo didn’t play on the final day, Sat., Sept. 27, at Newport Harbor. According to the Register’s tournament preview story, “Arroyo’s availability is day to day because he still is recovering from mononucleosis.” (Long Beach Wilson would also be without one of its key players, Ryan Brown, for the first half of October for the same reason.) Thus, San Clemente upset Foothill in the semi-finals, 10-9, in sudden death. It was quite an achievement – the first team other than Long Beach Wilson to beat Foothill since the 1994 CIF-SS semi-finals. The Bruins had no trouble in their semi-final game, winning 19-3 against Costa Mesa, an eventual Division II finalist. Foothill did salvage the third place game against the Mustangs, 8-7. Long Beach Wilson had just beaten San Clemente on Tues., Sept. 23, at Belmont Plaza, 10-5. Four days later, the Bruins beat the Tritons by an even wider margin, 15-8, to win the tournament. Mike Komrosky had four goals and Tony Azevedo had three to lead Long Beach Wilson.

San Clemente, however, would prove that they could handle at least one of the top contenders this year. Less than a week later, the Tritons beat the Knights a second time in another close match. The Triton’s Pat Wong scored with 37 seconds left in the game to give his team a 5-4 victory over Foothill, on Fri., Oct. 3, at San Clemente.

The top contenders from last year finally met up on Sat., Oct. 11, in the semi-finals of the Southern California Invitational at Woollett Aquatics Center. When they did, the Bruins had an easy time of it, winning 10-3. Los Alamitos, the eventual Division II champion, beat Newport Harbor in the other semi-final, 6-3. Once again the Bruins had no trouble closing out a tournament, crushing the Griffins, 9-2, in the final match, with Azevedo contributing four goals. The Bruins had now won the Invitational all four years of its existence. And, as at the South Coast tourney, Foothill salvaged the third place game, beating the Sailors, 5-4. The Los Angeles Times reported, “Robby Arroyo, who has missed half of Foothill’s games this season because of an illness, was back

in full stride Saturday as the All-American two-meter man scored the winning goal (against Newport Harbor).”

Foothill and Long Beach had barely towed off when they met three days later, Tues., Oct. 14, at Belmont Plaza. The Bruins led from start to finish, winning 7-2. The Bruins were now 15-0 on the season, and they had now gone a full calendar year since their last defeat.

The last of the “Big Three” tourneys was the setting for the third meeting between the two, in the finals of the Nor Cal Tournament, played Sat., Nov. 1, in San Jose. In one semi-final, Foothill defeated Miramonte, 11-9. (The Matadors would go on to win their third straight CIF-NCS title.) Long Beach Wilson beat Harvard, 6-2, in the other semi-final. Harvard had entered the tournament having lost only two games up to this point. Their most recent loss had come at home exactly one week earlier against the same Bruins, losing 15-7. The Wolverines’ first defeat had not come until they met up with Newport Harbor on Fri., Oct. 10, in the quarter-finals of the Southern California Invitational. They lost 9-7 on that occasion. Harvard ended up losing the Nor Cal third place game to Miramonte, 5-4, so they equaled their prior loss total in a single day.

In the tournament’s final game, Foothill won 4-3 in overtime, accounting for Long Beach Wilson’s first loss in more than a year, when the Knights had last beaten them. The victory has an amusing anecdote. According to the Register, Foothill’s “goalie Nick Ellis...almost didn’t make the final. Ellis spent three hours before the game taking his Scholastic Aptitude Test at Bellarmine, where the tournament was being held. ‘The test ended about 12:20 p.m. and the game started at 12:15 p.m.,’ Foothill coach Jim Brumm said. ‘We started our sophomore goalie to give Nick a chance to warm up before putting him into the goal.’ Ellis responded with 11 saves, four of them in two overtime periods.” Can’t forget about why the kids are in school in the first place! Having beaten the Bruins in this style – with Robbie Arroyo scoring three goals, including the game winner – the Knights seemed to be pulling even at last with Long Beach Wilson.

Moore League champion Long Beach Wilson (24-1) had three fewer losses and two head-to-head victories over both of their nearest competitors, making them the undeniable top playoff seed. Foothill (21-4) was the equally clear second seed. The Knights followed-up their strong showing at Nor Cal by visiting Villa Park on Wed., Nov. 5, and winning 4-3 for the Century League title. Third-seed Harvard (20-4) had reclaimed the Mission League championship after being dethroned the previous year by Loyola. The Wolverines, in fact, were a bit of a rejuvenated program, with coach Richard Corso now liberated from his Olympics team duties. Harvard inaugurated its own tournament this year, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 11-13, getting an early jump on the season.

The fourth seed was Newport Harbor, which had also reclaimed a league championship, entering as the top representative of the Sea View League for the first time since 1990. The decisive league match turned out to be a night game played at

Saddleback College on Wed., Oct. 15, between Newport Harbor and Santa Margarita, which the Sailors won in overtime, 9-8. The Sailors proceeded to go undefeated (5-0), and the Eagles (4-1) finished in second place, by virtue of a 9-7 win over third-place El Toro (3-2). And so, just as Newport Harbor got left out of the playoffs the previous year, now their crosstown rival Corona del Mar (2-3) was left out of things this year. The Sea Kings' playoff streak wasn't as long as the Sailors' had been. But it was 18 straight years – winning five CIF-SS titles along the way – and the first miss under Coach Vargas. What killed them was losing to El Toro, 9-8, on Wed., Oct. 29, at El Toro, after which they could finish no better than fourth. And, they had no shot at the At-Large spot in the playoffs, with a record far inferior compared to the team that did receive the berth, Santa Ana Valley. (Corona del Mar was 9-9 while Santa Ana Valley was 16-5 at the conclusion of play on Oct. 29.) This left the Sea Kings with nothing to play for but pride when they hosted Newport Harbor on Nov. 5. It was an intense, well-attended game, in keeping with their great rivalry, but the Sailors managed the win, 4-3.

In fifth and sixth seed, respectively, was South Coast League champion Capistrano Valley and the league's second place representative, San Clemente. The Tritons could beat Foothill not once but twice, but they could not stop the Cougars from reclaiming a title of their own. Capistrano Valley beat San Clemente, 10-9, on Oct. 29, in sudden death at Saddleback College, earning the Cougars their first league championship since 1991.

The playoffs got underway with Sweet 16 games played Thurs., Nov. 13. No contest was close, yet the round had some interesting features. First, private schools placed four entrants for the fourth year in a row. Santa Margarita became the third private – and the first outside of the Mission League – to record a win, beating Dana Hills, the third place team from the South Coast League. The Eagles' 14-8 victory was the slimmest margin of the round, and their win is worth noting for another reason. Santa Margarita opened in 1987 and the team was still "The School Without a Pool." They held their workouts at Saddleback College, 9.4 miles away, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. during the week. As I have noted before, the heroes of the game aren't restricted to the finalists. Secondly, Foothill recorded a 15-0 victory over Long Beach Poly, the Moore League's third place team. It was the first playoff shutout since 1973, and the first as high as the Sweet 16 since 1971. Thirdly, as mentioned above, Santa Ana Valley – fourth place in the Century League – came in as the At-Large team. The Century League, then, became the fourth league since 1992 to place the At-Large team and, in fact, the league would do so for the next three years as well. Santa Ana Valley (1997 and 2000) and Canyon (1998 and 1999) would trade-off taking advantage of the berth, while they both continued to trail league superpowers Foothill and Villa Park. But, Santa Ana Valley's seed was dead last and they were crushed by Long Beach Wilson, 28-7.

Quarter-final games followed on Tues., Nov. 18 and featured blow-outs by the top two seeds. Long Beach Wilson beat Villa Park at the Spartans' pool, 15-6, while Foothill defeated Santa Margarita at Saddleback College, 12-3. It was the first time since 1982 that two quarter-final games had been won by nine goals or more. The other contests, however, were great games.

San Clemente had beaten Harvard in the quarter-finals in 1993, the first of four straight losses for Harvard in the Elite Eight. That game had been an upset – Harvard seeded third, San Clemente seeded sixth, just like now. The Tritons had been up and down this year, but they appeared as if they might have another upset in store for the Wolverines at Harvard's pool. As the Los Angeles Times reported, "The Tritons led, 6-4, midway through the third quarter and their zone defense seemed to have the Wolverines baffled. But long-range goals in the third quarter by (Jason) Malinsky and (Billy) Strickland pulled the Wolverines to within 7-6 and Mike Crosby, who had four goals, made a 12-footer off the right post that tied the score, 7-7, with 2:35 left in the fourth quarter." Harvard also got strong play from goalie Brendan Connolly – "Elevating high above the surface, he reached down to block a close-range shot by (San Clemente) All-American Jordan Hewko with three seconds left in regulation." Still tied at 7-7, the Times then says, "Malinsky's overtime goal gave the Wolverines their first lead, 8-7, and after Strickland extended the lead to 9-7, (Phil) Spataru sealed the victory when he scored with 1:10 left, giving the Wolverines a 10-8 lead." San Clemente got a final tally, but Harvard held on for the win, 10-9.

Back at Saddleback College as part of a doubleheader, Newport Harbor was taking on Capistrano Valley. Like Harvard, the Sailors knew a little something about being stuck in the quarter-finals – seven straight losses before failing to qualify last year. And, the situation on this day was uncannily similar to their three Elite Eight losses from 1992-1994. The Sailors had beaten the Cougars, 9-6, on Fri., Nov. 7, at this same pool. Now, exactly like those earlier losses, here Newport Harbor was playing the South Coast League champion in the quarters just 11 days later. The game attracted a "standing room only crowd," reported the Daily Pilot, "with spectators sitting on the walls surrounding the pool and hovering above the pool on the diving platform." The score was tied 4-4 at half-time and 5-5 in the middle of third period when, "Capo's Brian Pingree drove a steal down the middle of the pool and fired a shot about five meters in front of Harbor's all-CIF goalkeeper Jon Pharris, upping the score to 6-5, from where the Cougars never looked back." (Note to the careful reader – this is the same Jon Pharris who was playing goal for Villa Park in 1995. He transferred to Newport Harbor as a junior, in front of the 1996 season.) The third period ended at 6-5, and Newport Harbor got to within 7-6 in the fourth, but the Cougars pulled away for a 9-7 upset win. Capistrano Valley, with their unusual "double-set offense" comprising two hole-men, had made it to the semi-finals for only the third time, and first time since 1991.

The semi-finals were played on Sat., Nov. 22, and the two front-runners continued to go without serious challenge – to say the least. Foothill met Harvard at Tustin High School. The Knights built a 5-0 lead before the Wolverines scored their first goal with 2:49 left in the first half. Foothill coasted to a 10-3 victory. Things were even more lopsided in the Long Beach Wilson-Capistrano Valley match. The Cougars' coach, Jason Lynch, evidently hoped to repeat El Toro's success in 1993, when coach Don Stoll insisted on an "alternate site" – i.e., play the Bruins somewhere other than their home-away-from-home, Belmont Plaza. As in 1993, the semi-final game was played at Long Beach State, but the results were quite different. Long Beach Wilson pounded Capistrano Valley, 17-4. This marked the first time since 1980 that both semi-

final games were decided by seven or more goals. The Bruins' win was even more substantial – the first time since 1973 that a Final Four game was won by a margin of 13 goals.

So, for the first time since 1986, the final game featured a rematch, with Foothill in its third straight appearance, Long Beach Wilson in its second. The two teams had not been tested entering play at Belmont Plaza on Wed., Nov. 26. Foothill had won its three preceding games by 31 goals, Long Beach Wilson by 43. But, they would be testing each other tonight, in a game that more than made up for the less-than-hyped final game of the previous year. It was held “in front of a boisterous crowd of more than 4,000,” wrote the Long Beach Press-Telegram.

The Bruins led (or were tied) throughout the first half, which ended knotted up, 4-4. Long Beach Wilson's Tony Azevedo then scored a goal in the opening minute of the third period, making it 5-4. At that point, the Knights went on a tear. According to the Register, “Foothill scored four consecutive goals to take its first lead.” Scoring for the Knights were Matt McPherson, then Eitan Goldstein, and Nick Pirro added the final two goals of the quarter, the last one coming with :29 left. An impressive defensive stand by the Knights in the period's remaining seconds capped a highly successful quarter. Foothill had opened an 8-5 lead heading into the fourth.

There had been a number of great comebacks in the finals. As recently as 1993, El Toro had climbed back from a five goal deficit in the third period, though they had closed the gap to two goals by the end of that quarter. In 1981, Newport Harbor had trailed by four goals in the fourth period, rallying to tie the game, though ultimately losing. Coming back to win down by two goals at some point in the fourth period was not uncommon. But no team had ever come back to win a final game trailing by three in the last period. The Bruins actually got back in the game with dizzying speed. Mike Komrosky scored at the 5:29 mark, then quickly added his second goal of the night, bringing the score to 8-7. Then, Long Beach Wilson earned a penalty shot, which Azevedo converted at the 4:22 mark for his second goal, tying it up, 8-8. Following this, says the Register, “The Bruins had the best chance to win the match in regulation, but Mike Komrosky's one-on-one shot against (Foothill goalie Nick) Ellis hit the side post with 2:06 remaining. The fourth quarter was played at frantic pace. Foothill made nine turnovers while the Bruins had four.” The final game headed into overtime for the first time since 1993 – with the rules in place this year calling for two three-minute periods before sudden death. The Bruins' Jeff Nesmith scored the only goal of overtime, his second of the game, on “a man-advantage score from 2 meters with 42 seconds left in the first extra period.” Long Beach Wilson held Foothill scoreless for the remainder of this period as well as the second overtime period to complete their comeback, 9-8. In fact, as the Register precisely pointed out, the Bruins had held the Knights scoreless for the final 13:29 of the game. The paper quoted Foothill's Robby Arroyo, who had a game-high three goals, “We definitely blew it. It was our game to lose and we lost it.” That is the assessment of a true winner, though it's not difficult to remember that the Bruins had entered the game the favorites and had such remarkable offensive weapons that the fourth quarter turnaround hardly seems surprising.

(A note to the reader: The Los Angeles Times provided excellent coverage of Water Polo in this era, but its story of this game includes one glaring error. I want to point it out as it is not difficult to find it in a Google search of the Internet. The Times' story reported that Azevedo's third quarter goal was scored in the final minute of the period, rather than in the first minute. This led the paper to state that Foothill had a four goal lead at one point in the period. This is not correct. Foothill never had more than a three goal lead. The Bruins' comeback is impressive enough – and the Knights' defeat painful enough – without any exaggerations resulting from a newspaper error.)

Impressive, indeed, is the word for the Bruins, with three of the last four titles under their belt. And, they could count on two more years of service from the section's co-Player of the Year. Tony Azevedo was only now going to be an upperclassman. Things would get more impressive still.

1998

A marvelous story appeared in the Los Angeles Times on Oct. 28, 1997, just ahead of that year's Nor Cal Tournament, on the development of Water Polo and the by-now more than three decades of dominance by Orange County schools. It's worth citing at length:

“To more fully appreciate the county's place in high school water polo, you have to hear the lament of a Los Angeles County coach. Rich Corso, in his 12th season at North Hollywood Harvard-Westlake, says bringing his team to Orange County for games is like taking the U.S. national team to Europe. Corso, the coach of the U.S. team from 1993 to the Atlanta Olympics, is familiar with the feeling. European powers such as Spain, Germany, Hungary don't have to travel far for a game against top competition, and neither do Foothill, Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar. So Harvard-Westlake comes south, because few county teams are willing to play in North Hollywood. ‘They won't leave their area,’ Corso said. ‘I'd have to get a television contract from ESPN to get them come up here.’ The long drive wears on the players and Corso said the home teams often get favorable treatment from referees. ‘We're three or four goals behind before we get in the water,’ Corso said, ‘I don't think the referees are doing it on purpose. It's just because when you see the kids more, you know their moves and you are more apt to let them play.’ But Corso said Orange County's advantages are not insurmountable. ‘I think if you have somebody there running a year-round program and that's very serious about the sport,’ he said, ‘you could have success in Riverside, Catalina, El Segundo or North Hollywood. We don't have a real good facility here, but we have a lot of kids who are interested and want to play at a high level.’”

Here again is a reminder that player heroics are not restricted to championship teams. And, this dedication would indeed make Harvard playoff finalists, as well as helping to tip the competitive scales back toward Los Angeles County for the first time since El Segundo, Whittier and Downey reigned supreme. Unfortunately for Harvard, their “helper” in doing so was Long Beach Wilson, who this year probably produced that school's candidate for “Greatest Team Ever.”

Truly traveling far and wide for competition, Harvard opened its season on Fri.-Sat., Sept. 11-12, at “The Woodlands” tournament in Houston, Texas – nearly 1,600 miles from Studio City (not North Hollywood, where many stories placed their campus). The Wolverines went 3-0 to win the tourney, beating such competition as Cypress Creek (Houston), 15-5, and Clear Lake (Baytown, Texas), 15-8. Harvard had also founded its own tournament the previous year, but in its second year the Water Polo fest was merged with the long-standing Long Beach Millikan Tournament, held the next weekend, Fri.-Sat., Sept. 18-19. The combined event was renamed the “Toring Tournament” in memory of Jim Toring, the 1992 Player of the Year who had died five months earlier. Harvard easily won the tourney final, beating Glendale, 14-6, at Belmont Plaza (Glendale would finish in the Division III Elite Eight).

Meanwhile, Long Beach Wilson was making mince-meat of the pre-season’s top ranked Orange County schools. On Tues., Sept. 15, at Newport Harbor, the Bruins defeated the Sailors, 13-7. “They have a lot of firepower,” was Coach Barnett’s summation to the Register. Corona del Mar’s John Vargas was in attendance and after watching Tony Azevedo score three goals, he observed, “He’s unbelievable.” Exactly one week later at Belmont Plaza, the Bruins beat San Clemente, 14-7.

The South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 24-26, almost produced a Bruins loss. In the tourney’s semi-finals, Long Beach Wilson met the third of the three top Orange County contenders, man-handling Foothill, 10-3. In the other semi, Newport Harbor took care of its Sea View League rival El Toro, winning 12-4. (Foothill would then beat the Chargers, 7-6, for third place.) In the final, according to the Los Angeles Times, “A controversial ejection in the first quarter put the game in a whole new light and instead of a blow out, Wilson had to scratch and claw its way to a 10-9 victory over the Sailors at Newport Harbor High. With less than two minutes left in the first quarter, Wilson’s star player, Tony Azevedo, was ejected from the game. According to the official, Azevedo hit an opponent in the face.” The game was tied 1-1 at the time, but the Bruins upped their game to take a 6-2 lead into half-time. The Sailors, however, got to within 8-6 after three periods. They even pulled to within one goal twice in the fourth quarter, at the 5:20 and 2:54 marks, but no closer. Barnett told the Register, “That shows what a great team they are.” The Register also spoke to the opposing bench after the game: “Long Beach Wilson coach Ricardo Azevedo, Tony’s father, praised Newport Harbor for its play, but blasted the referees – both from Orange County. ‘I thought the refereeing was ridiculous,’ he said. ‘I will call CIF on Monday.’” The coach’s appeal was unsuccessful and Azevedo’s penalty meant having to sit out their next game, Thurs., Oct. 1, against Los Alamitos, an eventual Division II quarter-finalist. The host Bruins won it anyway, 17-5.

The second of the “Big Three” tournaments provided the section’s next test of strength, the Southern California Invitational, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 9-10, at Woollett Aquatics Center. The tourney’s first day was highlighted by San Clemente’s quarter-final victory over Harvard, 10-8 in overtime, marking the Wolverines’ first loss of the season. The next day, in the semi-finals, Newport Harbor took care of San Clemente, 5-4, while Long Beach Wilson beat Coronado, 11-5. San Clemente would go on to

defeat Coronado also in the third place game, 12-11 in overtime. This left the Sailors to see what they could do against the Bruins in the finals, with Azevedo playing a full game. Their third meeting, then, was very much like their season opener, Long Beach Wilson winning handily, 11-5. The Bruins had now won the tournament all five years of its existence.

With the final big tournament not scheduled for another three weeks, key matches centered around non-league action. Foothill met up with Long Beach Wilson for the second time on Tues., Oct. 13, at Belmont Plaza. Their South Coast tourney semi-final seemed like a close game compared to this one – Foothill scored the contest’s first goal, but then trailed badly thereafter, with the Bruins winning 19-7. The next Saturday, Oct. 17, featured two interesting battles. First, at Newport Harbor, the Sailors were beaten by Bishop’s, 9-8. The following month, the La Jolla-based school would lose the CIF-SDS Division II final match to Coronado by the identical score. For the Sailors, it would be their only defeat to someone other than Long Beach Wilson during the regular season. On the same day, Harvard lost its second game of the year – 10-2 to the Bruins at Belmont Plaza. Coach Corso tried to remain optimistic, telling the Los Angeles Times, “We only have to beat them once.”

The entire goal of the season had become one of trying to avoid playing the Bruins until the finals. This was driven home on Sat., Oct. 24, when Harvard got even against San Clemente, with an 11-6 win in Studio City (“Zanuck Swimming Stadium”). The Triton’s coach Marc Parker moaned to the Register, “This loss probably means they’ll be ahead of us (in the CIF rankings). They should be No. 3, and we’ll probably drop to No. 4.” Harvard’s Corso said, “None of us want Wilson (early). They’re the Yankees in our sport.” Newport Harbor’s Barnett expressed the same calculating to the Daily Pilot in a preview story to their league showdown against El Toro, played Wed., Oct. 28 (the Sailors won, 6-5, at home). He said, “The loser will (most likely) have to play Wilson to get to the finals – that’s another reason why it’s an important game.”

Meanwhile, Long Beach Wilson continued to romp. They beat Villa Park, 16-6, on Tues., Oct. 27, at Belmont Plaza. These were quality teams that the Bruins were beating so badly. The Spartans, in fact, would defeat Foothill 9-8 in overtime, on Fri., Nov. 6, at the Knights’ pool, to win the Century League crown for the first time since 1991.

The Nor Cal tourney was played, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 30-31, with the finals at Stanford University. Newport Harbor faced Harvard in one semi-final game. The Sailors held the Wolverines scoreless for three quarters, carrying a 3-0 lead into the fourth period. The Sailors ultimately won, 5-3. In the other semi-final, Long Beach Wilson beat Miramonte, 11-5. The Matadors would go on to win their fourth straight CIF-NCS title, and just like last year, Miramonte beat Harvard in the third place game by one goal, this time 9-8. Thus, again just like in 1997, Harvard entered the last day of tournament play with only two losses on the season, and exited with four. In the tourney’s final match, the Bruins established a 15-5 lead after three periods over the Sailors. Long Beach Wilson then finished off Newport Harbor for the fourth time – by the widest margin yet, 16-8.

Long Beach Wilson had won all three of the major tournaments, beating Newport Harbor in the finals each time. So, it was easy for the playoff schedulers to plot yet another final meeting in November. Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson (25-0) was top seed, while Sea View League champ Newport Harbor (20-5) was second seed. And, just as San Clemente's Coach Parker had feared back on Oct. 24, Mission League champion Harvard (20-4) got the third seed. The Tritons, South Coast League champions, were seeded fourth and fated to an early date with the Bruins. Century League champ Villa Park was seeded fifth, with Foothill consigned to seventh seed.

A final act in the avoid-the-Bruins-at-any-cost drama was played out between El Toro and Corona del Mar. The Sea Kings had beaten the Chargers, 9-8, on Wed., Nov. 4, at Corona del Mar, making them the Sea View League second-place representative, and moving El Toro to third place. But in the complicated machinations of seed assignments, El Toro actually ended up the sixth seed, and the Sea Kings were seeded eighth – which meant the Sea Kings would have to play Long Beach Wilson in the quarter-finals. The thinking, perhaps, was to avoid any chance of Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar – the top two Sea View League teams – from meeting until the finals. In any case, the Register's headline announcing the seedings read "El Toro Catches Break for Water Polo Playoffs." The story quoted the Chargers' Coach Stoll saying, "I'm pretty happy. I'm really happy, actually." Who could blame him?

First round action took place on Thurs., Nov. 12. The narrowest margin was El Toro's 8-3 win over Capistrano Valley, the second place South Coast League team, at Saddleback College. The toughest game, though, may have been Corona del Mar hosting Loyola, the Mission League's second place team. The Cubs led after the first period, 3-2, and trailed by only 5-4 after three. The Sea Kings, however, had a huge fourth quarter to win, 11-5. At the (extreme) other end of the spectrum, Long Beach Wilson "entertained" Canyon, the At-Large entrant from the Century League. The Bruins won 28-3 – the 25 goals separating them being the widest margin in tournament history. The only exception is a 34-point spread in 1955 when non-penalty shot goals counted as two.

Quarter-finals were played Tues., Nov. 17, and were all tough games, even if a few of the finals scores didn't reflect that. First, Long Beach Wilson disposed of host Corona del Mar. The Bruins led 7-2 after the first period, 10-2 at half and 14-4 after the third, closing it out, 16-7. The Daily Pilot's Roger Carlson wrote, "The Sea Kings... distinguished themselves with a solid effort.... But against this Long Beach Wilson juggernaut, their efforts paled." Tony Azevedo had six goals, twice that of any other scorer. The next Eight Elite match-up was much closer, with San Clemente visiting Villa Park. It seemed for a while as if the Tritons couldn't shake the Spartans, who tied the score 1-1 with :02 remaining in the first quarter and 5-5 with :08 left before the half. Then, Villa Park pushed out to its only lead of the game, 8-7, with :25 left in the third quarter. But now it was the Tritons' turn – coming right back to make it 8-8 with :05 left in the period. San Clemente tightened up its defense and finally took control, scoring fourth quarter goals at the 6:30, 6:00, 3:45 and :48 marks to win, 12-8. One thing further needs to be noted – this was the last coaching effort for Jeff Ehrlich at

Villa Park, after 25 highly successful years with the Spartans. The third Elite Eight game was tighter still, taking place at El Toro with the Chargers facing Harvard in their first playoff meeting since the finals in 1992. It was yet another long driving trip for Harvard – 60 miles. The Wolverines never trailed but, with Harvard carrying a 5-3 lead into the fourth quarter, El Toro finally tied the score on two quick goals. It did not stay tied for long, however, as Harvard's Peter Hudnut scored the game winner with 5:54 left, leading to a 6-5 victory. The Chargers had scored only one goal while on six man-advantage situations, causing Coach Stoll to tell the school newspaper, "If we had put away our opportunities against Harvard, we would be preparing for the semi-finals right now; it was pretty disappointing." As it was, Harvard recorded their first ever win over El Toro. And, El Toro was unable to cash in their advantageous seeding – they finished in the same round as the team that had to play Long Beach Wilson.

That leaves Newport Harbor vs. Foothill at Tustin High School, in what the Register reported, "certainly qualifies as upset of the year." Newport Harbor had beaten Foothill, 9-3 ("shells" read the Daily Pilot headline), at the Sailors' pool on Fri., Oct. 23. What happened? Newport Harbor was flat – Bill Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "Foothill was ready to play and played very hard and we didn't." Foothill was fired up – as Jim Brumm told the paper, "We played with intensity and spirit and we executed." According to the Register, "The Knights led 2-0 in the first period on goals by (Matt) Ellis and Mike Schulz. Newport Harbor tied the score at 2 in the second and could have taken a 3-2 lead, but goalie Adam Katz blocked a 4-meter penalty shot." The Sailors would convert only two of six man-advantage situations as well. The score was tied 3-3 at half-time and then 5-5 after three periods. In the fourth quarter, Foothill scored goals at the 4:41 and 4:07 marks to go up, 7-5. Newport Harbor got one back, but Foothill's Wes Fox scored the game-winning goal with 2:15 remaining, lifting the Knights to an 8-6 lead. Newport Harbor scored again with 40 seconds left, but then suffered an ejection at :18, preventing them from regaining possession. Final score, 8-7. The defeat was a bitter one for the Sailors, who had maddeningly lost in the Elite Eight for nine of the last 10 years – the only break being when they didn't qualify at all. Barnett told the Daily Pilot, "I thought this team should have gone to the CIF finals. Everything was set up for us because we didn't have to play Wilson until the finals. This has to be a disappointing season for us." This was a last game of sorts for Barnett as well – the last game as head coach of Newport Harbor's Boys Water Polo team. The following year he would be the school's "co-coach" in a neatly phased transition for both him and the program he built into the most successful in the history of CIF-SS. Foothill, however, was moving on to the semi-finals for the fifth year in a row, apparently finding their form of the previous three years.

The semi-finals were held on Sat., Nov. 21 and, as in 1996, the games were played 80 miles apart at Pepperdine University and Saddleback College. Up in beautiful Malibu, Harvard took on Foothill. And, it must be said in defense of Orange County schools, the Knights made an even longer drive than Harvard did four days earlier – 62 miles. Of course, Foothill wasn't supposed to be there at all, and Harvard took full advantage of the situation. The score was tied 3-3 at half-time and 4-4 late in the third quarter, when Harvard's Bill Strickland scored one of his game-high three goals. From

there, the combination of solid defense by goalie Joe Axelrad and two fourth quarter goals allowed Harvard to pull away for the win, 7-4. So, having earlier beaten the team they lost to in the 1992 finals, and now defeated the team who'd been there three years in a row, the Wolverines were headed for their first title game in six years. Down in suburban Mission Viejo, San Clemente faced Long Beach Wilson. The game was over by half-time. The Bruins led 3-0 after the first period, pushed it to 5-0 before the Tritons scored their first goal, then closed out the first half leading, 10-2. Long Beach Wilson eventually extended their lead to 14-4 before cruising to a 14-7 victory. It was exactly the same score as when the two teams met two months earlier. The unstoppable Tony Azevedo again accounted for six of the Bruins' goals. Now it was Long Beach Wilson who was headed to the finals for the third year in a row.

The final game was played Wed., Nov. 25, at Belmont Plaza and the first thing the Los Angeles Times noticed about the match-up was stated in their game-preview headline, "Something Missing from Division I Game." The first sentence explained, "Orange County's hold on the highest level of high school water polo slipped this season – for the first time in 36 years there is no county team in the Southern Section major division championship game." Yes, you had to go back to Downey vs. Whittier in 1962 to find another example. After their semi-final win, Harvard's Richard Corso had told the Times, "We're going to go after them." And the Wolverines did, giving the Bruins their closest game of the year with Tony Azevedo in the line-up for the entire contest (Newport Harbor, remember, had come within one when Azevedo was ejected in the first period). Harvard actually had a lead for a short time, scoring the game's first goal. But, Long Beach Wilson answered with four in a row to finish the first quarter up, 4-1. The Wolverines stayed close in the second period, with the Bruins only up 5-3 at half-time. But, that was the last time they were within two goals, as Long Beach Wilson sprinted ahead 9-4 at the end of three periods. The Wolverines pulled to within 10-6 with 3:43 to play, but Azevedo scored his fourth goal at the 1:59 mark. Harvard got one more to make the final score, 11-7. (The Bruins' scorers had actually been led by Jeff Nesmith with five goals.) The game was closer than when the two met one month prior but it remained true, as Corso said afterward, "They're better than us" (Long Beach Press-Telegram).

It's possible this Long Beach Wilson team was better than anyone ever. They were the first team to finish the season 29-0 and the first undefeated team in 20 years. They had won their four playoff contests by a total of 45 goals, surpassing by one goal the tournament record they had set the previous year. This record would stand until 2014, when Harvard (ironically) piled up a 49 goal total margin. Tony Azevedo, still only a junior, won his second Player of the Year award – this time with no co-recipient. So, the Bruins were in outstanding position to make it four titles in a row the following year. The one possible thing opponents could hope for was that this turned out to be a final game for another distinguished coach. Tony's father, Ricardo, was ready for a step-up career-wise and would soon resign to take the head coaching job at Long Beach State. Hey Dad, how about taking your son with you? He seems ready for a step-up, too!

1999

Indeed, Tony Azevedo was ready for a step-up and the story of the 1999 season is simply a story of Long Beach Wilson before and after – the four weeks before he rejoined the team on Wed., Oct. 6, on the eve of the Southern California Invitational, and the seven weeks after he was back on the roster through to the CIF-SS finals. Still only 17 years old, he was already setting his sights on making the 2000 U.S. Olympics Team. In fact, Azevedo would make it, his first of five appearances clear through 2016. For those first four weeks, he was busy with the U.S. National Team, which was playing in the FINA Men's Water Polo World Cup, held Tues.-Sun., Sept. 28-Oct. 3 in Sydney, Australia. The John Vargas-coached team would end up losing the fifth-place game to FR Yugoslavia, 8-4. Upon his return, the Los Angeles Times reported on Fri., Oct. 8:

“Despite speculation that he would not play his senior year with the Long Beach Wilson High boys' water polo team, Tony Azevedo said this week he looks forward to helping the Bruins defend their Southern Section Division I championship....Azevedo, who began workouts Wednesday with Wilson, said he will not compete in games in the relatively weak Moore League but will participate in nonleague, tournament and playoff games. He doesn't report again to the U.S. team until February, but plans to graduate from high school in January. 'I want to be free to focus on the Olympics,' Azevedo said. 'I don't want to worry about homework and school while I'm training and playing.' Azevedo...said he can't begin to explain how much he learned over the past two months. 'I was a little intimidated when I first started to play,' he said. 'I mean, these guys are men. They're big, fast and rough. So I was a little hesitant at first.' But that quickly changed after one of his teammates took him aside. 'He said, "We can't use you if you don't play your game,"' Azevedo said. 'He told me, "Put your fears aside and remember why you were selected.'””

And, Azevedo's absence was not entirely bad for the Bruins, as their first year coach Tony Martinho would reflect to the Times as the playoffs began – “He left a void no one can fill, but it was a positive thing because some of our other players were forced to step up athletically as well as in leadership roles. Now that he's back, we're that much better.” Yikes, after three consecutive championships, Long Beach Wilson was better! The Bruins, additionally, had found an extremely able replacement for Tony's father – one with the strongest of ties to the school, having been a member of the school's first championship team in 1981. Martinho had won a Division II title with Los Alamitos in 1997, and would remain as coach of his alma mater through 2013.

The only team that was able to take advantage of Azevedo's absence was Newport Harbor. On Opening Day for both teams, Tues., Sept. 14, at the Sailors' pool, Newport Harbor defeated Long Beach Wilson, 11-10, scoring the winning goal 45 seconds into sudden death. It was the Bruins' first loss since Nov. 1, 1997, ending a 35 game winning streak. On top of the loss, Martinho's career at Long Beach Wilson got off to a forgettable start for another reason. As the Daily Pilot reported, “Less than a minute into the fourth quarter, (Newport Harbor's Peter) Belden was given a four-meter penalty shot, infuriating Bruins Coach (Tony Martinho). (Martinho) was given a red card,

ejecting him from the contest.” It was a memorable start, however, for Sailors’ co-coach Brian Kreutzkamp. Kreutzkamp had also won a Division II title – in 1995 with Costa Mesa. Following that triumph, he resigned and spent 1996 back in school getting his Teacher’s Credential. In 1997, Bill Barnett hired him as his assistant coach, and so began a well-orchestrated succession plan. Kreutzkamp continued as assistant coach in 1998, then became co-coach in 1999 and head coach in 2000, with Barnett as his assistant coach. The school made an excellent choice because Kreutzkamp seemed to take on the assignment of “replacing a legend” without hesitancy or awkwardness. In fact, he was functionally head coach beginning this year – with Kreutzkamp directing from the bench during the game and talking to the press afterwards, while Barnett was generally perched on a locker room rooftop above the stands talking into a videotape microphone. For Barnett, he was transitioning with his usual success to head coach of Newport Harbor’s Girls Water Polo team. His work here would lead to him being offered the head coaching position of the U.S. Women’s Olympics Water Polo Team. He ultimately had to decline the opportunity because he couldn’t obtain a leave of absence from his teaching position with the Newport-Mesa School District.

Newport Harbor capitalized a second time on Azevedo’s absence 11 days later, on Sat., Sept. 25, once again at the Sailors’ pool, in the finals of the South Coast Tournament. On this occasion, Newport Harbor dominated the Bruins, building a 9-0 lead mid-way through the third period. They were then in the unique position of being able to let up on Long Beach Wilson, cruising to an 11-5 win. To get to the finals, Newport Harbor defeated Foothill, 6-5, in one semi-final, while Long Beach Wilson beat El Toro, 10-8, in the other. That afternoon Foothill beat El Toro, 7-5, in the third place game. It was El Toro’s third loss of the season and second one already to the Knights. Foothill had defeated the Chargers, 10-7, in their game held Sept. 14 at El Toro. (The Chargers had better tournament luck Fri.-Sat., Sept. 10-11, when they won the Poway tourney, defeating Bishop’s in the final, 17-7. Bishop’s would finish second again this year to Coronado in CIF-SDS Division II.)

Then came the “Southern California S&R Invitational,” held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 8-9, at the Woollett Aquatics Center (yes, corporate sponsorship was now a part of high school Water Polo). In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated San Clemente, 8-5, while Long Beach Wilson beat Foothill, 11-2 (“Azevedo, who played only the first half, had five goals,” said the Los Angeles Times). Foothill would win the third place game against San Clemente, 7-6. Tony Azevedo had been back in the Bruins’ line-up as of the previous day, and would contribute two goals to Long Beach Wilson’s cause in the final game. The game was memorable for a technical glitch, as reported by the Daily Pilot, “The scoreboard stopped because of a power failure, causing a 15-minute delay in the game.” The Sailors held a 5-4 lead with three minutes left in the second quarter when play was stopped. When the game resumed, it was “with a partially working scoreboard and the time and score was yelled out across the pool.” Azevedo and Albert Garcia scored in the final two minutes of the half to give the Bruins a 6-5 lead. Long Beach Wilson scored four more times in a row to lead 10-5 early in the fourth quarter. The Bruins then coasted to a 13-10 win, and their sixth consecutive Southern California Invitational championship.

If there was any doubt that the proper order of things had been restored, it was eliminated in the following week. First, the Bruins hosted Foothill on Tues., Oct. 12, beating the Knights, 13-9. Then, Long Beach Wilson defeated Harvard, 17-10, at Belmont Plaza on Sat., Oct. 16. Azevedo contributed five goals in the three quarters he played, with six Bruins scoring that day. As Harvard's Coach Corso told the Times, "(Azevedo) is a great player. You try to double down on him, but he helps his team score, even if he doesn't get the ball."

Long Beach Wilson capped things off on Fri.-Sat., Oct. 29-30 in San Jose at the "TruWest John Felix Memorial Cal State Invitational." The quarter-finals showed Long Beach Wilson 16, San Clemente 4; Coronado 8, Corona del Mar 7; Newport Harbor 10, Harvard 5; and Foothill 13, Bellarmine 7 (the eventual CIF-CCS Division I champ). In the semi-finals, Long Beach Wilson pounded Foothill, 12-5, while Coronado beat Newport Harbor, 8-6. The Sailors then won the third place game over Foothill, 10-9. In the finals, Coronado only trailed 4-3 at half-time, and moved into a 4-4 tie early in the third, but the Bruins took over thereafter for an 11-4 win. Among the also-rans, Newport Harbor lost to a team they had beaten playing at Coronado on Sat., Sept. 18 – 8-7 in sudden death. So, the Sailors' first two games of the season had been won that way. But, Newport Harbor's quarter-final win over Harvard was a big help as schedulers drew close to considered playoff seedings. The Wolverines had a disappointing season in tournament play. At the Southern California Invitational, they had also lost in the quarter-finals – to San Clemente, 9-8. And, at their co-sponsored Toring Tournament, Harvard had lost in the finals to Los Alamitos, 7-5, on Sept. 18 at Long Beach Millikan. (Los Alamitos ended up a semi-finalist in Division II.)

There were two other contests that seemed to influence how playoff seedings were eventually assigned – both involving El Toro. It first needs to be explained that the Sea View League underwent an emptying out before the season began. Corona del Mar was moved to the Pacific Coast League – which may have made sense for their football team, but it put the second-winningest Water Polo program of all-time in Division II. As the Los Angeles Times noted in previewing the season, "the Sea Kings are immediate threats for league and division titles." That, indeed, was the outcome as Corona del Mar defeated Servite, 8-6, in the championship game – one that, interestingly enough, matched Coach Vargas against his old Sunny Hills antagonist, Jim Sprague. Also moved out was El Toro, which rejoined the South Coast League – making it once again the toughest league in the section. This meant that the most consequential league game of the year was the one pitting El Toro against San Clemente, played at the Chargers' pool on Thurs., Oct. 14. The game was tied 7-7 with just three minutes left in the game when El Toro scored the final two goals to win, 9-7, deciding the league title right there. Following the South Coast Tournament, the Chargers were only 8-3, but they would proceed to win 15 of their 16 remaining games. The one loss came on Tues., Oct. 26, again at El Toro, against the Sea View League's only remaining powerhouse – Newport Harbor. As the Register reported, "The Chargers... never led and didn't tie the score after falling behind 3-0 in the first quarter. But El Toro got within one goal of the... Sailors six times – three times in each half. The last time was with 1:14 remaining in the fourth period on Trevor McMunn's fourth goal." There was no further scoring, however, and the Sailors held on, 10-9.

When the seedings were reported on Tues., Nov. 9, Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson (22-2) had snatched the top seed for the fourth year in a row. And, for the second straight year, Sea View League champ Newport Harbor (23-2) was the number two seed. Right behind them in third was South Coast League champ El Toro (23-4), while Mission League champ Harvard was fourth. San Clemente, second place in the South Coast League, took fifth seed. The sixth seed went to Century League champ Villa Park. The Spartans once again claimed the title on the last day of the season – Fri., Nov. 5 – with an upset victory over Foothill, 7-6, at Villa Park. The second place team from the Mission League, Loyola, was seventh seed, and Foothill paid a heavy price for their season-ending loss by being assigned the dreaded eighth seed.

First round games were played on Thurs., Nov. 11, and like the previous year, only one game was as close as a five goal margin. The round is worth noting only in that the hollowed out Sea View League sent two representatives who normally don't qualify. Third-place Aliso Niguel played its only Division I playoff game ever in a 13-8 loss to Villa Park at the Spartans' pool. Second-place Irvine made their first playoff showing since 1993, losing 14-5 to host Foothill. For Irvine, though, it marked the beginning of a run of five consecutive playoff appearances.

The quarter-finals took place on Tues., Nov. 16. Furthest south, San Clemente played Harvard at Saddleback College. The Wolverines didn't waste the long trip or the opportunity to avenge their earlier loss to the Tritons, winning 12-8. Just up the I-5 a bit, El Toro was entertaining Villa Park, who the Chargers had already beaten three times this year. The Spartans had lost to El Toro, 7-3, in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament; 7-6, in the final game of the Villa Park Classic, Sat. Oct. 2; and 11-7, in a non-league game played Oct. 9 at El Toro. This last game was arranged to fill a hole in the Chargers' schedule. According to the Register of Oct. 8, "(Coach) Stoll tried but failed to get his team entered in...the Southern California S&R Invitational." This fourth meeting was the most lopsided of them all, with El Toro ending Villa Park's season, 12-6.

To the northwest at Belmont Plaza, Long Beach Wilson met up with Foothill. If any team was prepared for the Bruins, it would be Foothill – having played them three times, all after Azevedo's return. Of course, the two teams had also faced each other in the 1996 and 1997 CIF-SS finals, so the Register wrote that the game "had a bit of a title-match feel." And, "Foothill gave its best effort," leading 3-2 after the first period. Long Beach Wilson did not establish its first lead until early in the second period, 4-3, and then extended it to 6-3 with 2:16 left in the half. Still, Foothill stayed close, eventually getting to within 8-7 at the 2:05 mark of the third period. The Bruins added one to make the score 9-7 at the end of three. From there, Long Beach Wilson scored the first two goals of the fourth period to go up, 11-7, and Foothill never threatened thereafter. The game ended 12-8. The Knights had given the top seeded Bruins a tougher quarter-final match than they probably felt they had coming. The Register quoted Long Beach Wilson's Albert Garcia saying, "They played a great game – hands down. It's unfortunate they lost to Villa Park. That screwed up everything."

Furthest north of all, Newport Harbor and Loyola were playing at Mira Costa High School. Unlike the other Elite Eight battles, these two teams hadn't played each other all year. Newport Harbor was favored, but jinxed – unable to advance past the quarters since 1988. The Cubs were eager to exploit any fears of “here we go again” and scored the first goal. The Sailors tied it 1-1 by the end of the first period. The second quarter appeared to be decisive, as Newport Harbor moved out to 4-1 lead at half-time. But, Loyola came right back in the third period to tie it, 4-4. The Sailors responded with a goal and then another with only :10 left for a 6-4 lead at the end of three. The Cubs kept closing in – making it 6-5 and then 7-6 during the fourth quarter, before Newport Harbor scored a final goal to put it away, 8-6. The Sailors had cleared this hurdle at last, and completed something on behalf of their fellow top four seeds as well – it was the first time since 1995 that all four teams had survived the quarter-finals.

The semi-finals arrived on Sat., Nov. 20. According to the Daily Pilot of Wed., Nov. 17, the contests were planned as a doubleheader at Belmont Plaza. But, Harvard's Coach Corso must have called for an “alternate site” for its game with Long Beach Wilson. Pepperdine University was chosen, with the battle starting at 3:30 p.m. El Toro and Newport Harbor no longer had a reason to travel up to Long Beach, and settled on Corona del Mar as their site, starting at 1 p.m. For the fourth year in a row, then, the two semis were taking place far from each other, a total of 66 miles. The change of venue didn't help Harvard much in their own rematch of a CIF-SS title game with the Bruins – played just last year. It was a relatively tough defensive battle, with Harvard holding the Bruins to their lowest playoff point total since 1995. Unfortunately for the Wolverines, they were held to their lowest point total on any level since 1973. According to the Long Beach Press-Telegram, “After taking a 4-2 lead into half-time, the Bruins broke the game open in the third period when they scored three goals in two minutes.” One of those goals came from Tony Azevedo, who ended the game with two total. There was no further scoring and Long Beach Wilson won, 7-2.

The Bruins and Wolverines, though, had a hard act to follow because the contest that preceded theirs was one of the all-time great semi-finals. The Daily Pilot called it, “a wild, melodramatic and excruciatingly tense game.” Newport Harbor scored the first goal, but El Toro held a 2-1 lead after the first period. In the second quarter the Sailors nosed ahead 3-2, the Chargers retook the lead 4-3 and the Sailors closed out the scoring to lead 5-4 at half-time. El Toro tied the score 5-5 towards the end of the third period, but left time for Newport Harbor to reassert its lead, 6-5, at the end of three. The Sailors scored the first goal of the fourth quarter to make it 7-5, the only two-goal lead of the game. The Chargers then scored three times in a row to go ahead 8-7 – the contest's fifth lead change. El Toro's latest goal came with 1:25 left, which again left Newport Harbor just enough time. The Sailors converted an extra-man situation to tie the score 8-8 at the :47 mark, and the fourth quarter ended. In the first overtime period, says the Daily Pilot, “The Sailors thought they had the game won when (Robert) Weiner made a good shot past El Toro's goalie. But the ball hit the left post and straddled the goal line without going in.” The ball was frantically grabbed by an El Toro field player. The two overtime periods went scoreless and the game moved to sudden death. There had been surprisingly few sudden death games in the semis, having only occurred in 1966

and 1985. They really got into it – the game remained scoreless for another 2:57 of play. Finally, with only :03 left in the period, the Register reported, “(El Toro’s Trevor McMunn’s shot was straight-on from about 12 yards. He faked a side-arm attempt before firing an over-hand rocket toward the upper, right corner. Newport Harbor goalie Tim Birdsong tipped the ball, but the shot pounded the back of the net.” El Toro had won, 9-8. Imagine, the teams had played in sudden death for six to seven times longer than the sudden death periods in the 1992 and 1993 finals. No wonder the Daily Pilot wrote, “(the game) left El Toro Coach Don Stoll in tears,” and Newport Harbor’s Co-Coach Brian Kreutzkamp told the paper, “I must have aged 10 years during the game.”

The final game took place Wed., Nov. 24, at Belmont Plaza. Just like Sunny Hills and Newport Harbor in 1979, the El Toro-Long Beach Wilson game of 1999 was to decide “Team of the Decade.” Long Beach Wilson had won four titles in the decade, El Toro three, though this was the Chargers’ first time in the finals since 1993. The decade both opened and closed with a Long Beach Wilson-El Toro final game, this contest being a rematch of the 1990 final game. It was also a rematch of their South Coast Tournament game of two months earlier, when the Bruins had won by two goals without Tony Azevedo. What chance did the Chargers have now that he had rejoined the team? Well, things started promisingly for El Toro – the Chargers jumped out to a 2-0 lead at the 4:26 mark of the first period. Coach Martinho called time-out and, the Register reports, “the Bruins responded with a 9-0 run that the Chargers didn’t stop until three seconds were left in the half.” But even then the Bruins weren’t done as “Azevedo... (scored) a goal from half-tank with one second left in the second period.” The score had gone from 4-2 after the first period to 10-3 at half-time. Long Beach Wilson took a 12-6 lead heading into the fourth quarter, then closed out the victory, 14-9, with Azevedo earning a match-high seven goals. Coach Stoll said, “All I can say is we didn’t play defense. We didn’t stop Azevedo.” After four years, the Chargers were hardly alone in that department against the now three-time Player of the Year.

I have related in this story how inspired I was when my alma mater, Newport Harbor, had won its fourth title in a row in 1980. Now, a program had come along just 19 years later and done the same thing, absorbing a coaching change in the process. “Team of the Decade” definitely goes to Long Beach Wilson with five titles in the 1990s. Still, prospects were brightening for the competition. Tony Azevedo was finally headed for Stanford University and the Olympics. Long Beach Wilson was also losing its second best player, Albert Garcia, who contributed five goals in the final game. A new year, a new decade, heck, a new millennium awaited.

2000

The new year was expected to be wide open with Azevedo’s departure. Indeed, it was so wide open that Foothill made it all the way to the finals with an unprecedented 11 losses. At the same time, Newport Harbor, the preseason favorite, won the title – not without some stumbles along the way, but in the end doing so as easily as Long Beach Wilson had the previous two years.

In fact, the Sailors stumbled out of the blocks. On Opening Day, Tues., Sept. 12, they lost to Long Beach Wilson, 12-11, at Belmont Plaza. The Bruins still had a strong team – and they nearly had a great one. A source of early season controversy was Long Beach Wilson's attempt to add to their roster France Denk, a 6-foot-5-inch foreign-exchange student from Slovenia. He did not participate in any games, however, and by Wed., Sept. 20, the Register reported that the potential season-changing player was declared ineligible by CIF-SS. Newport Harbor proceeded to drop its second game as well, losing on the road again to Coronado, 9-8, on Sat., Sept. 16. The Islanders, as we will see, had an extremely good team and would eventually beat Bishop's for the third year in a row to claim the CIF-SDS Division II championship.

“The First Big Test” – the South Coast Tournament – arrived Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 21-23, at Newport Harbor. Foothill entered the tournament with a 2-1 record, having lost at home on Tues., Sept. 19, against Esperanza, 13-11 (the Aztecs would eventually finish in the Division II Sweet 16). The Knights proceeded to lose their semi-final match to San Clemente, 8-5, and then the third place match to Newport Harbor, 10-8. The Sailors lost their semi-final match to Villa Park, 8-5. Newport Harbor would avenge this defeat by beating the Spartans 6-4 on Tues., Oct. 17, back at the Sailors' pool. In the meantime, Newport Harbor (4-3) joined Foothill (5-3) in exiting the tournament with three losses on the season already. True to the season's wide-open billing, then, the final game featured two surprising but in the end snake-bitten teams. San Clemente won the championship, 7-6, reported the Register, in “a bizarre, ‘Hollywood’ ending.” With just seconds remaining, the Tritons got the ball to Josh Hewko at two-meters, who was promptly fouled. Hewko attempted “to pass to Pat McCann near the goal, but the ball hit the far post and bounced to (James) Hollywood, who scored” as the buzzer sounded. But Villa Park's players believed play had been stopped, thinking Hewko had taken a shot at the goal off a free pass – something not permitted. “Villa Park also disputed how the clock was run in the final seconds. Villa Park coach John Carcich said the clock wasn't running during Hewko's pass/shot.... Said Carcich: ‘How could it end like that?’” For Villa Park, it would not be the last bit of outrageous fortune this season. For San Clemente, future setbacks included being stopped in the quarter-finals of the next two major tournaments, and losing at home to El Toro, 10-9, on Thurs., Oct. 12, in the match that decided the South Coast League title.

Next up was the middle event of the “Big Three,” now known as the “S&R Sport Cup,” played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 6-7. Foothill had lost two more games coming into the tournament – to Harvard, 6-5, at Tustin High School on Tues., Sept. 26, and to Coronado, 8-5, in the final match of the Coronado Tournament on Sat., Sept. 30. Now, the Knights would lose in the Sport Cup's quarter-finals to Long Beach Wilson, 11-3. Foothill would go on to claim fifth place in the tourney, and exit with a 12-6 season record. The quarter-finals had been held at El Toro because, said the Register, “The diving pool at (Woollett Aquatics Center) was vandalized overnight.” The final day, however, returned to Irvine. In the semi-finals, Corona del Mar defeated Long Beach Wilson, 9-6, and Newport Harbor got revenge on Coronado, 11-8. (It would be the Islanders' only loss of the year, and they beat the Bruins in the third place game, 11-6. Coronado would also defeat Long Beach Wilson, 8-7, while hosting the Bruins on Sat., Oct. 14.)

The Sport Cup's final game, then, was the only "Battle of the Bay" for 2000 – with the Sea Kings edging the Sailors, 12-11. For all competitors, it meant somebody besides the Bruins had finally won this tournament. For the Sailors, it ended a seven game winning streak, and they exited with a 10-4 record. And for the Sea Kings, they were now firmly driving towards winning the Division II crown for a second consecutive year. Just the Tuesday before, Oct. 3, Coach John Vargas had returned from the Olympics. The 2000 Olympics Water Polo Tournament was held Sat., Sept. 23-Sun., Oct. 1, in Sydney, Australia. The U.S. lost to Italy, 10-8, to finish in sixth place. The legendary Ratko Rudic would succeed Vargas as coach this fall – thus Vargas remains the last of four CIF-SS coaches to lead the U.S. Olympics team.

Foothill was done with tournament play for the year and spent the next three weeks winning league games and losing non-league contests. On Tues., Oct. 10, they again faced Long Beach Wilson, losing 14-9 at the Bruins' pool. Following a league win the next day, they visited Corona del Mar on Fri., Oct. 13, and lost, 11-4. Then came a tough week, starting with a rescheduled game against San Clemente on Mon., Oct. 16, at El Toro, which the Tritons won, 6-4. The Knights won a league game on Wed., Oct. 18, and then faced Newport Harbor at the Sailors' pool, on Fri., Oct. 20, losing to them, 11-8. The next day, Foothill lost at home to Coronado, 12-8 (so their three defeats that week were second losses to each opponent). But they also got a much needed boost that would help them in time. According to the Register, "Blake Seymour, who quit the team before the season, called Coach Jim Brumm on Oct. 6 and said he wanted to return to the squad. Brumm and Seymour met, and the former U.S. national youth team player returned to the Knights lineup on Oct. 13 against Corona del Mar." Foothill's schedule then slowed down somewhat with only another league win on Wed., Oct. 25, which took them into the final week of the season with a 15-11 record.

Newport Harbor had one more tournament to go – the TruWest Cup Tournament, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 27-28. Villa Park highlighted the competition's first day, beating Long Beach Wilson, 6-4, in the quarter-finals. The Spartans seemed to have the Bruins' number this year – they had beaten them in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament as well, 8-5. (And, as with the prior tourney, the Bruins would finish fifth here.) On the final day, Newport Harbor beat Villa Park in their third meeting of the year, 9-6, in one semi-final, while Coronado beat Corona del Mar, 12-7, in the other. Villa Park proceeded to win their first game ever against the Sea Kings, 13-5, in the third place contest. The final game was held at Bellarmine in San Jose, with Coronado defeating Newport Harbor in their own third meeting of the year, 12-8. So, the Islanders beat the eventual CIF-SS Division I and Division II champions in a single day. Not bad. The loss to Coronado had brought the Sailors' nine-game winning streak to an end, but they racked up three more wins in the following week, including a 14-6 victory at home against El Toro on Tues., Oct. 31. All told, the Sailors played seven games in the last eight days of the season – more than one-quarter of their total – to end regular play with a 22-5 record.

The regular season fireworks in this era were never over, however, until Foothill faced Villa Park, always to decide the Century League title. The previous year, the Los

Angeles Times called it, “(Orange) county’s oldest league rivalry.” Their 2000 face off took place on the last day of the season, Fri., Nov. 3, at Tustin High School. The Knights upset the Spartans, but the outcome wasn’t truly known until 24 hours later. Villa Park had a 7-4 lead at one point in the third period. Then, reports the Register, “It started with 12 seconds left in the third quarter and Villa Park leading, 7-5. After a player from each squad was ejected, Villa Park’s Josh Kashuk entered the game early and the referee blew the whistle and awarded a penalty shot to Foothill. The Knights’ Brian Alexander took advantage of the opportunity and bounced a shot past goalie Jared Jones to close to 7-6 at the end of three quarters. (Villa Park Coach John) Carcich contends the penalty shot was unwarranted. He believes CIF rules state that when a player prematurely enters a match with less than a minute remaining, the infraction should have led to another ejection, not a penalty shot....Foothill’s beef comes with the timing of the protest. The Knights coaching staff said the protest has to come within a certain time frame under CIF rules.” Villa Park Assistant Coach John Kulisich stated he notified the referees of their protest during a timeout with 5:14 left in the fourth quarter – by then, Foothill had tied the score, 7-7, at the 6:30 mark. Foothill’s Coach Brumm, however, said he didn’t become aware of it until after his team had tossed him into the pool in triumph at game’s end. The Knights scored with 3:57 left and a final time with less than two minutes remaining to win, 9-7. The issue only accelerated, however, as “both referees and the two coaching staffs debated for more than an hour in the coach’s office. They decided nothing could be done until contacting CIF officials (the next day).” Ultimately, it was league officials not CIF-SS who judged the matter and ruled in favor of Foothill – the protest was not filed quickly enough and made adequately known, even though Villa Park was evidently correct about the (erroneous) decision by the referees. The previous year’s game had been controversial as well – a Foothill player was called for headbutting a Villa Park player, “with 2:04 left in the first half, resulting in a game-brutality penalty that left the Knights...down one player for the final 16:02 of regulation,” wrote the Register at the time. Thus, Foothill finished the 2000 season 16-11.

On Tues., Nov. 7, the newspapers reported the playoff seedings, which just so happened to be Election Day, resulting in the disputed 2000 Presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. The election wasn’t effectively decided until the Supreme Court ruled on recounts in Florida on Tues., Dec. 12. What a country! Our playoffs unfolded throughout the national controversy. Sea View League champ Newport Harbor was top seed, Moore League champ Long Beach Wilson was second, Century League champ Foothill was third and Villa Park was fourth. At fifth seed was South Coast League champ El Toro and at sixth seed was Mission League champ Harvard.

First round games took place Thurs., Nov. 9, and once again there were no close games. The tightest margin was six goals, with Loyola (second in Mission) over Canyon (third in Century), 10-4. The round marked the first appearance in Division I by Laguna Hills (third in Sea View League), who lost to host Foothill, 18-4. The Hawks would qualify seven times in nine years (through 2008), though they wouldn’t win a single game.

The quarter-finals were played on Tues., Nov. 14. We are nine years into the current playoff structure, and by now the top teams were growing very used to seeing each other in the year-end tournament. At Harvard, Foothill took a 3-2 lead into half-time against the Wolverines. The Knights extended the lead to 6-2 at the end of three, and finished off Harvard, 8-5. It was their seventh meeting since 1992 in the Elite Eight or Final Four, with Foothill now holding a 5-2 advantage. At Belmont Plaza, Long Beach Wilson faced San Clemente for the fifth time in a quarter- or semi-final since 1992, the Bruins leading the series 3-1 heading in. The score was tied 5-5 at half-time before Long Beach Wilson went on a 6-0 tear to lead 11-5 after three periods, then winning 14-9. And, at Newport Harbor, the Sailors faced Loyola for the second year in a row in the quarter-finals, with Sweet 16 games played back in 1994 and 1992 – all triumphs by the Sailors. The Cubs, of course, had been giving Harvard hard battles for years and as recently as Sat., Nov. 4, had placed second in the North Orange County Tournament, losing to host Servite, 13-4 (the Friars would end up a semi-finalist in Division II). Now, Loyola jumped out to a 2-1 lead at the end of the first quarter. Eventual Player of the Year Peter Belden then scored two goals, the second with only :50 left in the half, to give the Sailors their first lead – 3-2, the score at intermission. Newport Harbor proceeded to dominate the second half, though, taking a 7-3 lead at the end of three periods, and finishing with a 10-3 final score. Belden recorded four goals, though his teammate Ryan Cook notched six.

El Toro and Villa Park were also meeting in the Elite Eight for the second year in a row, with a Sweet 16 game played back in 1994 – both won by the Chargers. More recently, the host Spartans had smashed El Toro, 13-1, on Oct. 6. This lop-sided score may have been partially due to El Toro's leading scorer, Brett McCleave, not playing due to illness. The playoff contest was held at El Toro and, for Villa Park, it would be the final act in a star-crossed year. The Spartans had a 9-7 lead with 2:55 left in the fourth quarter, but the Chargers scored at the 2:06 and :43 marks to send it into overtime, 9-9. The first overtime period was scoreless. Early in the second overtime, El Toro moved ahead, 10-9, but Villa Park came back just 30 second later to tie it again, 10-10. Then, according to the Register, "(Danny) Pierson scored from 7 meters on the wing with 45 seconds left in the overtime to lift El Toro past fourth-seeded Villa Park, 11-10. Pierson, with plenty of open water and scoring machine Brett McCleave in front of him, fired to beat the shot clock, which had ticked down to five seconds. (Villa Park's goalie) appeared to try to catch the shot, but it slipped through his hands and into the cage. McCleave, who played a strong overall game, sealed the victory with a steal with 32 seconds left."

The semi-finals were played Sat., Nov. 18. After four years of the games being held far apart, a doubleheader took place at the Los Alamitos USA Aquatic Center, Newport Harbor facing El Toro (17-11 entering the playoffs) at high noon, followed by Foothill vs. Long Beach Wilson (20-5). On the one hand, it was a Final Four of the finest company – all were previous CIF-SS champions, the first such quartet since 1993. On the other, what an odd circumstance considering their performances in the season's tournaments! None had won any of the five Water Polo fests they combined to participate in. The Sailors, Knights and Bruins had finishes ranging from second to

fifth. The Chargers had an even less impressive record. They finished 15th in the South Coast tourney, 11th at TruWest and seventh at the Villa Park Classic, held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 28-30 (the Spartans won their own tourney). Well, somebody was going to win this tournament!

That dismal regular season loss to Villa Park had left El Toro 8-8, but they had gotten much better as the season rolled on, going 9-3 the rest of the way. They had lost to Newport Harbor less than three weeks prior, but they had also lost to the Sailors during the season last year, before turning the tables in the memorable semi-final. But Newport Harbor had an all-senior line-up this year and they were still smarting from 1999. The first quarter ended 3-3, and the game was still tied 4-4 after an El Toro goal with 3:59 left in the half. But then the Sailors scored three goals to make it 7-4 at intermission, and then added three more to open the third quarter to lead 10-4. "In my opinion," Newport Harbor's Head Coach Brian Kreutzkamp told the Daily Pilot, "El Toro was out of gas, especially after that win over Villa Park." The third quarter ended, 10-5, and the Sailors closed it out for a 12-6 final. Ryan Cook had scored seven goals and Peter Belden scored twice for Newport Harbor. The Sailors were back to the final game for the first time in 13 years – the longest span of years for a program between trips to the finals in the tournament's history.

Foothill had lost twice to Long Beach Wilson in the space of five days around six weeks earlier, but that was before the Knights added Blake Seymour. Now, the Register reported, "The Knights never trailed and were never tied. Foothill scored on its first two shots, getting goals from Wes Fox and Blake Seymour." Fox would end the day with four goals and Seymour scored twice. Foothill steadily added to their lead throughout, ending the first period ahead, 3-1, then 5-2 at half-time and 6-2 at the end of three. The Knights' defensive dominance was punctuated at the 5:16 mark of the fourth quarter, when goalie Ian Elliott blocked a four-meter penalty shot by the Bruins' leading scorer, James Shin – who was held scoreless for the first time all year. Foothill kept Long Beach Wilson at bay from there to finish up, 8-4. The Knights had done it – ending the Bruins' string of four championships. Says the Register, "Foothill received a standing ovation from its cheering section, which had no problem being heard among the crowd of nearly 1,500." The Knights were back the finals after a two year absence, though recent enough for the seniors to recall it.

The final game took place on its traditional eve before Thanksgiving, on Wed., Nov. 22 – Belmont Plaza a truly neutral site for the first time since 1995. Considering the histories of the two schools, they had met in the playoffs surprisingly few times – Sweet 16 games in 1974 and 1991, both won by Newport Harbor, and a quarter-final game in 1998. Foothill had won that match of two years ago, and so the Sailors aimed to exact revenge as they had just done to El Toro for ending their 1999 season. It had also been a long time since the eventual champ came in with as many as five losses – not since 1990. But in this odd year it didn't matter. The Sailors didn't have to worry about any of the teams that had beaten them – Coronado was in CIF-SDS, Corona del Mar was in Division II, El Toro had taken care of Villa Park and Foothill had just

eliminated Long Beach Wilson. They only had to push the anti-complacency button and beat a good team three times in a row.

Newport Harbor, indeed, came in with guns blazing. The Sailors scored on their first three possessions to go up 3-0 with 4:45 still left in the first quarter. They were up 5-1 at the end of the first period, 10-5 at half-time and the game was over by the end of the third quarter, with Newport Harbor up by seven, 14-7. The game ended with the Sailors' 11th CIF-SS title, 15-9. Peter Belden and Steven Jendrusina led Newport Harbor's scoring with four goals each. The Knights' scoring had come mainly from their offensive duo of Wes Fox and Blake Seymour with three goals each. But the Sailors' defense and play by goalie Brandon McLain were equally effective, denying Foothill on six of their eight man-advantage situations.

It was a big night for the Newport-Mesa School District, with Corona del Mar beating University, 15-7, for the Division II title. But it wasn't the first time for this center of Water Polo excellence – in 1987 the Sea Kings had won the 4A title while Costa Mesa won in 2A. The big triumph, though, belonged to Newport Harbor, which added another remarkable record to their many – 16 years between titles, the longest in the history of the tournament by a matter of three years. The Daily Pilot reported, “The only remaining piece to those past championship puzzles, (Assistant Coach) Bill Barnett, couldn't escape the customary dunk in the pool. ‘It was useless to try to hide,’ a soaked, shivering and smiling Barnett said. ‘They would have found me anyways.’” Head Coach Brian Kreutzkamp, of course, had been tossed in with him. When he came out, he told the paper, “Our school history is great and everything, but it really doesn't have anything to do with this team and this game. It's a lot of pressure to put on one team. We just wanted to go out there and perform to our best and they definitely did that tonight.”

2001

Players and coaches of CIF-SS premier division teams are justly proud to be playing in “the toughest division in the country.” It is a fact by a wide margin virtually every year. I say “virtually” only because in this particular year the claim is open to fair debate. Long Beach Wilson would return as champions, but not before losing seven regular season games – equaling the number recorded by Sunny Hills in 1986 and El Toro in 1990. Yet, the Bruins could embark on the playoffs secure in the knowledge that their opponents in five of those losses were safely out of the section or the division. Of course, we can never know exactly what would have happened unless actual playoff showdowns were played. Let's just say there were some really good teams engaged elsewhere in 2001.

This year, of course, was the year of 9/11 – Tues., Sept. 11, when terrorists attacked the United States through four hijacked aircraft, the first piloted like a missile into a World Trade Center tower in New York at 5:46 a.m. Pacific time. People alive and aware of the world remember this day the way a previous generation remembered Pearl Harbor. And, indeed, these events led to the first interruption of the season's start since

World War II. Some competition had already gotten underway – Harvard, for instance, visited Mira Costa for its season-opener and beat the defending Division III champion, 6-3, on Sat., Sept. 8. But the familiar “Opening Day” of the season was set to take place on – Sept. 11. The Daily Pilot reported the next day, “Tuesday morning’s tragedies... took its toll in every direction and on every level. Among scheduled events postponed, mostly without a makeup date, were Long Beach Wilson’s water polo game at Newport Harbor.” On Tues., Sept. 18, the Register wrote, “Showdown Off: The Corona del Mar-Foothill match that was canceled last week because of the terrorist attacks will not be rescheduled.” The Los Angeles Times, on Thurs., Sept. 13, stated, “The Jim Toring Memorial boys’ water polo tournament, scheduled for today through Saturday at Harvard-Westlake and Long Beach Millikan highs, has been canceled in the wake of the terrorist attacks.... ‘We feel it’s the right thing to do,’ said Harvard-Westlake Coach Rich Corso, the tournament director. ‘We looked for ways to do it next weekend, but there are other tournaments and league matches, and there was just no way.’” And, the Glendale News-Press on Sat., Sept. 15, reported on a pair of Division III schools, “Crescenta Valley... was supposed to open the season against San Marino on Tuesday, but that match was rescheduled for Friday because of the attacks. Friday came and passed and CV still hadn’t played a match because the school district decided to not play any events on Friday in observance of National Day of Mourning.”

Yet, for high school Water Polo at any rate, things got back on track remarkably quickly. Most of the first games were played in San Diego County the weekend of Sept. 14-15, including the Poway Tournament that featured at least the host school, and Division II’s Edison and University. (Poway would eventually win the CIF-SDS Division I title.) Also on Sept. 15, Coronado hosted Newport Harbor and defeated the Sailors handily, 15-2. Coronado would proceed to have a huge year – winning the CIF-SDS Division II crown for the fourth year in a row, going undefeated and routinely referred to as “the top ranked team in the state” whenever a CIF-SS team had the misfortune to play them. (Unlike CIF-SS, the San Diego Section assigned teams to levels strictly on the basis of enrollment.) On Sept. 18, Foothill beat host Esperanza, 10-7. The lethargy caused by the season’s delay was in evidence as the Register reported, “Neither team was sharp.” But, normality was returning. The Newport Harbor vs. Long Beach Wilson game was made up on Wed., Sept. 19, with the visiting Bruins getting their season started right, beating the defending champs, 14-12.

The very next day, the Bruins stepped into the South Coast Tournament, held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 20-22. In the quarter-finals, they lost to Corona del Mar at the Sea Kings’ pool, 10-4. The Bruins then lost a fifth-place semi-final game to Foothill, 8-4. They ended up claiming seventh place with a victory over Newport Harbor, 12-7. Competing for the championship at Newport Harbor, then, Corona del Mar won their semi-final match against Servite, 12-6. In the other semi-final, yet another strong school from San Diego – Bishop’s – defeated El Toro, 12-7. Servite would defeat El Toro, 6-5, for third place. In the final match, Corona del Mar defeated Bishop’s, 8-6. So Division I teams were not off to a good start – the top three finishers were from Division II of both CIF-SS and CIF-SDS. Bishop’s fine tournament play is worth noting. Nobody had to tell them about the misfortune of playing Coronado – Bishop’s again finished second

to the Islanders, but Coronado just scrapping by, 8-7, in the final. Bishop's, however, was not yet done beating up on CIF-SS teams. The following weekend they would win the Villa Park Classic – defeating El Toro again, 10-8, in the semis, and crushing La Canada (Division III) in the finals, 14-4.

As for Corona del Mar, on the very day of 9/11, Coach John Vargas and Athletic Director Jerry Jelnick announced that Vargas had resigned to take the head coaching job at Stanford University, effective Jan. 1, 2002. Unlike Vargas' (subsequently withdrawn) resignation in 1992, this announcement took everyone by surprise. And, this time, there would be no return to the Sea Kings. His 18 years as a walk-on had paid off, and he would go on to win NCAA championships with Stanford in 2002 and 2019. Meanwhile, observers fervently hoped to see one last CIF-SS final match (albeit in Division II) between Vargas and Servite's Jim Sprague – a hope made stronger when the Friars shocked the Sea Kings in their own pool on Mon., Oct. 22, winning 9-6.

Long Beach Wilson made it three losses in five days on Tues., Sept. 25, when they were again defeated by Corona del Mar, 9-4, in a non-league game at Belmont Plaza. The Bruins then entered the S&R Sport Cup at Woollett Aquatics Center in Irvine, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 5-6. In the quarter-finals, they ran up against Coronado. Scott Swanson, a freshman playing Varsity for Long Beach Wilson, could only remember it for me as a double-digit drubbing by the Islanders. It was – 15-1. The Bruins did, however, go on to claim fifth place the next day. In title bracket play, Corona del Mar defeated Harvard, 8-4, in one semi-final, while Coronado beat Servite, 9-6, in the other. In the third place game, Servite beat Harvard, 10-7 – for the Wolverines, the day meant their first two losses of the year. In the final match, Coronado defeated the Sea Kings, 8-6. For the second major tournament in a row, teams from other than Division I had finished in the top three spots.

During the next two weeks, Long Beach Wilson lost two more games, first to Coronado, 10-7, played on Sat., Oct. 13, at the Los Alamitos USA Aquatic Center. Regarding this quick rematch with the Islanders, the Bruins' Coach Tony Martinho wrote to me, "I remember this because we were blown out so badly the first time we faced them, that we used the second game's closer score as motivation for our team, to relay how much they had improved." Still, Harvard would subsequently hand them their sixth loss, 9-7, on Sat., Oct. 20 at Belmont Plaza.

Also played during this stretch were two crucial league face-offs that had important ramifications for playoff seedings. On Thurs., Oct. 18, El Toro hosted San Clemente and won, 7-6, to sew up the South Coast League. Then, on Wed., Oct. 24, Foothill traveled to Villa Park for their annual grudge match. This game was played a week early in the season by their standards – before Nor Cal rather than right after. And, it was a poignant meeting. The previous spring, Orange County schools had gathered to re-league once again, and the result this time called for Foothill to move to the Sea View League the following year. Foothill's Jim Brumm recalled for me the intense interest the rivalry attracted, which had decided the Century League title going back to the 1970s. Played in small campus aquatic facilities, the team benches had to be

cordoned off by yellow tape to keep the overflow of spectators separated from the players. On this day, Foothill won convincingly, 14-8.

Finally, 16 top teams gathered for the TruWest Cal-State Memorial Cup on Fri.-Sat., Oct. 26-27. In the semi-finals at Bellarmine, Corona del Mar defeated Long Beach Wilson for the third time, 12-11. It was the Bruins' seventh loss on the year, but they were indeed improving – no five or six goal margin this time, and it took overtime for the Sea Kings to beat them. In the other semi-final, Coronado defeated El Toro, 10-5. The Bruins would claim their best tournament finish thus far, beating the Chargers, 10-8, in the third place game. Still, Division I teams were locked out of a tourney final game once again. And, just like three weeks prior, Coronado beat Corona del Mar, 8-7, for only the Sea Kings' third loss of the season. Two other games from this tournament were important ultimately from a playoff seeding standpoint, both involving Harvard. El Toro beat the Wolverines, 10-5, in the quarter-finals, and then the next morning, San Clemente beat them, 9-8 in sudden death overtime, in the fifth-place semi-finals. These losses brought Harvard's total to four for the season – all accumulated in the last two major tournaments. And, just like in 1997 and 1998, they had entered Nor Cal with two losses all year and exited with four.

The playoff pairings were reported on Tues., Nov. 6, and even with their seven losses, the top seed went to Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 19-7). Second seed was El Toro (South Coast, 20-8); third was Harvard (Mission, 15-4) and fourth was San Clemente (second in South Coast, 16-11). Century League champ Foothill (17-10) was seeded fifth and Sea View League champ Newport Harbor (14-14) was sixth. The Register's coverage included a humorous A-Z listicle. The writer couldn't help noticing that Division I's top seed had been beaten three times by Corona del Mar – which hadn't even been awarded number one in Division II. (Servite was top seed having only lost those two tournament semi-final games all year.) The listicle concluded, "Z is for Zapped. Division I's status as the Southern Section's best division." Well, we'll just see.

First round games were played on Thurs., Nov. 8, and included two games with three-goal victory margins – but none closer. Mission Viejo was the At-Large team from the South Coast League – the first time since 1996 that a Century League team didn't snag the spot. And, the Diablos gave Long Beach Wilson a half-decent game, losing 13-7. The game that attracted the most interest, however, was Newport Harbor's match with Capistrano Valley (third-place, South Coast). After winning the title in 2000, the Sailors' Coach Brian Kreutzkamp resigned in May 2001 to accept the head coaching job at Golden West College. So, after a carefully orchestrated four-year succession plan, Newport Harbor found itself once again in search of a coach. But, a replacement was close at hand and selected by the end of June. Jason Lynch had been coach of Capistrano Valley for the seven previous seasons, and his team had beaten Newport Harbor in the 1997 quarter-finals. Lynch inherited a "near-senior-less" (Daily Pilot) Sailors Water Polo team, but in his first year he would also coach the school's swimming team to its only CIF-SS title (Spring 2002). This game was also of interest because stepping in for Lynch at Capistrano Valley was none other than Steve Yancey, who had piloted San Clemente through the 1995 season. Yancey would remain with

the Cougars until his retirement in June 2018, and would record substantial success in swimming in particular, with CIF-SS titles in 2009, 2010 and 2012. The two teams had actually just played each other six days earlier – on Fri., Nov. 2, the Sailors beat the Cougars 13-8, at Newport Harbor. The return engagement took place at the same pool. The Sailors had a narrow 5-4 lead late in the third quarter when they scored a buzzer-beating Hail Mary shot to make it 6-4. Newport Harbor scored the first four goals in the fourth to go up 10-4 with 4:14 left, and cruised to the win, 10-6.

The quarter-finals were played on Sat., Nov. 10, and featured two blow-outs and two tight contests. At Belmont Plaza, Long Beach Wilson beat Irvine, 14-4. It was the second-place Sea View League entrant's only-ever advance to the Elite Eight. At Newport Harbor, the Sailors hosted Harvard, with the Wolverines taking a 3-2 lead at the end of the first period, and then dominating thereafter to win, 13-5. Kevin Schwimer and eventual Player of the Year Marty Matthies, a junior, led Harvard with three goals apiece. San Clemente and Foothill made it a doubleheader at the Sailors' pool. It was their fourth meeting this year – though their last game was played more than four weeks prior. Foothill had beaten the Tritons at the South Coast tourney, 8-7 in overtime (fifth place game); San Clemente returned the favor at the S&R Sport Cup, 8-7 in regulation (seventh place game), and Foothill won, 8-6, in a non-league game on Fri., Oct. 12 (played at El Toro). It seems it was the Tritons' turn to win. The Register reported, "After falling behind, 2-0, the Knights responded with three consecutive goals, the third...with 1:55 remaining in the first half. But it was all San Clemente from there. The Tritons finished the match scoring three consecutive goals," winning a tough defensive match, 5-3. And, at El Toro, the Chargers faced Villa Park. The Chargers had beaten the Spartans, 16-7, in a game played at the same pool on Oct. 5 while the S&R Sport Cup was going on. This one was much closer – El Toro established a 3-0 lead at half-time and maintained that margin through three periods, 5-2. Villa Park scored twice in the fourth quarter, but El Toro held on for the win, 5-4. It was the Spartans' third straight loss to El Toro in the Elite Eight, and their sixth straight loss in the quarters – equaling their streak of 1983-1988. In fact, this was Villa Park's last Division I game after 19 distinguished years at the premier level. The same re-leaguing that would carry Foothill into another league in 2002 would carry the Century League and Villa Park with it into Division II (where the Spartans would finish in the Elite Eight a seventh year in a row).

All four of the top seeds, then, arrived safely to the semi-finals, played on Wed., Nov. 14, as a doubleheader at Los Alamitos USA Aquatic Center. It was Los Angeles County vs. the South Coast League – Harvard taking on El Toro at 5 p.m., and Long Beach Wilson facing San Clemente at 6:30 p.m. It could be said Division I reasserted its "toughest in the nation" billing this evening, with two one-point decisions in the Final Four for the first time since 1983.

Less than three weeks earlier at TruWest, El Toro had beaten Harvard by five goals. Now, El Toro jumped out to a 3-0 lead and at half-time were enjoying a 6-3 advantage. But, Harvard scored on its first four possessions of the third quarter to go ahead, 7-6. El Toro tied it on an extra man situation with 3:18 to play in the third period. Harvard

closed out the quarter's scoring at the 1:21 mark to go back ahead, 8-7. Then, "The Chargers answered with three goals on their first three possessions of the fourth quarter and led, 10-8, with 5:03 remaining. (Harvard's Marty) Matthies cut the lead to one 12 seconds later, then tied the score...with 2:51 remaining" (Los Angeles Times). As in 1999, El Toro found itself in a Final Four overtime game. The Times continued, "Harvard's Eddi Berman scored the only goal of overtime. The Wolverines were awarded back-to-back man-advantage situations and Berman scored on the second." The goal occurred in the first overtime period, and the game was not decided until the :08 mark of the second period, when a final El Toro shot on goal was blocked. Harvard had won, 11-10. As to the second contest – the Bruins and Tritons were meeting in the playoffs for the sixth time in 10 years. The Register reported, "A strong start by the Bruins paved the way to victory. Wilson went up, 4-1, early in the second quarter and built leads of 6-2, 7-3, 8-4 and 9-5. The Tritons inched their way back and closed the gap to 9-8 after a goal...with 38 seconds left. But the Bruins ran out the clock." The Bruins and Wolverines had combined to arrange an all-Los Angeles County final match for the second time in four years.

Since 1980 the final game had been held the Wednesday before Thanksgiving every year except 1985-87. Division I would always be the concluding game of a double- or tripleheader that included lower division contests. With CIF-SS now up to six Water Polo divisions, matches were also conducted the day – and sometimes two days – before. In 2001, the finals took on the format that exists today – all championship games played on a Saturday at a single location (Nov. 17 this year, five days before Thanksgiving). But there was an additional break with tradition. The Division I game was scheduled to cap the event at Belmont Plaza starting at 8:15 p.m. The day before, however, the Long Beach Wilson-Harvard game was moved up to a 3:45 p.m. start, while Division II inherited the 8:15 p.m. slot. The reason, the Bruins' Scott Swanson told me, was this: "They moved the game up because the CIF DI final of the Wilson Women's volleyball game was that night, so they knew a lot of fans wanted to go to both games. I believe theirs was televised, so we got moved up. Both teams supported each other throughout the playoffs so it was great to be there after we won and then the girls won that night, too! I also remember they blacked out the windows so there would be no glare, so it felt like we were playing at night which was cool." And, having the Division II game as the last game of the long day might have been perfect from the standpoint of drama, as well – except that Esperanza had upset Servite, 6-5, in the quarter-finals, ruining a hoped-for final clash between John Vargas- and Jim Sprague-led teams. Esperanza additionally upset Corona del Mar's Pacific Coast League rival Laguna Beach in the semis, 9-8. This set-up an embarrassing laughter for the last Water Polo game of the year – the Sea Kings winning, 16-4. (Corona del Mar won their four playoff games by a ridiculous total margin of 53 goals.)

As to the Division I final, both Long Beach Wilson and Harvard could be thought of as the unlikely survivors. In a season preview story in the Los Angeles Times on Tues., Sept. 4, the paper had ranked the Bruins fourth and the Wolverines sixth among Division I competitors. Yet here they were. And now, the Bruins' situation was similar

to that of Newport Harbor's the year before. They didn't have to worry about Corona del Mar or Coronado. They had also avenged their loss to Foothill by winning a non-league game, 10-6, at home on Tues., Oct. 9. San Clemente had taken care of Foothill in the quarter-finals anyway. One big difference from Newport Harbor in 2000 – the Bruins were starting six assumedly inexperienced juniors. And, Long Beach Wilson was going to have to beat a team in the finals that had shown the ability to beat them. It was not easy.

Harvard jumped ahead 2-0 in the first quarter, and still held a 6-4 lead early in the third period. At the 4:41 mark of the third, Thomas Hale scored for the Bruins to make it 6-5, and Matt Norris tied it up, 6-6, with 3:51 left in the quarter. Harvard regained the lead, 7-6, at the 3:30 mark to close out third quarter scoring. From there, Long Beach Wilson finally took control. Garrit Barth scored his third goal of the day with only nine seconds gone in the fourth quarter to tie things at 7-7. The Bruins took their first lead of the game, 8-7, on Hale's second goal at the 5:03 mark. John Foster added another with 4:22 left, making it 9-7. This ended up being the final score – reversing the score of Long Beach Wilson's loss to the Wolverines exactly four weeks earlier in the same pool.

It was a hard fought, well-played game, just like the two semi-finals – for the first time since 1995 the last three games were decided by only four goals total. Considering the way competition collapsed in Division II and the way Long Beach Wilson kept improving, the premier division ended up putting on the best show as always. The Bruins had gone from seventh at the South Coast tourney, fifth at the S&R Sport Cup, third at TruWest and first in the CIF-SS playoffs. And, with six titles in the last eight years to their credit, the Bruins were set to keep right on improving.

2002

Having won the title the previous year with a young team, Long Beach Wilson was in an excellent position to repeat as champion. They did more than that, going undefeated and becoming the first team to go 31-0, finishing with a 38-game winning streak over two seasons. The Bruins were not quite the awesome, Tony Azevedo-led juggernaut of 1998. This was a beatable undefeated team, though in the end (by definition) nobody did.

This year marked the first change in league representation in Division I since 1992, with the Century League demoted to Division II (and Foothill transferring to the Sea View League). At the same time, the Pacific Coast League was promoted to keep the league count at five (and bringing with it Corona del Mar after a three-year absence).

An approach I like to take in researching individual seasons is to start by looking at the two finalists and determine who beat them that year. This tells me who else was competitive and it is a natural source of interest and drama. The losses reveal the “man bites dog” stories. And, a trait of a great team is one that comes back from tough losses. This leads me to thank once again the many players and coaches who have helped me in my research, because I often ask them about those painful losses. But now, what

to do when the champion goes undefeated? In fact, all five league champions went undefeated within their own circuits. The solution is simple. I'll list every game that a league champion did lose in chronological order to tell the regular season's story.

I normally wait a bit, but to take this approach I need to begin by revealing how the playoffs were seeded. The 2002 season was one of those logical years when the top five seeded playoff teams were also the five league champions. Ranked number one was Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 27-0); second was Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast, 19-7); third was Harvard (Mission, 20-5); fourth was Newport Harbor (Sea View, 18-9); and fifth was El Toro (South Coast, 21-7). So, we see that the league champions combined to lose 28 games total.

Here they are, then, the 28 losses in the order they occurred. I have underlined the defeated team to help the reader keep track of the individual loss count for each program.

Early Season

1) Foothill defeated El Toro, 11-9, on Tues., Sept. 17, at El Toro. By now the Knights owned this traditional "Opening Day" match, having beaten the Chargers every year since 1994.

2) Long Beach Wilson defeated Newport Harbor, 18-9, on Sept. 17, at Belmont Plaza in another Opening Day rivalry. Four days later, Sat., Sept. 21, Newport Harbor would even their record at 1-1 by beating Coronado, 9-8, at the Sailors' pool. It was the Islanders' first defeat since losing to Newport Harbor back on Oct. 7, 2000.

3) Harvard defeated Corona del Mar, 10-7, on Thurs., Sept. 19, at Zanuck Swimming Stadium. As we know, Opening Day was basically ceremonial. Harvard had already been playing Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 12-14, in its co-sponsored Jim Toring Tournament. The Wolverines beat Long Beach Millikan in the tourney's final match, 12-1. The Sea Kings improved to 2-1 the next day, Fri., Sept. 20, by winning at home against Foothill, 11-7 in overtime.

4) Long Beach Wilson defeated Corona del Mar, 10-7, on Tues., Sept. 24, at the Sea Kings' pool. Corona del Mar's new coach was Tim Salvino, assistant coach to John Vargas in the three previous Division II championship years. As a high school player, Salvino had been a member of Servite's 1982 2A championship team.

South Coast Tournament

5) Bishop's defeated Corona del Mar, 9-6, on Fri., Sept. 27, in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament. After losing the last four years to Coronado in the CIF-SDS Division II finals, Bishop's would return the exact favor starting this year – beating Coronado four years in a row, in route to five straight CIF-SDS Division II titles. In fact, Bishop's had beaten Coronado in 1997, so the two schools would face each other in the CIF-SDS Division II finals nine consecutive years, 1997-2005. (Santa Fe Christian would replace Coronado as Bishop's victim in 2006.)

6) Newport Harbor defeated El Toro, 11-6, on Sept. 27, also in the tourney's quarter-finals.

7) Corona del Mar defeated El Toro, 10-8, on Sat., Sept. 28, in the tournament's fifth-place semi-finals. The Sea Kings would finish the tourney in fifth by beating Foothill, 10-5, while the Chargers finished seventh, beating Punahou (Honolulu, Hawaii), 16-13.

8) Servite defeated Newport Harbor, 12-9, on Sept. 28, in the semi-finals. After finishing disappointingly in the CIF-SS Division II quarter-finals last year, the Friars would put it together this year and win the division title. In the other semi-final, Long Beach Wilson defeated Bishop's, 14-8.

9) Bishop's defeated Newport Harbor, 12-11, on Sept. 28, in the third place game. All the South Coast Tournament games mentioned above were played at Newport Harbor, including the final match, which saw Long Beach Wilson beat Servite, 14-9.

"Between Majors"

10) Bishop's defeated El Toro, 12-9, on Sat., Oct. 5, in the final match of the Villa Park Classic. El Toro had beaten South Pasadena, 12-6, in one semi-final, while in the other Bishop's beat Villa Park, 12-4, who were now playing in Division II. South Pasadena would go on to be a Division III finalist, and won the third place game over the Spartans, 6-5.

11) El Toro defeated Corona del Mar, 11-7, on Tues., Oct. 8, at the Sea Kings' pool.

S&R Sport Cup ("So Cal")

12) Corona del Mar defeated Newport Harbor, 17-15 in overtime, on Fri., Oct. 11, in the quarter-finals of the S&R Sport Cup. The "So Cal" tourney had been played every year since 1995 at Woollett Aquatics Center, but the facility was undergoing a major renovation. This year, all Friday games were played at Newport Harbor and all games the next day were played at Belmont Plaza.

13) Servite defeated Newport Harbor, 16-12, on Sat., Oct. 12, in the fifth place game.

14) Long Beach Wilson defeated Corona del Mar, 10-7, on Oct. 12, in the tournament's semi-finals. Corona del Mar won the third place game by once again beating Foothill, 11-7.

15) Long Beach Wilson defeated Harvard, 10-7, on Oct. 12, in the final match. Both teams were undefeated at the time, with the Wolverines upending Foothill, 12-6, in their semi-final game.

“Between Majors”

16) Servite defeated El Toro, 16-13, on Tues., Oct. 15, at the Chargers’ pool.

17) Long Beach Wilson defeated Harvard, 8-6, on Sat., Oct. 19, at the Wolverines’ pool.

18) Servite defeated Corona del Mar, 6-4, on Tues., Oct. 22, at the Sea Kings’ pool. Corona del Mar had clinched their Pacific Coast League title the week before, on Wed., Oct. 16, by beating host Laguna Beach, 14-7.

19) El Toro defeated Newport Harbor, 10-7, on Fri., Oct. 25, at the Sailors’ pool.

20) Bishop’s defeated Newport Harbor, 17-13, on Sat., Oct. 26, at the Sailors’ pool.

TruWest Memorial Cup (“Nor Cal”)

21) Harvard defeated El Toro, 12-9, on Fri., Nov. 1, in the quarter-finals of the TruWest Memorial Cup at Bellarmine. All “Nor Cal” tourney games would be played here. The day before, El Toro had sewed up the South Coast League title by beating host San Clemente, 10-9.

22) Soquel defeated Newport Harbor, 16-9, on Nov. 1, in another tournament quarter-final game. Soquel is a small town (less than 10,000 residents) about 35 miles south of San Jose. The school would go on to win the CIF-CCS Division II championship.

23) Newport Harbor defeated El Toro, 8-7, on Sat., Nov. 2, in a tournament fifth-place semi-final game. The Chargers would finish seventh by beating Menlo School, 9-5. (Located in Atherton, Menlo School was Soquel’s victim in the final match of CIF-CCS Division II.)

24) Bellarmine defeated Newport Harbor, 14-7, on Nov. 2, in the fifth place game. Bellarmine would win the CIF-CCS Division I title, and the big debate among local Water Polo aficionados was who was “Best in the North” – Bellarmine or Soquel. The two teams would not face each other this year. For the Sailors, they would have one more game to play in the regular season. With Foothill joining the Sea View League, the circuit championship was no longer a given. On the night of Wed., Nov. 6 at Tustin High School, Newport Harbor would need to overcome a two-goal deficit in the fourth-quarter to rally past the Knights, 8-7.

25) Long Beach Wilson defeated Corona del Mar, 11-9, on Nov. 2, in a semi-final game.

26) Soquel defeated Harvard, 13-11, on Nov. 2, in the other semi-final game.

27) Corona del Mar defeated Harvard, 12-10, on Nov. 2, in the third place game. So, for the fourth time in six years, the Wolverines entered the Nor Cal tournament with two losses all season, and exited with four. (In the final match, Long Beach Wilson made it three-for-three of the year’s major tournaments, defeating Soquel, 14-12.)

Late Season

28) Servite defeated Harvard, 17-9, on Tues., Nov. 5, at the Friars' pool. Judging by the score and that it was the last week of the season, one wonders if Coach Corso elected to rest some key players. Nonetheless, the Wolverines had now lost three games in four days.

So, our Division I league champions lost nearly half their games to teams outside the division or section – five to Servite, four to Bishop's, two to Soquel and one to Bellarmine. We don't know what would have happened if Soquel had faced Bellarmine, but we know about Servite vs. Bishop's. On the last day of the season, Sat., Nov. 9, Servite beat Bishop's, 16-14 in overtime, at the Friars' pool. And, Long Beach Wilson dished out six defeats, three to Corona del Mar alone. Other than the league champs themselves, Foothill was the only Division I team to demonstrate the ability to beat the top five seeds, but their win had taken place at the very beginning of the season.

On to the playoffs, which opened with first round action on Thurs., Nov. 14. Mission Viejo (South Coast League) would claim the At-Large spot again this year, but lose to Foothill, 15-5, at Tustin High School. The distinguishing feature of this year's Sweet 16 was the presence of the two teams that joined Corona del Mar from the Pacific Coast League – Laguna Beach (second place) and Northwood (third place). Opening only in 1999, Northwood (of Irvine) was in its first "Big Dance" on any level – and got introduced to the playoffs by none other than Newport Harbor, losing to their hosts, 15-7. Laguna Beach, meanwhile, was making only its fourth premier level playoff appearance and first since 1975. And, today they would win their first playoff game ever. The school hosted Capistrano Valley (third place, South Coast League), beating the Cougars, 7-5, in the closest Sweet 16 game since 1996.

Quarter-final games took place on Sat., Nov. 16. The five league champions and the three second place teams from Orange County put on a terrific quartet of games. First, Harvard hosted San Clemente and beat the Tritons, 13-8. This game was made interesting by the effort of Sean Staudenbaur, who scored four goals in a losing cause. It was his first time back in the pool since Nov. 5, when he received a head injury requiring 24 stitches in the Tritons' 16-10 road loss to Long Beach Wilson in the final regular season game for both. As for the Bruins on this day, they traveled to Laguna Beach to face the Breakers for a second time. Laguna Beach had given the Bruins a tough game in the Sweet 16 round of the South Coast Tournament, before losing 9-6. Now, they played them even tougher, trailing the top seeded team only 5-4 going into the fourth quarter. But, Long Beach Wilson managed to maintain the slim lead, ultimately winning, 7-5.

At Corona del Mar, the Sea Kings were facing Foothill after beating them three times during the regular season. They hadn't seen each other, though, in exactly five weeks. Corona del Mar built a 4-2 half-time lead, but the Knights tied it, 4-4, by the end of three periods. John Mann gave the Sea Kings a 5-4 lead with 4:16 to play by converting a four-meter penalty shot. Foothill tied it again, 5-5, in the next possession,

when Alex Cripe scored a backhand shot from the hole. Finally, Corona del Mar's Ryan Moore scored with 1:02 left to make it 6-5. Foothill took a last, poor-percentage shot with :30 left, and the Sea Kings ran out the clock to preserve the win. An interesting footnote (and a heads-up for the years to come) – in the line-up for Foothill was a freshman named J.W. Krumpholz, who scored one goal. Krumpholz was the son of Kurt, a starter on Corona del Mar's 1969 championship team, and nephew of Bruce, a co-Player of the Year in 1972.

And, at Newport Harbor, the Sailors and El Toro were also facing off for the fourth time. The teams had alternated beating each other, Newport Harbor having won the most recent contest exactly two weeks earlier. With both teams so evenly matched, it seems inevitable that El Toro would tie the season series. El Toro never trailed and appeared on the cusp of running away with the game twice, but the Sailors keep closing in towards the end of each period. The game was tied at 1-1 after the first period and the Chargers led 4-3 at half-time. El Toro went ahead 6-3 at one point in the third period, but Newport Harbor got to within 6-5 at the end of three quarters. The Chargers again established a three goal lead, 8-5, with 4:30 left in the game. At that point the Sailors rallied, scoring at the 4:03 and 3:33 marks; then Michael Bury scored his game-high sixth goal with 1:42 remaining, making it 8-8. Finally, with only :12 left in regulation, El Toro's Brent Danna scored on a lob shot – what he told the Register was his first all year. The Chargers won, 9-8, and were headed for the semi-finals for the fourth year in a row.

The four surviving league champions entered the semi-finals on Wed., Nov. 20, played as a doubleheader at the home pool of the dispatched titlist – Newport Harbor. The first game featured Corona del Mar vs. Harvard in a great defensive battle, after splitting their two regular season encounters. Harvard went ahead 1-0 with about two minutes gone in the first quarter, and then Corona del Mar tied it with 1:13 left in the period. The Sea Kings went ahead 2-1 at the 3:30 mark of the second quarter, the score at half-time. The third quarter was scoreless, and then the Sea Kings made it 3-1 with 4:28 left in the fourth quarter. After being held without a goal for almost 23 minutes of play, Harvard finally scored with 3:29 left to make it 3-2. Harvard had a man-advantage opportunity at the 2:51 mark, but couldn't convert. Last year's Player of the Year, Marty Matthies, made one last attempt for Harvard at the buzzer under heavy pressure, with the shot falling short of the goal. The 3-2 final made it the lowest scoring playoff game since 1991. In the second game, El Toro was facing Long Beach Wilson for the first time all year. It was quite a different game, with more goals scored in the first quarter than in the entire preceding contest. After a 3-3 first quarter, Long Beach Wilson moved ahead 7-4 at half-time, and made it 8-4 early in the third. El Toro then roared back, finally tying things up, 9-9, with just :12 left in the period. The Bruins scored two goals quickly in the fourth to go up 11-9 with 5:34 remaining. El Toro got to within one twice – making it 11-10 with 3:59 left, and then 12-11 at the 3:17 mark. Long Beach Wilson finally put the game away with a final goal with 2:50 remaining for the 13-11 victory. Eventual Player of the Year Thomas Hale, a left-hander, scored a team-high four goals for the Bruins. Now, the second and third winningest programs in tournament history would be battling in the finals for only the second time.

The final match took place at Belmont Plaza on Sat., Nov. 23. Corona del Mar's coach Tim Salvino talked up his team's chances – both to his players and the press. He told the Daily Pilot, “We've played (the Bruins) three times and been in the game with them all three times. We just made mistakes at the wrong time of the game and it ended up costing us.” And, indeed, at their most recent meeting on Nov. 2 at TruWest, “Corona del Mar led, 3-1, early in the second period,” noted the Register. (Their fourth meeting, held exactly three weeks later, was the quickest rematch between finalists since 1995.) Salvino also told the Daily Pilot, “Not only can we win it, we will win it with defense. It's definitely in our favor if it's a low-scoring game.” It worked against Harvard!

The Sea Kings started off well, with a 3-1 advantage after one period and building a 5-2 lead at the 3:51 mark of the second period. Long Beach Wilson tied it, 5-5, but Corona del Mar scored with just :18 left to take a 6-5 lead into half-time. A wild third quarter kicked off with Long Beach Wilson scoring three goals by the 5:31 mark and taking its first lead, 8-6. The Bruins continued to hold leads of one and two goals until the Sea Kings finally caught up, 10-10, scoring with just :11 left in the third. In the fourth period, Long Beach Wilson's John Foster scored on an extra-man situation, giving the Bruins an 11-10 lead with 5:43 to play. Foster scored again (his team-high fifth goal) at the 4:43 mark to make it 12-10. Then, Corona del Mar's John Mann scored a back-hand shot with 4:29 remaining, cutting the Bruins' lead to 12-11. (Mann had an unbelievable game, scoring eight goals.) From there, Long Beach Wilson scored on an extra-man situation and then the Bruins' Garrit Barth tallied his fourth goal with 2:49 to play, making it 14-11 – the final score. Thomas Hale contributed two goals to the Bruins' total. At 25 goals, it was the highest combined total in a final game since 1983 – definitely not a defensive struggle, as Salvino had hoped. “We're definitely a second half team,” the Bruins' coach Tony Martinho told the Daily Pilot. “We were just fortunate to play our game.” In the end, nobody in 2002 could take Long Beach Wilson out of their game.

This would turn out to be the last final game appearance by the Sea Kings, which I think allows me to segue into observing that after this year, Daily Pilot Sports Editor Roger Carlson would retire after 40 years with the paper. He had been covering Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar from the time they started appearing in the playoffs. His contributions to high school Water Polo journalism are really without equal, and it was not only Water Polo where he made a difference. On his 75th birthday in 2011, the press box at Davidson Field, the school district football stadium located at Newport Harbor, was named the Roger Carlson Press Box. Well deserved!

Long Beach Wilson had won its seventh title in nine years and its eighth in school history. And, they weren't departing just yet by any stretch.

2003

Long Beach Wilson and Harvard met up in the 2003 finals, marking the third time in six years for what by now was a truly great rivalry. And, it marked once again an

all-Los Angeles County final match. Unlike 1998 and 2001, this meeting was expected. When playoff seedings were announced, the Wolverines and Bruins were ranked one and two, respectively – the first time since 1962 that two L.A. County teams headed the field. The Los Angeles Times did not waste a second, headlining their Wed., Nov. 12, story, “Forget About the O.C.?” Yet, just when it appeared that things were returning to what they looked like in the tournament’s first decade, there has not been a single all-L.A. County final since this year. And, there were two Orange County teams – Foothill and El Toro – that did their best to keep it from happening now.

The first fireworks of the season were lit during the South Coast Tournament, held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 25-27. In the quarter-finals at El Dorado High School, El Toro defeated Long Beach Wilson, 4-3, with the winning goal scored 52 seconds into sudden death. The loss made the Bruins 5-1, ending their 43-game winning streak dating back to Oct. 27, 2001. Long Beach Wilson would go on to finish fifth with a narrow victory over Los Alamitos, 5-4. The venerable 31-year-old pool at Newport Harbor was being refurbished, so the championship rounds were held at Corona del Mar. In the semi-finals, Foothill defeated El Toro, 10-5. It was already the Chargers’ second loss to the Knights, with Foothill winning, 9-6, on Opening Day, Tues., Sept. 16, at El Toro. In the other semi-final match, Servite defeated Newport Harbor, also 10-5. El Toro claimed third place by beating the Sailors, 8-6. Servite had finished second in last year’s tourney, but this year the defending Division II champion claimed the title, defeating Foothill in convincing fashion, 16-9.

Five days later, Thurs., Oct. 2, home-team Harvard also defeated Foothill, 11-10 in sudden death. (As always, Harvard had skipped the South Coast Tournament in favor of co-sponsoring the Jim Toring Tournament, Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 11-13. The Wolverines won the final match against Los Alamitos, 8-5, at Belmont Plaza.) Next, on Sat., Oct. 4, the championship rounds took place for the Villa Park Classic. In one semi-final, Marina defeated Villa Park, 12-8, while in the other, Carlsbad beat El Toro, 7-5. The Chargers would finish the tourney in third place, beating the Spartans, 9-6. In the championship match, Marina defeated Carlsbad, also by a 9-6 final score. (Villa Park ended up a Division II semi-finalist, while Carlsbad would win the CIF-SDS Division I title.) And, on Wed., Oct. 8, Foothill gained what would turn out to be their most important victory of the season. The Knights played Newport Harbor at Corona del Mar in the match that decided the Sea View League title. Foothill rallied from a two-goal deficit at the start of the fourth quarter, then won it in overtime, 11-10. It would be one of two league titles that changed hands this year.

The S&R Sport Cup followed on Fri.-Sat., Oct. 10-11, at Tustin High School and – in the championship rounds – Corona del Mar. Woollett Aquatics Center was still undergoing the major refurbishment that would turn it into the expansive complex we know today. In the quarter-finals, Bellarmine defeated Long Beach Wilson, 9-5. The Bruins would once again finish in fifth place, beating Coronado, 10-6, the next day. (Coronado would finish second to Bishop’s again this year in CIF-SDS Division II.) Harvard then beat Foothill for the second time, winning their semi-final match, 8-6. In the other semi, Servite beat Bellarmine, 8-7. Foothill took third place, beating

Bellarmino, 11-7. (These two losses in a single day turned out to be Bellarmino's only defeats all year. They would go on to win their sixth straight CIF-CCS Division I title.) Servite had vanquished an unbeaten team in the semis, now in the finals the Friars handed Harvard its first loss, 8-7, on the strength of three fourth quarter goals from Adam Hewko. Servite had become the first Division II team to win both the South Coast and S&R Sport Cup tourneys in the same year.

Foothill had placed better than Long Beach Wilson in the first two major tournaments, but that didn't stop the Bruins from beating the Knights when they finally met face-to-face – 10-9, on Tues., Oct. 14 at Belmont Plaza. In fact, Long Beach Wilson had actually beaten the team that had placed better than either of them. Back on Thurs., Oct. 2, also at Belmont Plaza, the Bruins had crushed Servite, 16-8. There was clearly a sleeping giant that would have to be contended with eventually. In the meantime, Servite continued to do very well against Division I teams, beating El Toro, 13-8, also on Oct. 14, at the Chargers' pool. Servite, in fact, would finish the regular season 25-2 – their only other loss coming on Wed., Nov. 5, to Harvard, 9-8, at the Wolverines' pool. The Friars would enter the Division II playoffs as top seed, but then lost to Marina, 9-8, in the quarter-finals. Marina should have been seeded higher than eighth seed (they were ranked fourth in the final Division II poll). But it was still an upset – due at least partially to the fact that Servite's Adam Hewko had to leave the game with a severe cut to the forehead that required 30 stitches. Two days later he was diagnosed with a concussion. (Esperanza would be the surprise Division II champ, beating Marina, 8-7, in the semis and Los Alamitos, 10-9, in the finals.)

On Sat., Oct. 18, one of the key games of the regular season took place at Harvard between the Wolverines and Long Beach Wilson. In what the Los Angeles Times described as a “close physical game,” the Bruins led 2-1 after the first quarter, but Harvard tied it by half-time, 4-4. From there, the Wolverines never trailed, leading 7-5 after three periods, and winning, 9-8. Scott Swanson, a junior with the Bruins, and the eventual Player of the Year, recalled for me, “Harvard always had us up there for their homecoming game, of course. Great rivalry! (We) played in their tiny pool with wall cages. Not the best pool for two top teams, but the environment made up for it.”

Speaking of rivalries, it was already beginning to seem like San Clemente and Foothill couldn't stay away from each other. On Fri., Oct. 24 at San Clemente, the Tritons defeated Foothill, 7-6. The teams had previously played each other in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament, Foothill winning in overtime, 6-5; and in the quarter-finals of the S&R Sport Cup, Foothill winning also, 9-4. (San Clemente finished seventh in the former tourney, beating out Villa Park, 10-5, and eighth in the latter – losing to Newport Harbor, 8-5.)

The TruWest Memorial Cup Invitational was played on Fri.-Sat., Oct. 31-Nov. 1, at Bellarmino. In the quarter-finals, Harvard defeated El Toro, 10-6, and Newport Harbor avenged its league loss by beating Foothill, 9-8. The next morning, El Toro also defeated Foothill, 6-5 in overtime, in a fifth-place semi-final match, marking the first time the Chargers had beaten the Knights since 1993. But, in the fifth place game, Coronado

defeated El Toro, 8-7. Foothill won the seventh place game against San Clemente, 13-3, in their fourth meeting of the year. In the championship rounds, Bellarmine defeated Long Beach Wilson for a second time, winning one semi-final, 8-7. As Scott Swanson told me, “(Bellarmine) had our number that year.” In the other semi, Harvard defeated Newport Harbor, 10-6. The Bruins would then claim third place by beating the Sailors, 7-6. In the final match, Bellarmine defeated Harvard, 7-4. It was Bellarmine’s first Nor Cal tourney title since they won it back-to-back in 1990 and 1991, and they beat Long Beach Wilson and Harvard on the same day. But as the top two Division I schools approached the playoffs, things looked promising for the Wolverines. Harvard had only absorbed two losses all year – both to teams they wouldn’t be facing in the post-season. Long Beach Wilson, on the other hand, hadn’t even made it to the finals of any of the three major tournaments.

The final week of the season featured two other noteworthy games. On Thurs., Nov. 6, El Toro hosted San Clemente and won, 9-7, to capture their fifth consecutive South Coast League title. And, on the season’s very last day, Sat., Nov. 8, Coronado hosted Foothill, and beat the Knights, 9-8. Foothill, for one, wasn’t just going through the pre-playoff motions. The Register reported, “Jim Brumm received his first red card and won’t be able to coach (Foothill’s first playoff game).”

When the playoff seedings were reported on Tues., Nov. 11, the top seed went to Harvard (Mission League, 23-2); second was Long Beach Wilson (Moore League, 23-4); third was Foothill (Sea View League, 19-8), and fourth was El Toro (South Coast League, 21-6). In the fifth spot was Newport Harbor and sixth seed was San Clemente. Los Angeles County’s dominance over Orange County had been ratified. As both the Register and Los Angeles Times reported, Foothill, El Toro, Newport Harbor and San Clemente had a combined 1-9 record against the Wolverines and Bruins.

Which brings us to the Pacific Coast League entrants. Corona del Mar was destined for a rebuilding year with a young team following last season’s trip to the finals. But it became much more so when Tim Salvino resigned as head coach just five weeks before Opening Day. The post was filled two weeks later by Mike Evans. The deciding league contest turned out to be Northwood vs. Corona del Mar on Wed., Oct. 22, when the Timberwolves beat the host Sea Kings, 7-6 in overtime. Northwood had lost to University, 8-7, on Oct. 8, so Northwood and Corona del Mar finished the league season with 3-1 records. Northwood was designated the league’s top entrant by virtue of head-to-head play, so the Pacific Coast League became the second circuit to have a title change hands. University was actually the league leader heading into the final week of the season. But the Trojans proceeded to lose two, one-goal home games on consecutive days – to Corona del Mar, 11-10, on Nov. 5, and Laguna Beach, 10-9, on Nov. 6. With Laguna Beach and University both at 2-2, Laguna Beach was designated third place, thanks to the head-to-head win. A perfectly terrible week for University was capped over the weekend when CIF-SS chose Irvine, fourth place in the Sea View League, as the At-Large entry. Meanwhile, Northwood was seeded seventh, and Corona del Mar, eighth, for the playoffs.

First round games were played on Thurs., Nov. 13, and just as the Register predicted, “the most intriguing” match turned out to be Northwood vs. Irvine played at University (is there no end to University’s torment?). Northwood led 6-3 going into the fourth quarter, but Irvine closed the gap to 7-6 with :57 left. Irvine then regained possession with :35 remaining, but a turnover ended their chances. What made this game particularly interesting is that this one-goal margin was the closest an At-Large team in this era ever came to actually winning a game. This round also featured another one point game, again won by a Pacific Coast League entrant. In Corona del Mar’s case, they had to come from behind to beat visiting Laguna Hills (third place, Sea View League). The Hawks led 5-4 going into the fourth quarter, but Corona del Mar rallied, scoring the tie-breaker on a lob shot with :46 remaining, and winning by the same score of 7-6. Finally, Sea View and Pacific Coast League teams played each other in a yet a third game. The Register reported, “The Foothill-Laguna Beach first round match has been moved up a day to Wednesday at Tustin at 5 p.m. Foothill contacted CIF-SS last week about the possibility of moving the match because it has a parent-teacher night Thursday.” With this healthy sense of priorities, Foothill won, 21-5, even without Coach Brumm directing things on the bench.

The quarter-finals took place two days later, Sat., Nov. 15. The top two seeds had little trouble in their games. Harvard had received a tough contest when they visited Corona del Mar more than eight weeks earlier, on Thurs., Sept. 18, the Wolverines winning, 8-4. But today, Harvard again visited the Sea Kings and ran away with the game, 10-2. Long Beach Wilson also easily handled Northwood, in their first Elite Eight match, the Bruins winning at Belmont Plaza, 13-7. What remained is what we might call an “Orange County Final Four” in the form of a morning-afternoon doubleheader at El Toro. First, Newport Harbor and El Toro faced-off in the playoffs for the fourth time in the last five years. More recently, El Toro had defeated the Sailors at the South Coast Tournament exactly seven weeks earlier. Now, the first quarter ended in a 1-1 tie; El Toro moved out to a 4-2 lead at half-time, and the Chargers maintained their lead after three periods, 7-5. At the 3:47 mark of the fourth period, Newport Harbor closed to within one, 8-7. But El Toro popped in a goal with 2:05 remaining, then scored on an extra man situation with :53 left to win the game, 10-7. By the afternoon, apparently, the weather had turned bad and Foothill vs. San Clemente (again!) was played in the rain. The last four minutes of this game was very similar to the morning one. According to the Register, “Foothill sophomore J.W. Krumpholz scored his fifth goal with 5:32 left in the fourth to put the Knights up, 9-5, but then the Tritons reeled off three consecutive goals to cut the lead to 9-8 with 3:20 left. Foothill responded with a goal on a skip-shot by Jayce Seymour with 2:11 left and an extra-man goal by Daniel Goldstein with 1:14 left to seal its fourth victory in five meetings against the Tritons.” Final score – another three goal margin on the day – 11-8.

Thus, the four teams expected to advance to the semi-finals arrived at their appointments on Wed., Nov. 19. For the first time since 1999, the matches were not held as a doubleheader. At Capistrano Valley, Long Beach Wilson faced Foothill for the second time, following their non-league game more than five weeks earlier. And 90 miles north at Westlake High School, Harvard and El Toro were also playing for

the second time, having contested at the TruWest tourney. Like the previous two years, 2003's true Final Four produced two outstanding games.

In South Orange County, reports the Register, "Foothill took the lead late in a four-goal first quarter.... Though Long Beach Wilson closed to one goal on four occasions and tied the match briefly in the third quarter, Foothill answered each time." In the fourth quarter, "The Bruins made it 8-8 with 4:24 left when Matt Sagehorn struck for his sixth goal of the match.... The Bruins took a 9-8 lead on an extra-man goal by Charles Wright with 2:37 to play." Then, the game almost came off the rails: "The Knights tied the match (9-9) with 1:37 to play when Frank Reynolds converted a 4-meter penalty shot for his fifth goal of the night. Reynolds was awarded the shot because Wilson's Joe Sherrin tried to re-enter the match after picking up his third ejection, which mandates a game disqualification. The Bruins' bench did not see the official scorer's red flag that signals a disqualification. An animated debate ensued. 'We had it different in our (score) book,' Long Beach coach Tony Martinho said. It only added fuel to a closely officiated match as both teams used aggressive pressing defenses, resulting in 20 ejections and 10 man-advantage opportunities for each team." Long Beach Wilson's Scott Swanson had picked up two of those ejections just in the first quarter, leading Martinho to keep him primarily on the bench until the fourth. But, finally back in the game, Swanson scored on a skip shot with 1:31 left to play – and just six seconds after Foothill had tied it. This gave the Bruins a 10-9 win "in a classic duel."

In Westlake Village, an even more intense game took place. According to the Los Angeles Times, El Toro led "for virtually the entire game. The Wolverines took their first lead, 8-7, on (Justin) Rappel's goal with 45 seconds left in regulation, but El Toro's Derek Danna scored 25 seconds later to send the game into overtime. In the second overtime, El Toro had a 10-9 lead and the ball with 45 seconds left. The Chargers let the 35-second shot clock expire, turning the ball over to Harvard with 10 seconds remaining." Harvard took a shot with :08 left, deflected out of bounds by the goalie. Retaining possession, the Wolverines worked the ball around the parameter to Rappel, who scored just before the buzzer, making it 10-10. It had been quite a past few playing minutes for Rappel – a sophomore who had spent most of the season playing Junior Varsity. For El Toro, they had come within one second of advancing to the finals, but instead now found themselves in their second Final Four sudden death game in five years. In the end, it was Harvard that advanced thanks to another unlikely hero. Andrew Zepfel did not enter the game until the second overtime period. With :27 elapsed in sudden death, he scored the game winner, 11-10, on his only shot of the day.

In the past two years, the finals had taken the shape we know today – all division title games held in one place on a Saturday. This year, things were scrambled again. The north-of-Los Angeles Division IV returned their finale to UC Santa Barbara, and played Sat., Nov. 22. Divisions II and III held their finals on Mon., Nov. 24, at Belmont Plaza. This left Divisions I, V and VI to invade the same venue on Nov. 25 – the Tuesday before Thanksgiving – with Long Beach Wilson and Harvard topping the tripleheader. Six days separated the semi-finals from the finals, the longest stretch

since 1987, which gave observers time to access the match-up. Both teams were young, with only one senior among their starters. The Bruins graduated nine seniors from last year's undefeated team, leaving only Swanson and Sherrin with title game experience. But that was at least equally true of Harvard, which missed the finals entirely the year before. There was speculation that Harvard's Richard Corso was the "hungrier" of the two coaches for a title – but, unfortunately, coaches don't get to play. Harvard had beaten Long Beach Wilson during the season, but the Long Beach Press-Telegram noted that game had been played in the Wolverines' "small pool," limiting the Bruins' ability to fast break. The paper quoted Swanson saying, "We play a lot better in bigger pools" – and they would now be playing in a pool they were much more comfortable in, to say the least.

Harvard jumped out to a 3-1 lead in the first quarter, though Long Beach Wilson closed the gap with :20 left to end the period, 3-2. The Bruins tied the score in the second period, 3-3, and then the teams alternated the next six goals – Harvard would go ahead by one, Long Beach Wilson would tie it. Tied 5-5 at half-time, Long Beach Wilson finally gained its first lead late in the third quarter, 7-6, on a goal by Ryan Piercy, the Bruins' lone senior starter. But then it was Harvard that came back to score with :34 remaining in the period, ending the third in another tie, 7-7. The Bruins went back ahead, 8-7, with 4:43 remaining on a goal by Cody Walter, and then extended the lead to 9-7 at the 3:53 mark with Joe Sherrin scoring. The Wolverines had an extra man opportunity with 1:07 left, but a big save by goalie Chay Lapin stopped the threat. Harvard made the score 9-8 on a four-meter penalty shot by Brian Flacks with :23 remaining, but the Bruins took possession with the 35-second shot clock off and that was it.

Long Beach Wilson had won its ninth CIF-SS title, and by beating top-seeded Harvard they managed a distinctive upset. The top seed had won the tournament every year since 1992, with the exception of 1994. A total of six Bruins had scored in the final match. Scott Swanson, who scored twice, wrote, "2003 was actually a rebuilding year for us, but we peaked at the right time." The Los Angeles Times added, "That Long Beach Wilson boys' water polo team sure knows how to rebuild." And, this young title-winning team would be back virtually intact the next year.

2004

The most recent string of Long Beach Wilson titles had a leap-frogging quality – the Bruins won in 2001 with a young team, setting themselves up to repeat in 2002; then they won it again in 2003 with a young team, making them the favorites to repeat in 2004. Harvard had a young team in 2003 also, but that did not lead to a final game rematch. Two other teams improved more – though the Bruins and Harvard did meet up again in the semi-finals. Taking Harvard's place in the finals was Foothill who, like their immediately prior appearance in 2000, came into the game with an unusual number of losses – eight, the second highest total for a finalist, right behind the 11 they had four years earlier. Ironically, their semi-final opponent, Corona del Mar, also recorded eight regular season losses. As we approach the end of this era, let's

unfold the 2004 regular season as we did towards the beginning (1993), looking at the tournaments that attracted the leading Division I teams, the key non-league matches involving the Bruins, and the league championship races. In so doing, we will see that CIF-SS Water Polo had changed, well, not that much – except in the playoffs, where Long Beach Wilson was running out of fingers to put championship rings on.

The Tournaments

The Toring Tournament kicked-off the season with a rematch between last year's tourney finalists, Harvard and Los Alamitos. Played at Belmont Plaza on Sat., Sept. 11, the title game also just so happened to be a match between the two runners-up in their respective playoff divisions in 2003. Harvard once again claimed the championship in an ultra-tough defensive game. Harvard broke a 1-1 tie with 3:26 left in the third quarter, and went on to win, 3-1. Los Alamitos, though, was off to a good start and they would go on to win the Division II title for the first time since 1997, when Long Beach Wilson's Tony Martinho was coaching there.

The first "major" arrived on Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 23-25, with the South Coast Tournament, and with the championship game back at Newport Harbor after a one year absence. In the semi-finals, Long Beach Wilson beat Los Alamitos, 8-4, while Villa Park defeated Newport Harbor, 6-5. Los Alamitos then beat the Sailors in the third place game, 11-8. In the final game, Villa Park defeated Long Beach Wilson, 9-7, for the Bruins' first loss of the season. The Spartans controlled the second half, leading 9-5 with :30 left in the game. Villa Park definitely had a good team – they would eventually place second in Division II. But the result was also at least partially due to the Bruins' decision to rest their starting goalie, Chay Lapin, who would be named Player of the Year, the first goalie so honored since 1996. Lapin was a great last line of defense, but also the beginning of many offensive fast breaks with ultra-sharp passes out of the cage. Other games to note include Foothill's loss in the quarter-finals to Los Alamitos, 8-4. The Knights then lost to Servite in a fifth-place semi-final game, which didn't end until 2:17 into sudden death, the Friars winning, 10-9. Servite placed fifth in this tourney, and would end up a Division II semi-finalist. Foothill salvaged their tournament by beating El Toro, 9-7, in the seventh place game. This at least avenged their loss to El Toro, 10-8, at the Chargers' pool on Opening Day, Tues., Sept. 14. Further back in the pack, Corona del Mar finished in 11th place, behind their Pacific Coast League rival, Laguna Beach, which finished ninth. The Sea Kings had lost in the Sweet 16 round to Servite, 11-10 in overtime, and in a ninth-place semi-final to La Canada, 9-7. (La Canada would reach the Final Four in Division III.)

The Villa Park Classic was held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 30-Oct. 2, with the Spartans winning a tourney for the second weekend in a row. In the semi-finals, Villa Park beat Bishop's, 7-6, while Carlsbad defeated Esperanza, 12-6. In the third place match, Bishop's beat Esperanza, 16-8. Bishop's would win the CIF-SDS Division II title, while Esperanza would finish a Division II semi-finalist. Villa Park defeated Carlsbad, 14-10, in the final match (Carlsbad was again on its way to winning the CIF-SDS Division I title). El Toro had lost to Esperanza, 7-5, in the quarter-finals, and settled for fifth place, beating Royal, 12-11. (Royal would end up a Division IV semi-finalist.)

The S&R Sport Cup, the second “major,” took place Fri.-Sat., Oct. 8-9, and returned to Woollett Aquatics Center after a two-year absence. The extensive renovations to the complex were finally complete and Heritage Park had officially been rededicated with its new name on Sat., Sept. 18. And, it was really nice – two 50-meter swimming pools and a 25-yard by 25-meter pool! The semi-finals found Long Beach Wilson beating Bellarmine, 11-8, while Foothill defeated Harvard, 5-4. In the third place game, Harvard beat Bellarmine, 11-6. (Bellarmine would win the CIF-CCS Division I title for the seventh year in a row.) The Los Angeles Times the next day took note in their headline of “Improving Foothill.” The Knights had finished in seventh place at the South Coast tourney, but here they got to the finals before losing to Long Beach Wilson, 10-5. And, as was their custom, the two schools played each other in a non-league game soon afterwards, on Tues., Oct. 12, at Belmont Plaza, the Bruins winning again, 11-8. Also notable among tourney results, Long Beach Wilson beat Corona del Mar, 15-5, in the quarter-finals, then Los Alamitos defeated the Sea Kings, 8-4, in the fifth place game – but Corona del Mar had gone from 11th at South Coast to sixth here. Meanwhile, Newport Harbor slipped from fourth place to seventh, beating Servite, 8-7.

Corona del Mar climbed even higher three weeks later at the TruWest Memorial Cup, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 29-30, at Bellarmine. In the semi-finals, Corona del Mar beat Foothill, 9-5, in a turnaround from the Sea Kings’ loss at home to the Knights, 12-9, on Fri., Sept. 17. In the other semi, Long Beach Wilson faced Bellarmine for a second time, the Bruins winning again, 6-5. Bellarmine then won the third place game over Foothill, 9-8. In the final match, Long Beach Wilson defeated the Sea Kings, 13-7, to win its second “major” of the year. Foothill had recorded its eighth and final regular season loss by finishing fourth. Back on Fri., Oct. 22, the Knights had met up with still-archrival Villa Park in a non-league game that was “just like them.” First, they had to play at Orange High School at the last minute because the chlorine level at Villa Park’s pool was too high. Then, Villa Park won, 13-11, in part due to the ejection for brutality of a key Foothill player with 2:51 left in the game and the score tied, 11-11. Damjan Dudic had to serve a five game suspension – including all four of Foothill’s matches here at TruWest. Trailing the tourney’s Final Four, Harvard beat Newport Harbor, 9-6, for fifth place, while Menlo School beat El Toro, 10-6, for seventh place. (Menlo School went on to be a finalist in the CIF-CCS Division II playoffs.)

The Non-League Games

Long Beach Wilson’s non-league schedule demonstrates they were not hiding from anyone (El Toro was the only leading competitor they did not face all year). On Opening Day, Sept. 14, the Bruins beat Newport Harbor, 14-8, at Belmont Plaza. Long Beach Wilson essentially bookended their season by defeating the Sailors a second time in the quarter-finals of the TruWest tourney, 9-8. On Tues., Sept. 21, the Bruins escaped with an 8-7 win over host Corona del Mar. Combined with their two tournament wins, the Bruins beat the Sea Kings three times this year. On Wed., Sept. 29, the Bruins beat Los Alamitos, 12-10 in overtime. This win against the Griffins, just four days after beating them in the South Coast tourney, highlights two things – tough competition could certainly be found beneath Division I, and this was a very underrated rivalry, with

the two schools only 6.6 miles apart. And, on Sat., Oct. 23, the Bruins beat Coronado, 17-8. The Islanders would place second again this year behind Bishop's in CIF-SDS Division II. One trend of this era should be self-evident to the reader by now – the rising tide of intersectional play, both North and South of the CIF-SS' borders. Harvard, for instance, had for years played an annual game against Miramonte. The Wolverines traveled north ahead of the TruWest tourney to renew the tradition on Thurs., Oct. 28, winning 8-4. (Miramonte ended up a semi-finalist in the CIF-NCS playoffs.)

Long Beach Wilson did lose two games this year, the second of them occurring on Sat., Oct. 16, when they visited Harvard. In their only meeting of the regular season, Harvard's Brian Flacks scored the winning goal with :52 remaining in the second overtime period to defeat the Bruins, 10-9. Harvard benefitted mightily by being awarded – and converting – three four-meter penalty shots, helping them to not only beat the Bruins but their star goalie.

The Leagues

Reviewing the leagues from least competitive to most hotly contested... Long Beach Wilson won the Moore League (26 of the last 27 years now). The Bruins defeated Long Beach Poly, 14-6, on Thurs., Oct. 7; Lakewood, 17-7, on Oct. 22; Long Beach Millikan, 17-5, on Oct. 28; and Long Beach Jordan, 24-6, on Thurs., Nov. 4. One guesses even with these margins that the Bruins took their foot off the pedal early. Long Beach Poly placed second and was seeded 10th in the playoff tournament, while Long Beach Millikan finished third and was seeded 14th. Over in the Mission League, Harvard's top rival Loyola had faded in the past three years. The Cubs were starting to get good again, but still not ready to unseat Harvard. The Wolverines beat them 26-4 on Oct. 7 and 19-4 on Wed., Oct. 27. Loyola would finish second in league and enter the playoffs the seventh seed. Harvard also made short work of the third place team, Crespi, beating the Celts, 21-2, on Wed., Oct. 6, and 11-1, on Thurs., Oct. 21. Crespi was seeded dead last – 16th – in the playoffs.

El Toro won the South Coast League championship for the sixth year in a row. In each of the previous five years, it had come down to a tough match against San Clemente, but which El Toro would always manage to win by one or two goals. Things came a little easier for the Chargers this year. The teams faced off on Oct. 7 at Capistrano Valley, El Toro beating the Tritons, 11-6. San Clemente then narrowly secured second place on Oct. 28 when they hosted Mission Viejo. Brett Garrett of the Tritons scored on a lob shot with no time remaining to beat the Diablos, 8-7 – their only lead of the game. San Clemente entered the playoffs as the ninth seed, while third place Mission Viejo was seeded 12th.

The Sea View League title had changed hands last year, and Foothill held on again this year with the decisive game played against Newport Harbor on Oct. 6 at Tustin High School. Foothill escaped with a 9-8 win in a game that wasn't decided until the Sailors' final scoring attempt at the buzzer bounced off the right goal post. Having beaten their chief league opponent, Foothill almost let the title get away the following week when they hosted Laguna Hills on Wed., Oct. 13. In between, they had played

four games over the weekend at the S&R Sport Cup and their non-league contest with Long Beach Wilson just the day before. Foothill was playing its seventh game in eight days, and they were tired. According to the Register, “Laguna Hills led 8-7 with 34 seconds left in regulation and had possession coming out of a timeout. But the Hawks were called for an offensive foul, leading to a counterattack goal by Damjan Dudic, who forced overtime with 11 seconds left.” From there, Foothill opened a 10-8 lead in the first overtime period, including the fifth goal of the day from junior J.W. Krumpholz. Laguna Hills scored with 2:27 left in the second overtime period, but that concluded things and Foothill held on for a 10-9 win. Laguna Hills finished third in league and was seeded 15th in the playoffs.

The Pacific Coast League had also changed hands last year – and would do so again in 2004. A Daily Pilot story of Mon., Aug. 2, was headlined “CDM Seeking Direction” because the Sea Kings were once again without a head coach. Replacing Mike Evans in June – at first on an interim basis – was Sam Bailey, who would do a fine job over the course of the season. At the beginning, though, the Sea Kings’ seniors were adjusting to their fourth head coach in their four years attending the school. The key game turned out to be an Oct. 13 contest in which Corona del Mar hosted Northwood, with the Sea Kings winning 9-7. Still, the season wasn’t quite over. On Wed., Nov. 3, the Sea Kings visited Laguna Beach. As the Daily Pilot story the next day explained, “A Laguna Beach victory would have resulted in a three-way tie for first with Northwood, CDM and Laguna.” Corona del Mar won, 8-6, with Coach Bailey telling the paper, “This was the most important win of the season.” Northwood finished second in league and was seeded eighth, while Laguna Beach took third and was seeded 11th. In addition, the Pacific Coast League became the fifth league of this era to produce the At-Large entry, with Tesoro snagging the spot and seeded 13th. (Tesoro of Rancho Santa Margarita had only opened its doors in 2001.)

The Playoffs

Tournament seedings were reported on Tues., Nov. 9, and there was no surprise that the top seed went to Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 25-2). A somewhat surprising second seed was Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast, 17-8). The third seed was Foothill (Sea View, 19-8) and fourth seed was Harvard (Mission). Like Foothill, Corona del Mar had lost their eighth and final game at TruWest. But the Sea Kings undoubtedly benefited from not only defeating the Knights there, but also Harvard, 5-4, in the quarter-finals. Corona del Mar had lost to host Harvard, 12-6, in a non-league game played Tues., Sept. 28; coincidentally, just two days later, Foothill beat Harvard, 13-11 at Tustin High School. Thus, both the Sea Kings and Knights had faced Harvard twice – the former splitting, the latter sweeping against the Wolverines. Rounding out the top contenders, the fifth seed was Newport Harbor (Sea View, second place) and the sixth seed belonged to El Toro (South Coast).

First round games were played on Wed., Nov. 10. The closest game in the Sweet 16 was Northwood vs. San Clemente, played at Capistrano Valley, but the final score was a

little deceiving. Northwood led 8-4 with 1:10 left in the fourth quarter, before closing it out, 8-6. No other game was closer than a five goal margin.

The quarter-finals were not played until almost a week later, on Tues., Nov. 16. Long Beach Wilson played Northwood for the second year in a row in the Elite Eight. Only the venue changed this year – the game was held at Northwood, but the Bruins won by last year's score, 13-7. At Loyola Marymount University, Corona del Mar had no trouble with Loyola, back in the Elite Eight for first time since 2000. Leading 5-1 at half-time, the Sea Kings exploded for seven goals in the third quarter to go up, 12-3. Corona del Mar kept adding on in the fourth to win, 16-4. At Tustin High School, Foothill and El Toro squared off for the third time this year, though they hadn't seen each other since the South Coast Tournament. The Chargers scored the first goal, but never led thereafter. The Knights took a 3-1 lead into half-time, and had four goal leads twice in the third quarter, before the period ended with Foothill ahead, 6-4. El Toro got to within 7-5 with 6:02 left in the game, but the Knights held them scoreless for the remainder, winning 8-5. And, at Harvard, the Wolverines and Newport Harbor were playing for a second time, having met up less than three weeks earlier at TruWest. The two teams were all tied up at half-time, 4-4. Harvard then took a 7-4 lead at the end of three periods, made it 8-4 early in the fourth, and held on for the 8-6 win.

Like last year, the top four seeds all made it to the semi-finals, played as a doubleheader at Woollett Aquatics Center on Fri., Nov. 19. Corona del Mar faced Foothill at 5:30 p.m. in a rubber match to their two previous meetings, and Long Beach Wilson took on Harvard at 7 p.m. in follow-up to their non-league contest. Of course, it was more than a doubleheader in the immense renovated facility. In the neighboring 50-meter pool, the Division II semi-finals were going on virtually simultaneously, with start times of 5 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Belmont Plaza's days of hosting the playoff finals were numbered.

In the first game, Corona del Mar and Foothill were tied seven times in the first three periods, though the Knights never trailed. With the score tied 9-9 entering the fourth period, the Register says, "Foothill seized control." The Knights scored first on a counterattack and then on a penalty shot, converted by Ryan Cummins (his fourth goal) with 4:41 to play. The Sea Kings could not penetrate Foothill's defense the entire period. Things actually did not go entirely smoothly at the sparkling Woollett complex, as the Los Angeles Times reported, "After a 15-minute delay because of a malfunctioning scoreboard, (J.W.) Krumpholz converted the last of his three goals on a penalty shot with 54 seconds left." That made the final score 12-9 Foothill.

Long Beach Wilson and Harvard, of course, had met in the finals last year, and this year's playoff result was very similar. In 2003, Harvard had beaten the Bruins in their "small pool" during the regular season, just as they had done this year. Now, again in a larger pool, the Bruins emerged victorious. Long Beach Wilson held a 4-2 lead after the first period, and took a 7-5 edge into half-time. At this point, the Los Angeles Times wrote the following month, goalie Chay Lapin stepped up with "one of his best performances of the playoffs....During a stretch late in the third quarter and early in

the fourth, he made three spectacular saves on three consecutive possessions to help Wilson stretch its one-goal lead to two and eventually win, 9-7.” The Bruins’ final goal with 2:07 left in the game was scored by the previous year’s Player of the Year, Scott Swanson.

The final game was held on Tues., Nov. 23, just ahead of Thanksgiving, at Belmont Plaza. It was the third meeting of the Bruins and Knights in the finals in nine years, and their third meeting of the year. The Bruins had won the two previous final games and the two meetings this year, the latest one played exactly six weeks earlier. The 2004 tournament had featured close games in each round – and this game, too, would be close. Interestingly, though, not a single game was decided by one goal, the first time that had happened since 1958, back when only three rounds were played.

Foothill got off on the right foot, leading the Bruins 2-1 at the end of the first period. But, that was their last lead. In the second period, Scott Swanson scored all four of his goals, and Long Beach Wilson moved out to a 6-4 half-time lead. The Bruins extended their lead at the end of three periods, 10-7. But, Long Beach Wilson couldn’t quite put Foothill away. The Knights closed the gap to 10-9 and then 11-10. Matt Sagehorn of Long Beach Wilson then scored with 1:40 left in the game to make it 12-10. Foothill staged one last comeback, scoring with 1:24 remaining to come within one goal yet again, 12-11. Finally, Sagehorn scored his fifth goal with only :37 left for the 13-11 victory. J.W. Krumpholz led Foothill’s scoring with five goals also. As the Los Angeles Times observed, the Knights were now 0-3 against the Bruins in the finals, but only losing all by a combined five goals.

The Bruins had won four consecutive CIF-SS titles, only the third time in playoff history it had been done. Only one thing remained to be done – make it an unprecedented five the next year.

2005

The segmenting of Water Polo eras is, of course, a choice of the author. It’s really all one long continuous string of years rolling by. There are a couple of reasons why 2005 is a fitting place to end this portion of the narrative. Among them is the fact that Long Beach Wilson was poised to win their fifth straight title – and would do so in the finals against Newport Harbor. At the time, the Sailors had won 11 CIF-SS titles, and the Bruins would tie them this year. Newport Harbor would win a 12th title in two years, but in 2005 we have the two all-time leaders in tournament championships playing each other for only the second time in the finals – and for the first time in 24 years. It was a match the two teams seemed to be building towards for years, as both were loaded with experienced players. A season preview story in the Daily Pilot noted that the Sailors had four starters from last year’s team, including Clay Jorth, along with two other seniors who “played significant minutes” in 2004. A similar story in the Los Angeles Daily News reported, “The Bruins return a plethora of players from a year ago,” including Matt Sagehorn and Anthony Artukovich. All three of the players named were members of the U.S. Junior National Team.

The Bruins and Sailors wasted no time getting after each other, facing off on Opening Day, Tues., Sept. 13, at Newport Harbor. The Register's headline the next day said, "Newport Impresses," winning 9-5, after four consecutive Opening Day losses to the Bruins. Clay Jorth had a match-high four goals for the Sailors, while Matt Sagehorn led the Bruins with two goals. The other team off to an interesting start was Newport Harbor's "Battle of the Bay" rival, Corona del Mar. On Wed., Sept. 14, the Sea Kings opened their own season by hosting Harvard and winning, 11-7. Two days later the Sea Kings again played at home, this time against Foothill. The Knights won, 9-8, on J.W. Krumpholz's game-high sixth goal with 1:44 elapsed in sudden death. Krumpholz was a U.S. Junior National Team member as well. Then, on Tues., Sept. 20 at Belmont Plaza, Long Beach Wilson clobbered Corona del Mar, 16-9. Matt Sagehorn scored six goals for the Bruins. And, oh yes, Corona del Mar had a new coach this year – Barry O'Dea, their fifth coach in five years. It was quite a start for O'Dea – playing three top contenders in just seven days, with the South Coast Tournament commencing two days after that. Think of it, a couple of the seniors undoubtedly were involved in Corona del Mar's feeder Age Group/Novice program as eighth-graders, meaning they would have had a new coach with each new season. It's certainly a credit to both coaches and players that the program continued to be as successful as it was. And, O'Dea would be the one to stick around – coaching there through 2016.

The South Coast Tournament was played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 22-24. Corona del Mar, again, contributed to the first day's most noteworthy contest, getting even with Foothill, 5-4, in a Sweet 16 game. The Sea Kings, however, would go on to lose their three remaining tournament games to finish in eighth place. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated El Toro, 9-5, while Long Beach Wilson beat La Canada, 13-9. La Canada then beat El Toro in the third place game, 10-8. (La Canada would go on to be Division III champs.) In the final game played at the Sailors' pool, the Register noted, "Newport Harbor...was 69 seconds away from beating Long Beach Wilson for the second time in a 12-day span." Trailing by one goal, the Bruins tied it 6-6 with 1:08 left in the game. The Sailors then had a man advantage situation, but their shot attempt was blocked and an outlet pass by goalie Jacob McIntosh went to a fast-breaking Matt Sagehorn, who scored with :30 remaining for the 7-6 win.

The S&R Sport Cup was held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 7-8 at the Woollett Aquatics Center. It was a peculiar sort of competition in that the FINA Junior Water Polo World Championships were taking place just now at the Pan-American Stadium in Del Mar Plata, near Buenos Aires, Argentina. The U.S. team included players from Foothill (Krumpholz), Newport Harbor (Jorth) and Long Beach Wilson (Artukovich and Sagehorn). Between travel and competition, these four key players would be away from this weekend through the following weekend. Newport Harbor and Foothill, in fact, had already decided to postpone their Sea View League showdown. Originally scheduled for Wed., Oct. 12, the coaches pushed it back until the teams could be at full-strength – to the very last day of the season. For the record, the U.S. finished out of medal contention. Serbia and Montenegro won the FINA tourney with Hungary, second, and Italy, third. The high school game had certainly changed. We didn't have scheduling conflicts like this when I was playing more than 30 years earlier! As to the

S&R Sport Cup, the first day's competition was highlighted by Long Beach Wilson defeating Foothill, 6-4, in the quarter-finals. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor beat Bellarmine, 7-6, while Harvard defeated Long Beach Wilson, 9-6. It was the second victory in eight days for the Wolverines over the Bruins. On Sat., Oct. 1, Harvard defeated the visiting Long Beach Wilson, 8-7, on a goal by Justin Rappel, scored 1:07 into sudden death. The Bruins' loss at the S&R Sport Cup would turn out to be their third and last of the year. They got back on track by winning the third place game over Bellarmine, 14-13, on a lob shot by Cody Walter with just :05 remaining in the second overtime period. (Bellarmine would go on to their eighth straight CIF-CCS Division I title.) In the tourney's final match, Newport Harbor tangled closely with Harvard until the Sailors scored with 1:37 left in the fourth to make it 11-9, which turned out to be the final score. The FINA tournament had allowed others to shine back home, as the Register wrote, "Parker Gregory, who replaced Clay (Jorth) in the starting lineup, scored a team-high four goals and was the face of Newport Harbor's depth." And, fittingly, it was Newport Harbor's first "major" tourney championship since the South Coast Tournament in 1999 – which they won in large part because Tony Azevedo was away from Long Beach Wilson, playing with the U.S. National Team.

With Clay Jorth still absent, however, Newport Harbor lost at home on Sat., Oct. 15, to Los Alamitos, 8-6. (The Griffins would finish second to Servite in the Division II playoffs.) Long Beach Wilson then faced off again with Foothill on Tues., Oct. 18, at Tustin High School. With both teams barely back to full-strength, the Bruins won, 10-9. Two days later, Thurs., Oct. 20, Newport Harbor was beaten by host Laguna Beach, 13-11. This game was more of a take-notice loss than the Sailors' previous two defeats, especially in light of the way Corona del Mar handled the Breakers exactly one week later. The Sea Kings wrapped up the Pacific Coast League championship at home by beating Laguna Beach, 13-5. (Corona del Mar had previously beaten host Northwood, 10-7, on Wed., Oct. 5, the Sea Kings' other main Pacific Coast League rival.)

Two games involving El Toro were noteworthy in the week leading up to the TruWest tourney. On Tues., Oct. 25, Newport Harbor defeated visiting El Toro, 10-8. The victory was a mixed result for the Sailors, however. Sophomore Clint Jorth – Clay's younger brother, and a key defensive resource – sustained serious facial injuries during the game, ending his season. On Thurs., Oct. 27, the first of two league titles changed hands for the year. Mission Viejo visited El Toro and defeated the Chargers, 13-12 in overtime. Mission Viejo took the South Coast League championship, after being held by El Toro for the previous six years.

El Toro and Newport Harbor tangled for the second time in four days in the quarter-finals of the TruWest Memorial Cup Invitational, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 28-29, in San Jose. Newport Harbor defeated El Toro, 16-11, for their third win over the Chargers this year. Also notable in the quarter-finals – Long Beach Wilson defeated Coronado, 13-7. It was the Bruins' second victory over the Islanders, having beaten them 12-8 at Belmont Plaza on Sat., Oct. 22. (Coronado was on its way to finishing second to Bishop's for the fourth consecutive year in CIF-SDS Division II.) The second day's championship rounds were held at Bellarmine. In the semi-finals, Foothill defeated Newport Harbor,

11-9, while Long Beach Wilson faced Harvard for the third time this year – and the Bruins finally triumphed over the Wolverines, 9-6. In the third place game, Harvard did some turning of tables themselves, defeating Newport Harbor, 8-6, and avenging their loss of exactly three weeks earlier. It was the fourth loss in 15 days for the Sailors, and their fifth and final defeat of the regular season. In the final match, Long Beach Wilson beat Foothill, 8-4. It was the Bruins' third win over the Knights this year, and their second major tournament championship of 2005.

Back in Southern California the following week, Foothill and Newport Harbor got together to resolve the Sea View League championship, in a contest held Fri., Nov. 4, at the Sailors' pool. Newport Harbor had a 5-3 lead late in the fourth quarter, but Foothill rallied for goals with only :58 and :03 remaining to send it into overtime. The Register reports, "With the teams still tied, 5-5, in the second overtime, Blake Hockenbury won the sprint and Newport Harbor took possession. The Sailors worked the ball around to Clay Jorth up top. Jorth fired a shot that appeared to bank off a defender's arm into the net to give the Sailors a 6-5 lead." That turned out to be the final score, and the Sea View championship changed hands after two years in Foothill's possession.

When playoff seedings were reported on Tues., Nov. 8, the top position went to Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 22-3), second seed was Harvard (Mission), third was Newport Harbor (Sea View, 20-5) and fourth was Foothill (Sea View, second place). Mission Viejo (South Coast) was seeded fifth, but Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast) was placed seventh. Rounding out the top seeds, sixth was El Toro (South Coast, second place) and eighth was Northwood (Pacific Coast, second place.)

First round games were played Thurs., Nov. 10, and contained some real milestones. First, Long Beach Wilson by simply showing up broke Downey's old record of most consecutive tournament appearances – the Bruins made it 32 straight dating back to 1974. They celebrated by easily handling Alemany, 15-8, at Belmont Plaza. (A study in contrast – Alemany was the third place Mission League representative and making their first playoffs appearance on any level.) Second, Newport Harbor hosted Tesoro, once again the At-Large entrant from the Pacific Coast League. By winning, 20-7, the Sailors claimed their 100th playoff victory dating back to 1962. The round also featured a pair of two-goal margin games. Playing at home, Northwood took on San Clemente in the Sweet 16 for the second year in a row. The Timberwolves won, 12-10, over the Tritons (South Coast League, third place). Meanwhile, Mission Viejo was playing in the top division playoffs for the first time since 1975, facing Laguna Beach (Pacific Coast League, third place). The Diablos earned their first trip ever to the quarter-finals by visiting the Breakers and winning, 10-8.

Quarter-final games were held on Tues., Nov. 15. Long Beach Wilson was playing Northwood for the first time this year, but when they visited the Timberwolves it was for the third year in a row in the Elite Eight. And, for the third straight year, the Bruins won by a six goal margin, 12-6. Meanwhile a doubleheader was taking place at El Toro, with Foothill playing Mission Viejo for the first time in 2005. Mission Viejo gave Foothill a surprisingly tough game, effectively double-teaming J.W. Krumpholz and

employing an aggressive counterattack. But Foothill had other offensive options and pulled ahead 10-7 in the fourth quarter, then survived two late goals by the Diablos to win, 10-9. It was the first one-point margin in the playoffs since the final game of 2003. In the other half of the twin bill, Newport Harbor was not only trying to beat El Toro for the fourth time this year, but also trying to even out some recent playoff history. It was the seventh time in 14 years the two teams had met in the playoffs – with El Toro winning five of the previous six meetings. The Chargers started fast and led 4-1 late in the first half. Newport Harbor didn't gain a lead until there was 3:36 left in the fourth quarter, when the Sailors pulled ahead, 7-6. The Sailors extended their lead to 9-6 with 2:13 remaining, then held on for a 10-8 victory. And that brings us to the only upset of the round – Corona del Mar playing at Harvard. A seventh seed beating a second seed normally is a shocker, but perhaps the Sea Kings simply had the Wolverines' number this year. Corona del Mar had beaten them by four goals almost nine weeks earlier. This game was a heated battle as, according to the Register, "Sea Kings coach Barry O'Dea received a red card for arguing between the third and four periods." It seemed to fire up Corona del Mar. The game went into overtime and then the Sea Kings pulled away for an 11-8 victory. The Sea Kings had lost in the quarter-finals of the South Coast tourney and in the Sweet 16 rounds of the S&R Sport Cup and TruWest Memorial, but now they were headed for the semi-finals of the tournament that counted.

The semi-finals were held as a doubleheader for the second year in a row at Woollett Aquatics Center on Fri., Nov. 18. And what a great Final Four to end this era on – with all four semi-finalists being prior champions, accounting for 31 of the previous 40 titles. It was the first time since 2000 for this type of Final Four, and the seventh and last time to-date. It was Corona del Mar vs. Newport Harbor playing for the first time this year in the opening match, and Long Beach Wilson vs. Foothill vying for the fourth time in the night cap. What if the match-ups had been different? It still would have been great – Long Beach Wilson and Newport Harbor had split two meetings, while the Bruins had beaten Corona del Mar once in an early season match. Foothill had split two games with both Corona del Mar and Newport Harbor.

In the history of the great rivalry between Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar, the two schools had met in the playoffs five times – all in the final game. This was their first meeting in an earlier round and the first time since 1987 they had played each other at all. As a result, says the Register, "an estimated 2,700 spectators packed into the (Woollett complex)" – about double the largest previous turnout for a semi-final game. From the opening sprint at 5:30 p.m., the two teams immediately "made up for lost time. The score was tied seven times in regulation and the largest lead was two.... Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar made sure the masses were entertained. The Back Bay rivals showcased plenty of driving and movement on offense in battling into overtime." The score was tied, 11-11, after four periods of play. Corona del Mar edged ahead in the first overtime, 12-11, but then in the same period "(Newport Harbor's Jeff) Auer tied the score, 12-12, on a tip-in front of the post on a speedy, diagonal pass from (Clay) Jorth on the perimeter. 'Are you kidding me?'" announcer Don Brantley roared." Finally, with only 1:07 remaining in the second overtime period, "Jorth scored the winner after drawing an offensive foul while guarding (CDM's) Jacob Murphy

at 2 meters. Jorth got ahead on the counterattack and scored from about 6 meters in the center of the pool.” The Sailors won, 13-12, in the long-overdue renewal of their playoff rivalry.

Due to the length and crowd of the first game, the second one didn’t quite get started at the scheduled 7 p.m. opening sprint. Once underway, Long Beach Wilson never trailed in-route to beating Foothill for the fourth time. According to the Long Beach Press-Telegram, “The Bruins held a 5-4 half-time lead, and overpowered the Knights 4-2 in the second half. . . . Matt Sagehorn scored four goals, one on a lob shot with :23 remaining to put the Knights away,” 9-6. Foothill’s J.W. Krumpholz told the Register, “Every player in the pool played their hearts out,” but for the Knights the Bruins were just one team they seemingly couldn’t get past in the playoffs – Long Beach Wilson had now won nine out of 10 meetings going back to 1985. Krumpholz is a candidate for “best player never to have received Player of the Year honors.” He was certainly the best player among Orange County programs for three years, and he would go on to be a member of the silver-medal winning U.S. Water Polo team at the 2008 Olympic Games. With at least four strong candidates this year, the recognition logically and deservedly went to Matt Sagehorn, a member of the eventual champion. (Krumpholz, Sagehorn and Long Beach Wilson’s other star, Anthony Artukovich, all ended up teammates at USC, where they won NCAA championships in 2008 and 2009.)

All that remained for the Bruins in their “Drive for Five” straight titles was to beat back Newport Harbor, on Tues., Nov. 22, at Belmont Plaza. Interestingly, the two great programs were meeting in the finals for the first time since 1981 – when Long Beach Wilson’s coach Tony Martinho had been in the pool for the victorious Bruins as a senior. It was a match of perfect symmetry in that the two teams had opened their seasons against each other and now they were closing them in the same way. They had played each other a second time at the South Coast tourney – exactly 60 days earlier, the longest in-season separation of meetings between finalists since 1999. After the game, the Register’s verdict was “The match lived up to the hype.”

The Sailors got off to a good start, scoring on their first two possessions to go up 2-0. Newport Harbor had a 7-5 lead with 2:28 left in the second quarter, before Long Beach Wilson scored to make it 7-6 at half-time. According to the Register, “the score was tied seven times in the first three periods, there were five lead changes and the biggest lead was two goals.” But, the third period would be decisive. “Newport Harbor took its final lead at 9-8 on Clay Jorth’s extra-man score with 4:11 left” in the quarter. Then, Long Beach Wilson’s Kyle Wootten scored on a man-advantage situation to tie it, 9-9; Anthony Artukovich scored on a counterattack to give the Bruins a 10-9 lead at the 2:43 mark; and Scott LaBounty scored on another extra-man score with 1:59 remaining to give the Bruins their first two-goal lead, 11-9 – the score at the end of three periods. In the fourth, reports the Daily Pilot, “The Sailors pulled to within 12-11 when Telford Cottam. . . . scored on a counterattack with 4:04 left in regulation time. But Bruins two-meter man Charles Wright, who had a game-high five goals, scored on the man advantage, then added the crusher – a fade-away lob over the head of Newport

goalkeeper Bryce McLain into the net to give Wilson a 14-11 lead with 2:47 left in the game.” It was the game’s only three-goal lead and that turned out to be the final score.

It was the capstone to an amazing run for Long Beach Wilson – their 11th CIF-SS title, their fifth in a row (something unheard of since the 1930s) and the sixth for Coach Martinho. It was only 2005, but Long Beach Wilson was already the “Team of the Decade.” Yet, as with Newport Harbor in 1980, just when it seemed there was no hope for the competition, the dominance came to an end. As Martinho told the Los Angeles Times after the game, “Each one gets harder. We really feel like these people come after us as hard as they can.” It remains Long Beach Wilson’s last CIF-SS championship. We’ll turn now to Water Polo’s next era to find out who was taking their place.

CHAPTER X

The More Things Change: Unifying the Title, 2006-2020

From State Champions to State Championships and from Pandemic to Pandemic

In the 1910s, when the Long Beach Poly “Super-Dreadnoughts” ruled the pool, the writers of the Water Polo entry in the school yearbooks had a semi-regular conclusion. They would finish with a sentence or two to the effect that “Long Beach” (no need to specify “Poly” at that point) had issued a statewide challenge to establish the champion of all of California. Hearing back from no one, they would declare themselves state champion.

Now in 2006, approaching 100 years of CIF-SS Water Polo, we at last see efforts to move from hypothetical to reality. In this year, the CIF-SS Council authorized a “Masters Tournament” to follow the division championship games. This tournament featured the top contenders from all six division levels – with Division VII added in 2008 (the division designations changed from Roman numerals to regular numbers the following year). As the Register wrote in previewing the first event, “The Masters (is) thought to be a precursor to a larger regional or state tournament.” But such a statewide tourney would prove easier said than done. In theory, the Masters was rather a throw-back to the tournament years of 1952-1973, when all teams competed for the same prize. In practice, of course, it was little more than an exhibition with the coveted section titles won and lost just days before. The Masters Tournament was abandoned after 2008, but not the idea of a state championship. Finally, in 2017, a regional “SoCal Championships” was introduced, involving top contenders from CIF-SS, CIF-SDS and CIF-Los Angeles City Section. The addition of Water Polo to CIF-LACS was truly a case of “the more things change.” Introduced in Spring 2008 as a Co-ed sport, Boys competition began that Fall and Girls competition started up that Winter. It was the first time that Los Angeles Unified School District schools fielded Water Polo teams for a post-season title since Spring 1942. The age-old dream of a state champion in fact as well as in swagger remains unfulfilled through 2020, but it does seem that it’s going to happen eventually.

Of course, one could argue that a state championship tournament does exist. In fact, by 2006 it could be said there were already three of them. One of the things that distinguishes this era from the one that preceded it is the proliferation of major intersectional tournaments. From 1994 to 2005, seasons unfolded with orderly spacing between the early season South Coast Tournament, the mid-season Southern California Invitational (S&R Sport Cup) and the late season Northern California Memorial Cup (TruWest). In 2006, the North-South Challenge was introduced by Sacred Heart Prep of Atherton, in the Palo Alto area. The school’s coach was none other than Brian

Kreutzkamp, who coached Newport Harbor to a championship in 2000. After a short stay at Golden West College, he joined John Vargas as an assistant coach at Stanford, before arriving at Sacred Heart in 2005, where he is coaching to this day. (Vargas' predecessor at Stanford, Dante Dettamanti, never really retired – he coached Sacred Heart to a CIF-CCS Division II title in 2003, his one year there.) The North-South Challenge immediately took its place as a major intersectional event – followed in 2011 by the Santa Barbara Invitational and in 2016 by the Elite Eight Tournament, founded by Harvard. Before long, top programs from Northern California were making so many trips south that it was easy to forget that they weren't in CIF-SS at all. With six big tournaments for top competitors to choose from what was “major” any longer anyway? The answer: whatever tournaments the Division I finalists played in that particular year.

The new era in Water Polo can also be set at 2006 by virtue of Northwood's journey to the playoff finals. The Timberwolves became both the first new semi-finalist since Loyola in 1996 and the first new finalist since Foothill in 1995. Four more first-time finalists would follow in the next 11 years – Mater Dei in 2010, Orange Lutheran and Huntington Beach in 2016 and Oaks Christian in 2017. The year 2006 also marked the end of Long Beach Wilson's dynasty, and in the course of this era they wouldn't even be playing in the premier division. Belmont Plaza's reign as the site of the playoff finals also breathed its last in 2006, with the chosen site moved to Woollett Aquatics Center the following year. If the not-entirely-unrelated dynasties of Long Beach Wilson and Belmont Plaza came to an end, another one soon took their place. The introduction to the previous chapter remarked on the slow rise to prominence of private schools in the premier division. Now they achieved dominance. A private school won the championship 10 years in a row (2010-2019), with Final Fours comprising three private schools in five of those years.

The tournament structure itself soon underwent a change. In 2008 a Wild Card round was added, expanding the playoffs beyond 16 teams, the number of entrants seen every year since 1983 (with the exception of 1990 and 1991). The tournament was reduced again to 16 teams in 2016, then to only eight teams in 2017 – the first time the playoffs began with the quarter-finals since 1960. In the context of the “SoCal Championship” inaugurated that year, perhaps to be replaced eventually by a State Championship, the abbreviated format makes sense. This Elite Eight may one day compete for an even bigger prize beyond the section's premier division title.

The year 2006 is a good place to identify the start of a new era, and 2020 is a good place to close it – indeed, conclude this entire book. The question of a state champion brings us full circle with the beginnings of CIF-SS Water Polo, and the pandemic that began to impact the United States in March 2020 causes us to loop around to the beginning once again. The pandemic of fall 1918 led to a Spring 1919 season that didn't conclude until June 16. The adversity did lead to some hard-won recognition for the sport – the word “Water Polo” appears in a CIF-SS bulletin for the first time when it reported the minutes of a May 21, 1919, business meeting. Fast forward 102 years. The Fall 2020 season did not in fact begin play until Sat., Feb. 27, 2021, delayed six months due to lockdowns designed to stem the spread of COVID-19. The objective became one

of simply trying to get in as many regular season games as possible, which concluded exactly three weeks later, on Sat., March 20, 2021. Yet, the most difficult years are also among the most memorable. The players and coaches of today are to be congratulated for making the season happen at all, and celebrated in the same breath as the sport's pioneers.

There's one final report to make that clearly indicates an end of an era. Bill Barnett, my high school coach and to whom this book is dedicated, retired from Newport Harbor in February 2015 at the age of 72, after 49 seasons guiding Boys and Girls Water Polo teams there. In December 2018 he died at age 76, under care for acute leukemia. As I hope I have portrayed, coaching is a difficult and noble profession. I thank all the coaches who have carried the baton and advanced this wonderful sport for well over 100 years. In particular I thank Bill Barnett once again for helping "me to be successful in the pool and, more importantly, successful in life."

2006

In addition to the several changes taking place in 2006 recorded in the introduction, league representation underwent only its second change since 1992. (In 2002, the Pacific Coast League had been promoted and the Century League demoted.) Now, the Sunset League was promoted and the South Coast League demoted. Newport Harbor moved from Sea View to Sunset and El Toro moved from South Coast to Sea View, helping to create two ultra-tough Orange County leagues. The promoted Sunset League brought with it Los Alamitos and Esperanza, both of which had recently won Division II titles (Los Alamitos in 2004, Esperanza in 2003). The revamped Sea View League – which still included Foothill – also added Northwood from the Pacific Coast League. The departing South Coast League took with it San Clemente, after a highly successful 16-year run in the premier division. Although it wasn't immediately reflected in Division I, the shifting around of leagues in the lower divisions completed the section's gradual move away from geographic centering of the divisions. For instance, in 2006 the north-of-L.A.-County Channel League left its long-standing place in Division IV and landed in Division II, where league rivals Santa Barbara and Ventura eventually met in the finals (Santa Barbara triumphing, 14-11). In Division I, five leagues (Mission, Moore, Pacific Coast, Sea View and Sunset) once again competed for 16 playoff spots.

That 2006 was different from 2005 was massively confirmed on Tues., Sept. 12, when the previous year's finalists faced off in their traditional Opening Day non-leaguer. Newport Harbor posted a 13-5 victory over Long Beach Wilson at Belmont Plaza in a game that was more lopsided than even that final score would suggest (the Sailors had a 10-2 lead in the third quarter). Long Beach Wilson had won five titles in a row, repeatedly winning-while-rebuilding. But, they had graduated 16 seniors from the 2005 team, a hole that just couldn't be filled. The Bruins went 4-23 on the season, finishing third in the Moore League – the first time they had failed to win the title since 1986. Newport Harbor, in contrast, would hover near the top of the CIF-SS rankings and eventually enter the playoffs as the "Darkhorse" candidate for the championship (in the Register's view).

The leading contenders throughout the year, though, were El Toro and Northwood. El Toro had last won a title in 1993, but since then had finished below the quarter-finals only once. Led by a trio of brothers – senior Zach, junior Spencer and sophomore Griffin White – and still coached by Don Stoll, the Chargers were favored to reclaim the top spot. Northwood, coached by Steve Carrera, had finished in the quarter-finals the past three years. With the services of eventual Player of the Year Caleb Hamilton, the Timberwolves were ready for a breakthrough.

Northwood started the season 2-0, then suffered its first loss on Wed., Sept. 20, beaten at home by Villa Park, 12-10 in overtime. The next day, El Toro and Northwood entered the South Coast Tournament seeded first and second, respectively, with play ongoing from Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 21-23. In the semi-finals, the Chargers defeated Newport Harbor, 8-4, while Northwood beat Servite, 11-6. In the third place game, Newport Harbor triumphed over Servite, 5-3. In the final game, Zach White and Luke Allen each scored four goals for El Toro, giving the Chargers an 11-7 lead with 3:27 left in the fourth. Northwood proceeded to make it close as Caleb Hamilton converted a pair of five-meter penalty shots in a span of 24 seconds (five meters, not four, now being the toe line). But, the Timberwolves could get no closer and the Chargers claimed an 11-9 victory. For El Toro, it was their first South Coast Tournament title since 1992, a good omen since that was a CIF-SS championship year for them. For Northwood, it was the first time they had ever advanced to the final match of this prestigious major, making undeniable their new status as a top contender.

Hard on the heels of their triumph, El Toro proceeded to lose all four of their regular season games in a space of 15 days. On Tues., Sept. 26, the Chargers lost at home to Esperanza, 9-8, with the Aztecs scoring the winning goal with :12 left in overtime. El Toro then entered the Villa Park Classic, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 28-30. This venerable Water Polo fest was suddenly a major tournament again by virtue of El Toro's resurgence as a CIF-SS title frontrunner. The Chargers won their semi-final match 14-12 against Carlsbad, the eventual CIF-SDS Division I champion. The other semi saw Santa Barbara win 14-11 over Royal, which ended up in the Final Four of Division IV – and they beat Carlsbad, 9-8, in the third place game here. In the tourney's final match, El Toro held a 7-5 lead over Santa Barbara heading into the fourth period. But, the Dons ran past the Chargers for an 8-7 advantage, and then broke up an 8-8 tie by scoring the game winner with 1:01 left. Santa Barbara claimed the tournament title over El Toro, 9-8.

Next came what would turn out to be the most important game of the regular season. On Wed., Oct. 4, El Toro traveled to Northwood for the first Sea View League game for both teams. The contest was tied, 6-6, when Northwood received a man-advantage opportunity with 1:18 left in the fourth period. A skip shot by Caleb Hamilton made it 7-6, the final score, and the outcome decided the league title. Both teams would go on to easily handle the league's only other viable contender, Foothill – Northwood defeating the Knights, 10-4, on Wed., Oct. 18, at Tustin High School; while host El Toro beat Foothill, 14-7, on Wed., Oct. 25. Most importantly, Northwood's upset victory meant the two teams would be seeded in the playoffs according to the

order they finished in league. El Toro completed its rough stretch on Tues., Oct. 10, getting hammered by visiting Servite, 10-6. (The contest was originally scheduled for Tues., Sept. 19, but was postponed because the Friars didn't have bus transportation!) The Register later described it as "an ugly loss. (Coach) Stoll pulled his starters midway through the third and never returned them." The Chargers did win five games in-between their first and fourth losses; but still it was a bit of spiral. Yet, it was one that had now bottomed out – they wouldn't lose another game in the regular season.

Both El Toro and Northwood made the trip to the Palo Alto area to participate in the inaugural North-South Challenge, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 20-21, at Sacred Heart. Tournament organizer and host coach Brian Kreutzkamp managed to recruit a top-flight intersectional field the very first year. In the semi-finals, El Toro defeated Bishop's, 10-6, while in the other semi, Northwood beat Menlo School, 8-7. In the third place game, Menlo School defeated Bishop's, 9-6. (Bishop's went on to win its fifth straight CIF-SDS Division II title, while Menlo School claimed the CIF-CCS Division II championship. Northwood's semi-final victory was Menlo School's one and only defeat all year. By the way, the private Menlo School of Atherton is not to be confused with the public Menlo-Atherton, which finished second in CIF-CCS Division I.) In the final match of the North-South Challenge, El Toro won handily 12-8, but with an asterisk. Caleb Hamilton did not play in the final due to a neck injury sustained in the second half of Northwood's semi-final match. The injury would turn out to be lingering, limiting his play through the following weekend.

Northwood actually had to get right back into competitive play two days later, when the Timberwolves participated in the Hank Vellekamp Tournament #2, held Mon., Oct. 23 and Fri.-Sat., Oct. 27-28. Under the theory that the CIF-SS finalists define what is a major tourney, this was one of them for 2006. The event was the successor to the North Orange County Tournament, which had been founded by Sunny Hills and organized by Jim Sprague, and he continued to manage it now that he was at Servite. In late November 2005, Vellekamp died from cancer at the age of 69, and Sprague renamed the tourney in honor of his coaching colleague from the early 1970s heydays of Sunny Hills. The North Orange County Tournament had actually functioned as two tourneys in recent years, and so it was with the rechristened event, Hank Vellekamp #1 winding up two weeks earlier. In the semi-finals, Servite defeated Northwood, 10-6, though with an asterisk here also. Northwood was still without full use of Caleb Hamilton, and the Timberwolves were without three other starters due to ACT testing that morning. Still, it is to be observed that the Friars beat both El Toro and Northwood this year, and they went on to win this tournament, defeating Mira Costa, 10-4, in the final match. Despite these accomplishments, Servite would finish in the quarter-finals of the Division II playoffs. Northwood finished up the tourney winning the third place game over Oaks Christian, 14-11, with Hamilton scoring four goals in three quarters of play. Northwood had lost their fourth and final game (same as El Toro), but Hamilton was nearing 100 percent heading into the final week of the season. (Mira Costa ended up winning the Division IV title while Oaks Christian, having lost to the Mustangs here in the semis, 11-7, finished in that division's quarter-finals.)

Neither El Toro or Northwood participated in what for a dozen years prior had been considered the second and third legs of the “Three Majors” – the S&R Sport Cup in Southern California, and the Memorial Cup (“Nor Cal,” founded in 1975, had placed “TruWest” in front of its name in 1999, but would go by a couple of prefixes in this era). Tracking the progress of Newport Harbor – the season’s Darkhorse – reveals what happened at these tourneys. The S&R Sport Cup took place Fri.-Sat., Oct. 6-7 at Woollett Aquatics Center. In the semi-finals, Corona del Mar beat Servite, 9-8, while Harvard defeated Newport Harbor, 7-4. Servite then beat Newport Harbor, 4-3, in the third place game (there goes Servite again – this time reversing the third place game outcome from the South Coast Tournament). In the finals, Harvard beat Corona del Mar, 6-3, to capture its first-ever S&R Sport Cup title. Moving up to San Jose, the (still TruWest) Memorial Cup took place three weeks later, Oct. 27-28. In the semi-finals, Menlo-Atherton beat Corona del Mar, 7-3, while Newport Harbor turned the tables on Harvard, beating the Wolverines, 7-5, in the other semi. Harvard would again convincingly beat Corona del Mar, 14-6, in the third place game. In the tournament’s final match, Menlo-Atherton defeated Newport Harbor, 6-4.

Newport Harbor had narrowly managed to win the Sunset League title. The Sailors hosted Esperanza on Wed., Oct. 11, winning 7-6; then Newport Harbor hosted Los Alamitos on Wed., Oct. 18, triumphing, 4-3. Esperanza would take second in league by beating Los Alamitos in another one-goal game, 5-4, played on Wed., Nov. 1, at (yet again) Newport Harbor. No less a highlight for the Sailors was their game against Corona del Mar, played on Oct. 21. The two rivals had encountered each other over the years in tournaments and, in the 1990s, when they were in the same league. But they hadn’t scheduled a non-league “Battle of the Bay” since 1970. It would become an annual affair, with the Sailors visiting the Sea Kings and winning the first of the meetings, 7-4. The Sailors finished with five losses on the season – four in the three tournaments they played in, plus a non-league game at home against Villa Park on Sept. 26, losing 9-7. (The Spartans, who had beaten Northwood the previous week, would eventually finish in the semi-finals of the Division II playoffs.)

The playoff seedings were reported on Tues., Nov. 7, and fully revealed the importance of the Northwood’s league victory over El Toro. Northwood (24-4) was seeded first, even though number two seed El Toro (also 24-4) had beaten them twice and was the top ranked team in the final coaches poll. Newport Harbor (22-5) was third and Mission League champion Harvard (23-4) was fourth. Rounding out the top spots, Esperanza (18-10) was fifth, Pacific Coast League champ Corona del Mar (17-9) was sixth, Loyola (18-9 and second in the Mission League) was seventh and, yes, Moore League champ Long Beach Poly (20-8) was eighth.

First round games were played on Thurs., Nov. 9. Of note, Harvard played host to Woodbridge, the At-Large entry from the Sea View League. The Wolverines won, 17-8, marking the first playoff victory for their new coach, Larry Felix, after Richard Corso left to become the Women’s Water Polo coach at Cal-Berkeley. The most lopsided game of the round was not one you would expect – Newport Harbor beat visiting Long Beach Wilson by a shocking count of 17-2. So, the Sailors handed the Bruins both their

first and last defeats of one of their most forgettable seasons. There was only one game, in fact, tighter than a five-goal margin – even Los Alamitos’ win over host Long Beach Poly, technically an upset, had a 13-8 final score. Easily the best match of the round was Foothill at Corona del Mar. It was a tie game about mid-way through the third period when Corona del Mar quickly scored three unanswered goals to go up 6-3 at the end of the quarter. Foothill cut Corona del Mar’s lead to one twice in the fourth but the Sea Kings scored the final goal of the game with 1:25 left to give them a 9-7 victory. For the Knights, it was their first loss in the Sweet 16 since 1991 (Long Beach Wilson, by the way, hadn’t lost in this round since 1986).

Quarter-final games were played on Tues., Nov. 14. El Toro had little trouble with Loyola, in a game played at Mira Costa, where the Cubs had hosted an Elite Eight contest back in 1999. On this day, El Toro went from a 6-4 half-time lead to winning 11-4, with Griffin White scoring four goals and Spencer White adding three more for the Chargers. What remained were three tight games all involving Sunset League teams. With Foothill and Long Beach Wilson missing from the Elite Eight, their places were essentially filled by Esperanza, which had only qualified for the quarter-finals once before (1981), and Los Alamitos, which had never gotten this far. Both would come up empty, however. Esperanza traveled to Harvard, where the Wolverines built a 5-2 half-time lead, and stayed ahead 6-3 at the end of three periods. Esperanza kept fighting but Harvard held on to win, 7-5. At the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base, the Griffins and Northwood were tied 1-1 after the first period, 4-4 at half and 5-5 at the end of three. In the fourth quarter, Caleb Hamilton scored the game winner and Travis Noll ended play with six goals as the Timberwolves escaped, 8-7.

The quarter-final match at Corona del Mar between the Sea Kings and Newport Harbor represented the earliest the two great rivals had ever met in the playoffs – which had also been the case just last year when they met in the semi-finals. And, as in 2005, this was a terrific game – in fact, it’s too bad it wasn’t played later in the playoffs because it might have been remembered as their best ever. I attended this night game. The stands were packed, of course, but the main thing I recall – it was a long one, taking over two hours to play. Corona del Mar scored the opening goal for their only lead of the game. It was tied at 1-1 after the first period, then Newport Harbor pulled ahead 4-3 at half and 5-3 after three quarters. The Sailors had a 6-3 lead with 3:30 left in the fourth when the Sea Kings’ Omar Mobarek scored. This was followed by goals by Jeff Lee at the 2:26 mark and Ryan Hultman, who tied it at 6-6 with :47 remaining. Then reports the Register, “Corona del Mar drew a man-advantage with eight seconds left. At about the same time, another Newport Harbor player was called for a game misconduct for splashing the referee. Corona del Mar wasn’t awarded a two-man advantage and misfired twice on the extra man.” The two teams headed into overtime for the second year in a row. The Sailors scored first, but Corona del Mar evened it at 7-7 by the end of the first overtime period. The second overtime frame was scoreless. So, they entered sudden death for the first time since their all-time classic 1982 final game. The contest remained scoreless through a first sudden death period. As it transpired, one of the heroes for the Sailors in the second sudden death period would be Clint Jorth, whose 2005 season had been brought to an early end by a severe

facial injury. The Register reports, “Jorth was up on a counterattack and closing in on goalie Brian Peotter. But just as a defender started to close on Jorth, the junior faked a shot and passed to Riley Hayes on the far post. Hayes had gained inside position on his defender and re-directed the pass past the outstretched arm of Peotter to lift the third-seeded Sailors to an 8-7 victory.” It was Hayes’ game-high third goal.

The top four seeds, then, advanced as expected to the semi-finals, played Fri., Nov. 17, at Woollett Aquatics Center. The Division I contests were accompanied by the Division II and VI semi-finals, a six-game card that attracted 2,450 fans. Northwood faced off with Harvard at 5 p.m. and El Toro vs. Newport Harbor followed at 7 p.m. As noted in the chapter introduction, Northwood was the first “new” team to the semi-finals in 10 years, and would soon become the first new finalist in 11 years. The first game featured strong play by the goalies, freshman James Hartshorne for Northwood and senior Brian Pingree for Harvard. The Timberwolves had a firm 4-1 lead at half-time, Harvard got to within 4-2 at the end of three, and then Northwood closed it out, 6-3. Caleb Hamilton and Travis Noll each scored twice for the Timberwolves, the game’s leading scorers.

El Toro and Newport Harbor were holding their ninth playoff meeting since 1982, the Chargers leading the series 5-3, and it was their sixth contest in eight years. El Toro had beaten the Sailors soundly in the semi-finals of the South Coast Tournament, but now “NHHS out-hustled El Toro and played some of their best polo of the season in the first half,” according to Doug Prichard, a Newport Harbor parent who attended. And, the Sailors held a 4-2 lead at half-time. My brother Doug wasn’t the only one there who noticed the difference in energy levels between the two teams. According to the Register, “(El Toro’s Coach Stoll) said he challenged them at half-time to show heart and the Chargers responded.... ‘It’s not about who has the most talent.... It’s who wants it the most.’” Newport Harbor still managed to keep a 5-4 lead at the end of three quarters. However, Zach White tied the score for El Toro 30 seconds into the fourth quarter, and the Chargers’ Dave Van Boxtel added a goal with 3:23 left, making it 6-5. Newport Harbor had the only man-advantage chance of the fourth and missed. In fact, the Sailors were held scoreless the last 10:24 of the game, and El Toro made 6-5 stand up as the final score.

The final match was played Tues., Nov. 21, at Belmont Plaza, along with the Division V and VI final games (the other three divisions playing at the venue the day prior). It was to be the last final game ever played at the legendary natatorium. In December 2014, “‘The Taj Mahal’ of swim stadiums” (Orange County Register) was demolished, judged seismically unsafe the previous year. A smaller, open-air pool exists at the site through 2020, with plans – should funding ever be secured – for a complex rivaling its former grandeur. It would also be the last final game I have attended to-date (I went with my son, Matt, a junior goalie for Aliso Niguel, a Sweet 16 finisher in Division II). Northwood of Irvine vs. El Toro of Lake Forest is a rivalry that never quite developed into what it could have been. The schools are just 8.8 miles from each other, the closest distance between two finalists since 1995, and this was the first meeting in the finals since that year between teams from the same league. In retrospect,

Northwood might have been better served seeded second. They won their semi-final by a rather easy margin, and they might have benefited from the mental toughening of a more challenging prior match – assuming, of course, they got past Newport Harbor. This year turned out to be a case of the championship being played in the semi-finals. Unfortunately, in their final game debut in front of a crowd of 2,500, Northwood didn't play very well and was never in it.

El Toro “played arguably its best match of the season,” according to the Register. The Chargers jumped out to a 4-0 lead, while the Timberwolves made crucial errors at the very end of the both of the first two quarters (in the first, sloppy defense cost them a goal with less than one second remaining, and in the second they had an extra man situation with time running out and failed to shoot; in fact, Northwood ended up going 1-for-8 in these opportunities, failing to get a shot on goal five times). During the third period, El Toro extended its lead to six goals twice. In the end, El Toro's trio of White brothers contributed eight goals – three by Zach and Spencer, two by Griffin; with Dave Van Boxtel contributing two more and Trevor Abbey another. Northwood's Caleb Hamilton had a game-high four goals, telling the Register, “They were ready to play more than us.” The game ended with El Toro's fourth premier division title and first in 13 years, winning 11-8.

And, this is where our story would end most years. However, back on Thurs., Oct. 12, at a CIF-SS Council meeting held in Long Beach, a post- post-season tournament was created as a placeholder for a future regional or state championship. For 2006, this meant a 16-team tourney with a consolation bracket involving schools from all six CIF-SS divisions. This “Masters Tournament” was held later in the very same week as the divisional championships, starting the day after Thanksgiving, Fri.-Sat., Nov. 24-25, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Of course, having created a “placeholder,” nobody cared very much about the tourney itself – with the possible exception of Northwood, still smarting over their play on Tuesday. The Sweet 16 round was highlighted by Villa Park's upset of Harvard, 5-4. Perhaps symbolic of the Wolverines' indifference, they lost their consolation bracket semi-final to Montebello, 11-7, which on Monday had won the Division III championship. In the Final Four, El Toro defeated Santa Barbara, 9-8, while Northwood beat Newport Harbor, 8-6. (This was the first meeting of the year between the Timberwolves and Sailors, and perhaps Northwood had some added motivation to counter the sort of talk I've already exhibited – that the championship had been decided in the semi-finals.) The final match attracted 500 fans – only 20 percent of the numbers for either the final or semi-final playoff matches. In the Register's game story, it noted how “sharp” El Toro had looked on Tuesday – suggesting the team wasn't quite so in this match. On the other hand, “a different Northwood squad showed up Saturday.” Northwood went ahead early in the second quarter, and held the lead the rest of the way, winning 11-7. Caleb Hamilton and Jonathan Colton each scored four goals for Northwood. The Register reported, “After the match's final buzzer, Northwood didn't celebrate by jumping into the pool like CIF champions often do. ‘We felt like this wasn't our goal,’ Colton said. ‘Our goal was obviously CIF....(But) this helps to show we're better than we were (Tuesday).’” Some redemption had indeed been earned by Northwood. And, the precedent of something beyond a section title was established – and maybe there might be something more at stake in the near future.

2007

When playoff seedings were announced, the Register noted the “wildly unpredictable regular season in boys water polo.” The leading contenders were Newport Harbor and defending champ El Toro, though only the Sailors would get to the finals. Northwood was also in the mix. The Timberwolves’ coach Steve Carrera had resigned in June, with his shoes eventually filled by Chris French. The result was a very slow start for last year’s second place team, though they would somewhat miraculously climb back into the finals.

Newport Harbor and El Toro established themselves as the frontrunners at the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 20-22. The Sailors entered the tourney with one loss, having been beaten at home by Coronado, 9-8, on Sat., Sept. 15. (The Islanders would finally end Bishop’s five-year string of championships and win the CIF-SDS Division II title.) In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated Villa Park, 8-7, while El Toro beat Servite 12-10. In the third place game, Villa Park whipped Servite, 6-2 (the Spartans would eventually win the Division II title, while the Friars finished in that division’s semi-finals). In the tournament final, Newport Harbor and El Toro battled to a 5-5 tie at the end of regulation and through a scoreless first overtime period. The Sailors then put up three goals in the second overtime for an 8-5 victory, handing El Toro its first loss. It was the first South Coast tourney championship for Newport Harbor since 1999 – when they had defeated a Tony Azevedo-less Long Beach Wilson.

Northwood, meanwhile, opened the season 0-3 with losses to Los Alamitos, 11-6, on Fri., Sept. 7, at the Joint Forces Training Base; at home to Laguna Hills, 9-8, on Wed., Sept. 12; and to Villa Park, 13-6, on Tues., Sept. 18, at the Spartans’ pool. At the South Coast tourney, the Timberwolves were beaten by Servite, 11-7, in the quarter-finals; and by La Canada, 9-7, in the fifth-place semi-finals. On Tues., Sept. 25, they were defeated while visiting Mater Dei, 7-5, which brought their season record to 3-6. (La Canada eventually won the Division III title, while Mater Dei finished second in Division II.)

The Timberwolves had improved to 5-6 when they took the short bus ride to El Toro to play the Chargers in the Sea View League opener for both on Wed., Oct. 3. El Toro still had only one loss and had just claimed a “first since 1999” of its own – the Villa Park Classic, defeating Sacred Heart, 12-11 in overtime, on Sat., Sept. 29. (Sacred Heart would win the CIF-CCS Division II title.) However, just like last year, Northwood shocked El Toro, 11-9 in overtime. This league loss would prove even costlier to the Chargers than the one in 2006. Northwood emerged amped-up from the victory. Their next game was on Tues., Oct. 9, at Newport Harbor, where the Timberwolves extended their hosts into a second sudden death period before the Sailors finally triumphed, 8-7. Northwood then won three games in a row before coming down to earth, losing a Sea View League game at home to Foothill, also 8-7, on Wed., Oct. 17. As it happened, El Toro would beat Foothill, 6-2, at Beckman High School on Thurs., Nov. 1. This produced a three-way tie for first, with the top competitors all having 4-1 records. After El Toro’s win, a series of coin flips produced the league’s playoff entries – Northwood, first; El Toro, second, and Foothill, third.

For Newport Harbor's part, they rode into the S&R Sport Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 5-6 at Woollett Aquatics Center, with just their one loss to Coronado. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated Servite, 6-4, while Coronado got past Miramonte, 7-5. In the third place game, Miramonte triumphed over Servite, 13-11 (Miramonte would win the CIF-NCS title, all teams on one level). In the tourney's final match, Coronado defeated Newport Harbor for a second time, 8-7.

Northwood and El Toro then traveled to Sacred Heart in Atherton to participate in the second annual North-South Challenge, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 19-20. The year before, they had met in the finals, but the results were much different in 2007. El Toro fared slightly better – the Chargers were beaten by Agoura, 11-8 in overtime, in the quarter-finals (Agoura would go on to win the Division IV championship). The Chargers were then handed their second loss in a row when Miramonte beat them, 10-7, in a fifth place semi-final match. Northwood had lost to Miramonte also – in the Sweet 16 round, 7-5. The Timberwolves won their next game, then lost in the ninth-place semi-finals to Menlo School, 6-5 (Menlo School finished in the semi-finals of CIF-CCS Division II). For the record, Villa Park won the tournament, beating Agoura, 5-3, in the final match. El Toro and Northwood returned home with four and 10 losses, respectively, but also their last losses of the year.

In truth, Northwood might well have finished with more than 10 losses but for a natural disaster that disrupted schedules in the last two weeks of the regular season. For the first time, but definitely not the last time in this era, wildfires struck Southern California. The havoc extended to the Nor Cal "FINIS Memorial Cup Invitational" in San Jose, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 26-27. Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar cancelled plans to attend, based on their school district's interpretation of a travel advisory by the Orange County Department of Education. Coronado also cancelled their trip – perhaps missing a chance to beat Newport Harbor a third time. Foothill's school district read things differently and the Knights made the journey. Sacred Heart beat Foothill, 8-6, in one semi-final, and Miramonte beat Menlo-Atherton, 14-7, in the other. For third place, Menlo-Atherton beat Foothill, 8-3 (Menlo-Atherton would win the CIF-CCS Division I title). In the all-Northern California final game, Miramonte defeated Sacred Heart, 9-7. So, for the second year in a row, the two eventual CIF-SS Division I finalists did not play at all in the "major" Nor Cal Memorial Cup.

The disruption was even more profound down south, where the Hank Vellekamp Tournament #2 was scheduled to be played Mon., Oct. 22 and Oct. 26-27. However, the Register reported on Tues., Oct. 23, "The Servite-run tournament had scheduled Northwood as one of its prime sites Monday but the campus was closed because of the fires in the area. Northwood and Mater Dei... were scheduled to face off Monday at 3 p.m. Servite coach Jim Sprague said tournament pools at Servite and Esperanza were left without electricity because of high winds. The tournament also featured at least one team – San Diego-area power Carlsbad – with travel concerns because of potential evacuations." The event got pushed back to the following week, but the Northwood-Mater Dei match never happened. Scheduling was so difficult that games were only arranged and played as teams were available, with no champion crowned.

In fact, the tourney wound up involving schools not originally planning to participate – Newport Harbor for one. The Sailors had lost an entire week of practices and games due to travel restrictions and poor air quality. The Register noted on Wed., Oct. 31, that Newport Harbor would partially make up for that by playing both Northwood and Mater Dei in Hank Vellekamp #2 on Sat., Nov. 3 – the last day of the season. Instead, wrote the Register, “Newport Harbor arrived at Mater Dei after defeating Ventura, 12-7, at Servite earlier in the afternoon. The Sailors’ match against Mater Dei started around 5 p.m. The Monarchs’ earlier scheduled match Saturday didn’t occur because Riverside Poly arrived late.” Newport Harbor was playing its fifth game in five days at this point and Mater Dei beat them, 7-6. It was the Sailors’ third and final loss of the year. Fatigued opponent or no, Mater Dei could now claim victories over both Newport Harbor and (back in September) Northwood. Significantly for Newport Harbor, though, they had begun their hectic final week with an at-home victory over Los Alamitos, 8-6, on Tues., Oct. 30, which was the deciding match for the Sunset League title. (As for Northwood, the Timberwolves came out of the North-South Challenge with an 11-10 record and ended up only playing their two remaining league games to close out the campaign.)

Playoff seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 5, with Orange County’s two toughest leagues producing the top four teams. There was no surprise that Newport Harbor (23-3) was ranked first. But Northwood, with its 13-10 record, victory over El Toro and Sea View League coin-flip title, had landed in second. And, to keep league rivals away from each other until potentially the final match, Los Alamitos (19-8) was seeded third and El Toro (24-4) was pushed back to fourth. In fifth was Pacific Coast League champ Corona del Mar (15-7). The sixth seed went to Long Beach Millikan (18-1), the Moore League champ. The seventh and eighth seeds went to the first two finishers in the Mission League, Harvard (16-10) and Loyola (16-7), respectively.

First round games were played Thurs., Nov. 8. The one upset – like last year – involved the Moore League champ. Foothill visited Long Beach Millikan and came away with an 8-6 victory. Long Beach Wilson was still rebuilding – the Bruins finished second in league with a 13-13 season record. Long Beach Wilson, in turn, lost to host Loyola, 14-7. This marked the Bruins’ 34th straight appearance in the playoffs – but their record would stop at that number. Next year, the Moore League would drop down to Division II. So, in a space of just three years, the Bruins went from winning 10 titles in 12 years to not playing in the premier division at all. Northwood hosted Edison, the At-Large entry from the Sunset League, winning 12-6. And, Newport Harbor’s Sweet 16 game perhaps signaled what was to happen later in the tournament. The Sailors hosted Laguna Hills, the third place team from the Pacific Coast League, and – you will recall – one of the four teams in the tournament who had beaten Northwood in the regular season. Newport Harbor whipped the Hawks, 21-3, in the most lopsided game of the round.

Quarter-final games were played Sat., Nov. 10, and reflected the “wildly unpredictable” season commented on a few days earlier by the Register. The game between the fourth and fifth seed is typically the game to watch in the Elite Eight, but

it turned out to have the widest margin of victory in the round. El Toro had punished Corona del Mar, 18-7, at the Chargers' pool back on Fri., Oct. 12. The Sea Kings did much better this day playing at home, but El Toro still triumphed, 10-6. And, the game between the first and eighth seed is often a laugher – but this year it had the tightest victory margin. Newport Harbor faced Loyola at Harvard, where the Sailors established a 6-2 lead at half-time. But the Cubs climbed back into it after three, 6-4. The Sailors then hung on for a 7-6 win. At High Noon at Beckman, Los Alamitos tangled with Foothill. The Knights built a 4-1 lead at one point in the second period, and maintained a 4-2 advantage at half-time. The Griffins had a huge third period, though, to go up 5-4 by the quarter's end. Foothill evened the count, 5-5, by scoring off the sprint to open the fourth and that's how regulation ended. Los Alamitos then had another scoring outburst in the first overtime period to go up 7-5; Foothill closed to 7-6, and the Griffins scored a final goal in the three minute frame to lead 8-6. That turned out to be the final score.

Beckman and Northwood are less than three miles apart, so the Timberwolves were in attendance to see Los Alamitos win – their next opponent if they could beat Harvard, who they were hosting at 4 p.m. It was no easy task. Harvard held a 7-5 lead in the third period, and entered the fourth still ahead, 7-6. According to the Register, “The final minutes were filled with drama. Northwood's David Kim scored a goal with 1:07 left to put the Timberwolves ahead, 9-8. However, Harvard scored with 12 seconds left to send the match into overtime.” Northwood scored two goals in the first overtime period to take the lead, 11-9, and a scoreless second frame made it the final score. It was turning into a remarkable season for the Timberwolves, due in no small part to their first-year coach, Chris French, who had an amusing knack for simplifying issues: “I just said, ‘all you have to do is play two of the three toughest minutes of your life, and this won't be your last game.’”

Terrific quarter-final games were followed by even better semi-finals, played Wed., Nov. 14, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Northwood took on Los Alamitos at 5 p.m., followed by El Toro and Newport Harbor at 7 p.m., with the Division II and Division VI semi-finals also being played at the complex. For Northwood, it was a case of flipping their 2006 tournament – they had beaten Los Alamitos in the quarters, then played Harvard in the semis. For Los Alamitos, it was their first ever trip to the semis – now joining Northwood, who had made their first appearance last year. The Griffins had previously beaten the Timberwolves by five goals, but that was nearly 10 weeks ago. On this night, the teams were tied, 3-3, at half-time and 4-4 at the end of the third quarter. The Griffins' Alex Merrill then scored off a 6-on-5 play with 2:45 left to put Los Alamitos ahead, 5-4. Just 30 seconds later, Northwood converted their own extra-man situation to tie it again. Said the Register, “the final two minutes were nerve-wrecking for followers of both teams....After earning possession, Northwood called timeout with 41 seconds. Then, with 17 seconds left, (Travis) Noll's follow-up shot off a miss went in.” Even then, “Los Alamitos still had a chance to tie it. (Northwood's) Jonathan Colton was called for an exclusion with five seconds left, so the Griffins had a 6-on-5 opportunity. But Louis Comtois (a field player) came up with a big block on a potential tying shot and the Timberwolves held on to win,” 6-5. Eight seniors

from Northwood's 2006 runner-up were unlikely returnees to the title game. Colton credited one of French's simplifying maxims, telling the Register, "When we were 0-3, everyone was down on ourselves. Coach Chris just kept re-iterating it. 'It doesn't matter if we start out 0-15 as long as we win those last games, qualify for CIF and to win CIF, you basically have to win three league games and the four in CIF.'"

El Toro and Newport Harbor were playing their 10th playoff contest, seventh in nine years, making it one of the section's great rivalries. When they had played in the South Coast tourney, they seemed destined to meet at last in the finals, but instead they faced each other for the fifth time in the semis. The round was a disappointment, but not the game. Newport Harbor jumped out to a 3-0 lead after the first period. The Sailors extended their lead to 4-0 early in the second, then made it 5-1 before El Toro scored three goals in the last two and half minutes to close to 5-4 at half-time. Newport Harbor came out of the intermission fired-up again, making the score 7-4 after three periods. Throughout the game, the Sailors seemed to have an intensity edge, as the Register noted, "they even showed their unity by shaving their heads for the match." Still, a wild finish awaited: "Newport Harbor led, 9-7, with about 16 seconds left when El Toro forced a turnover near mid-pool. Spencer White scored on a counterattack with nine seconds left. The Sailors called timeout after the goal, which allowed the... Chargers to press goalie Myles Christian in the backcourt. Griffin White, Spencer's brother, pressed Christian into a turnover with about five seconds left. El Toro ended up with a corner throw on the other side of the pool and called its final timeout with .4 of a second left. But Christian blocked a shot by Spencer White at the buzzer," allowing the Sailors to escape with a 9-8 victory.

The 2007 finals marked an important occasion in the history of Water Polo's multi-divisional playoffs. For the first year, Woollett Aquatics Center was the site of the finals – all six of them on a Saturday (Nov. 17), just as is done to this day (with seven divisions starting the next year). As the Register reported back in October, "For years the CIF-SS polo finals had been played at dark, noisy Belmont Plaza in Long Beach. 'I liked Belmont, but Woollett is a better facility,' (Foothill Coach Jim) Brumm said." Newport Harbor had been frankly lucky to win their game against Northwood, played five and a half weeks earlier. The Sailors' Colin McKibbin had scored at the fourth-period buzzer to force overtime and then scored the winner in sudden death. Northwood had almost upset Newport Harbor while they were on a mid-season roll. After two tough, character-building playoff wins, could the overachieving Timberwolves pull it off now? Perhaps fortunately for the Sailors, they had two tough playoff games leading up to the finals themselves. The result was one of the all-time prime examples of the finals actually being played in the semis.

Newport Harbor never trailed, but Northwood did hang with the Sailors through the first period, with the Timberwolves only behind 2-1. But then Newport Harbor poured in five goals to go up 7-1 at half-time. By the end of the third period, the Sailors led 10-3. And, there was no letting up – the game's final score was 11-3. At eight goals, it is the widest margin of victory in a final game ever. Jonathan Colton scored all three of Northwood's goals – the lowest team goal count since 1968. Scoring two goals for

Newport Harbor was team captain and Player of the Year Clint Jorth. The Daily Pilot reported, “As a sophomore, he was out with an injury when Newport Harbor lost in the Division I title game to Long Beach Wilson. But after Saturday night’s win, the only remaining player from that 2005 team closely gripped the CIF championship plaque. ‘Coming back and being able to play in the championship game my senior year is...so awesome....When someone asks me what I did in high school,...it’s (that I) won a CIF title with Newport Harbor,’ (Jorth said).” It was, in fact, a record 12th CIF-SS premier division playoff title for Newport Harbor – and through 2020 they remained tied with El Segundo with most titles all-time. It was also a career high point for coach Jason Lynch, in his 19th year of coaching high school Boys Water Polo. Now having won titles at Newport Harbor in both swimming and Water Polo, Lynch told the Daily Pilot “this year’s Sailors are the best team he’s ever coached.”

...And, the Masters Tournament was held again over Thanksgiving weekend, Fri.-Sat., Nov. 23-24. The tourney demonstrated for a second year the near indifference of teams that were satisfied with their finish in the division playoffs – and the much greater interest of teams not satisfied at all with how things ended. Los Alamitos won their Sweet 16 round game against Servite, 10-9, then faced Newport Harbor in the quarter-finals, which the Griffins also won, 6-5. It avenged their Sunset League loss to the Sailors, reported the Register, “but that wasn’t the match Griffins coach Dave Carlson cited as the motivating factor. ‘They didn’t feel good about the Northwood (playoff semi-final) game,’ said Carlson. ‘It made the guys hungry....(We’re) playing with a fire right now that we haven’t had all season.’” Northwood also lost in the quarter-finals – to El Toro, 16-7. El Toro’s Griffin White scored 10 goals and “called Northwood a ‘revenge game’” for the Chargers’ costly Sea View League loss. In the semi-finals, Los Alamitos beat Agoura, 8-7, while El Toro defeated Villa Park, 10-4. In the final match, Los Alamitos was victorious over El Toro, 10-9. The Los Alamitos bench was initially subdued at the buzzer, like Northwood the year before. But then there seemed to rise up an “Oh, why not?” consensus as the Register wrote, “the players tossed Carlson and themselves into the pool to celebrate....Yes, the Griffins borrowed a page from the winning teams at the Southern Section finals, but it probably would have seemed odd had they not taken the victory plunge. Los Alamitos won the tournament by posting four one-goal victories.” That is impressive. But the two Masters finalists would meet each other in next year’s Division I playoffs, with much more at stake for both.

2008

In 2008 CIF-SS formed a Division VII for Water Polo, leading to a reshuffling of leagues with some noteworthy outcomes. First, the Moore League was dropped down to Division II. This league had been sending teams to the premier division tournament since 1957 – and actually since the very beginning in 1952. The league only took the name “Moore” in 1957; it was known as the Coast League prior to then. Taking the venerable league’s place was the Channel League, bringing with it three strong teams – Santa Barbara, Ventura and Dos Pueblos (of Goleta). This transfer signaled the final collapse of segmenting the divisions by geography. Division I got yet another

very tough league, which is exactly the way it should be. As recently as 2005 the Channel League was competing in Division IV; Santa Barbara and Dos Pueblos hadn't been in the premier division playoffs since 1982, Ventura not since 1981. Perhaps in recognition that Division I now had five truly competitive leagues, the tournament was expanded to 18 teams, with now three At-Large spots and a play-in Wild Card round introduced.

Since 1992 El Toro and Foothill had been among the most successful programs. They made the playoffs every year – and won at least one game every year (except El Toro in 1997 and Foothill in 2006). Yet, they had rarely seen each other in the playoffs – only a semi-final game in 1995 and a quarter-final game in 2004, both won by Foothill. They certainly were familiar with each other – in fact, they had been “Opening Day” rivals every year from 1996-2004. This year, not only would they see each other in the playoffs, they would meet up in the season's final game.

Many of those years when Foothill played its first game against El Toro, the Knights would meet the Chargers on a Tuesday, and then they would play their second game that Friday against Corona del Mar. In 2008, Foothill opened its season impressively against defending champ Newport Harbor, beating the Sailors in their own pool, 6-5, on Sat., Sept. 13. Less than a week later, though, Foothill fell to Corona del Mar, 11-10, on Fri., Sept. 19.

Foothill did not play very well all year on the last day of tournaments, starting with the South Coast tourney, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 25-27. This first “major” of the season was maintaining its status. It was the only event to attract all of the eventual playoff top six seeds, twice as many as any other tournament, and these programs finished one through sixth here. El Toro and Foothill met in the semi-finals, with the Chargers edging the Knights, 6-5. In the other semi-final, Los Alamitos beat Santa Barbara, 4-3. In the third place game, Santa Barbara defeated Foothill, 11-10, for their third loss of the season. Meanwhile, El Toro emerged from the tourney 7-0 on the season, winning the final game against Los Alamitos, 7-5. It was the Chargers' second South Coast Tournament championship in three years, and the next weekend they claimed their second straight Villa Park Classic title. The tourney was played Thurs.-Sat., Oct. 2-4. In the semi-finals, El Toro beat Santa Barbara, 9-8, while Villa Park edged Sacred Heart, 9-8 in overtime. Sacred Heart won the third place game, defeating Santa Barbara, 13-8. In the final match, El Toro beat tourney host Villa Park, 15-14. The Chargers were now 13-0 on the season, and must have been feeling pretty good about things – it was the first time since 1992, a championship year, that El Toro had won both the South Coast and Villa Park tourneys. (Villa Park would finish in the quarter-finals of Division II this year, while Sacred Heart would go on to win its second straight CIF-CCS Division II title.)

Foothill meanwhile played for two full weeks without a loss, until they got to the S&R Sport Cup, played at Woollett Aquatics Center, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 10-11. In the semi-finals, Los Alamitos beat Foothill, 8-6, for their fourth loss, while Miramonte defeated Coronado, 8-7. The Knights did claim third place, knocking off Coronado, 9-6. In

the final match, Miramonte became the first school from Northern California to win the S&R Sport Cup, the Matadors beating the Griffins, 6-4. (The CIF-NCS was still playing on only one level, with Miramonte going on to win their 10th title in 14 years. Coronado would finish second in CIF-SDS Division II.)

Miramonte, in fact, would soon take care of El Toro in a battle of unbeaten at the North-South Challenge, played at Sacred Heart of Atherton, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 24-25. Miramonte faced Los Alamitos again, this time in the semi-finals, with the Matadors winning, 10-9. El Toro won the other semi-final over Sacred Heart, 11-8. (The Gators had gotten there by beating Santa Barbara a second time, 8-5, in the quarter-finals; Santa Barbara ended up playing for seventh against Villa Park and winning, 11-10.) In the third place game, Sacred Heart defeated Los Alamitos, 8-6. In the final match, Miramonte handed El Toro its first loss with somewhat surprising ease. The Matadors had a 7-3 lead going into the fourth quarter, and closed it out, 9-5.

Foothill was now going on three weeks without a loss until it got to the Memorial Cup, hosted by Bellarmine, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 31-Nov. 1. Corona del Mar, for the second time, defeated Foothill, 9-8, in the tourney quarter-finals. The next day, Sacred Heart beat the Knights, 6-5, in the fifth place game, the sixth loss for Foothill. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor beat its archrival Corona del Mar, 7-4. It was the fourth meeting between the two teams this year, the most “Battle of the Bays” since 1986. The Sailors had beaten the Sea Kings, 10-6, in the fifth place game at the South Coast tourney. Newport Harbor then defeated Corona del Mar, 12-5, in a fifth place semi-final at the S&R Sport Cup. (The Sailors recorded their second fifth place tournament finish there, beating Harvard, 12-11 in overtime; Corona del Mar finished eighth, losing to Servite, also 12-11 – the Friars would end up second in Division II.) The Sea Kings finally turned the tables in their annual non-league game, beating the Sailors, 10-8, at Corona del Mar on Oct. 25. In the Memorial Cup’s other semi-final, Miramonte beat Coronado, 7-5. The Islanders would win the third place game over Corona del Mar, 11-10. In the final match, Newport Harbor won their biggest game of the year, defeating Miramonte, 13-12 in overtime. It would be the only loss of the year for the Matadors. For the Sailors, it was their only season title. They were going to finish second in the Sunset League, having lost at home to Los Alamitos, 7-5, on Thurs., Oct. 9.

As league rivals now, El Toro and Foothill were no longer seeing each other on Opening Day. Instead, beginning last season, they flipped the scenario – meeting virtually at the end. The Chargers had beaten the Knights in the two previous years since they were both part of the Sea View League. With Northwood out of contention, their meeting this time on Wed., Nov. 5, at El Toro would decide the league title. The day before, the Register ranked El Toro first among Orange County Division I schools; Foothill was fifth. But, the true measure was that South Coast tourney match, won by El Toro by only one goal. On this day, the teams were tied 9-9 at the end of regulation, before Foothill finally prevailed, 11-10 in overtime. The final seconds of the fourth period were frantic indeed, according to the Register: “The Chargers went on the power play when Foothill was whistled for interfering with Griffin White’s free shot outside 5 meters. The exclusion was called with four seconds remaining, but El Toro quickly

went on a two-man advantage because Foothill goalie Jay Lovero, who blocked the shot, also was excluded for pushing away the ball afterward. El Toro's Nick Rascon unleashed a shot near 5 meters, but Foothill's Paul Pickell blocked it in the field. Tyler Westerfield grabbed the rebound and fired the ball into net, but it was ruled that time had expired before the goal." This account references both of 2008's co-Players of the Year – Griffin White of El Toro and Jay Lovero of Foothill, the first goalie so honored since 2004. For the third year in a row, El Toro had been upset in league, but perhaps the real damage for the Chargers this season was what it did for Foothill's outlook. The Knights absolutely needed this – to convince themselves and others that they were contenders. Having secured league and a seeding ahead of El Toro, Foothill proceeded to drop an at-home contest with Coronado, losing to the Islanders, 7-4, on Fri., Nov. 7. It was the widest loss margin for the Knights all year – in their previous six losses, five had been by one goal, the other by two. The game was certainly less important now to the Knights than it might have been, but there was another reason for the loss – goalie Jay Lovero played only the first quarter due to a minor injury.

The playoff seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 10. As in 2006, the Sea View League placed the top two teams – Foothill (20-7) took Northwood's spot in first, and El Toro (26-2) was second, where they were two years ago. These schools were followed by third Los Alamitos (Sunset, 23-5) and fourth Santa Barbara (Channel, 21-7). Santa Barbara was the only league champion to suffer a defeat within its circuit. With five teams playing each other twice, the Dons won the Channel title with a 7-1 record, followed by Dos Pueblos (6-2) and Ventura (5-3). The remaining top seeds included fifth Newport Harbor (Sunset, second, 20-7); sixth Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast, 17-9); seventh Dos Pueblos (Channel, second, 22-5); and eighth Loyola (Mission, 24-4).

The first Wild Card round since 1991 was played Tues., Nov. 11, and resulted in some inequities that perhaps hadn't been considered. Esperanza (Sunset, third) defeated Laguna Hills (Pacific Coast, third), 16-8, at El Dorado, and Huntington Beach (Sea View, At-Large) beat Notre Dame (SO) (Mission, third), 11-8, at Brentwood. Thus, the Mission league had only two entries in the Sweet 16, while the Sea View and Channel leagues had four. The winners of the Wild Card games were disadvantaged in more ways than one. They had to join the other 14 competitors for first round games the very next day, Wed., Nov. 12. Two additional At-Large teams had been seeded into the Sweet 16 – Buena of Ventura (Channel) and Irvine (Pacific Coast). Yes, another inequity – the Pacific Coast League's At-Large team (Irvine) was placed in the Sweet 16 while its third place team (Laguna Hills) had to play in the Wild Card round. The thinking must have been a case of giving with one hand, taking away with the other – Irvine had to play top-seeded Foothill. In fact, the three At-Large teams plus Esperanza all had to face one of the top four seeds. They were easily dispatched, El Toro's home victory over Esperanza, 12-5, being the closest margin. Last year's second place team, Northwood (Sea View, third), was eliminated by host Corona del Mar, 11-4. The two best games of the Sweet 16 involved Mission vs. Channel League teams. Dos Pueblos had to rally to beat visiting Harvard (Mission, second), 7-6. And, in the only upset, Ventura (Channel, third) beat Loyola, 10-8, played at John C. Argue Swim Stadium in

Los Angeles. Perhaps this wasn't really an upset – Ventura had just defeated the Cubs, 11-10, on Nov. 1 in the championship match of the Hank Vellekamp Tournament #2. In any case, the Channel League had placed three teams in the quarter-finals in its first year in Division I.

The tournament came to the quarter-finals on Fri., Nov. 14, and were uneventful except for one extraordinary defensive battle. Foothill visited Ventura and the Knights established a 10-2 lead at half-time, then cruised to a 15-8 win. At the Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos built a 7-4 lead at half-time over Corona del Mar, then extended it for a 10-6 final score. El Toro was hosting Dos Pueblos and leading comfortably 13-8 after three periods, then almost let the visitors back into the game in the fourth. El Toro triumphed, 14-12. A total of 65 goals had been scored in these three games – almost 11 goals per team. Things were much different at Newport Harbor, however, where the Sailors were hosting Santa Barbara. The game remained scoreless through the first half. Newport Harbor opened up a 2-0 lead during the third period, but the Dons had tied it, 2-2, by the quarter's end. That is how the score remained through the end of the fourth period, the first overtime, the second overtime and the first sudden death period. Finally, reports the Register, “(Santa Barbara) left-hander Brendan Kerwin-McElroy scored on a lob shot with 46 seconds left in the second period of sudden death.” It was the lowest scoring tournament game in six years. Newport Harbor coach Jason Lynch was quoted, “Kids (on both sides) were totally exhausted at the end.” No doubt – and kudos in particular to the goalies. The defending champs were out, and Santa Barbara was the first North-of-L.A. County team to head to the semi-finals in exactly 30 years.

The semi-finals were played Wed., Nov. 19, at Woollett Aquatics Center, along with the Final Fours for Divisions II and VI – Los Alamitos vs. El Toro at 5 p.m., Foothill vs. Santa Barbara at 7 p.m. In their four meetings over the past two years, El Toro had beaten Los Alamitos, 9-6, in the last week of the 2007 season; the Griffins beat the Chargers, 10-9, in last year's Masters tourney final; then the Chargers won both games this year – 7-5 in the South Coast tourney final, and 9-8 in overtime on Nov. 7 at El Toro. So the outcome here was shocking – or at least it was “a humbling experience” as Los Alamitos coach Dave Carlson told the Register. El Toro raced to a 4-1 lead after one period and never looked back. Griffin White contributed three goals to the Chargers' lopsided victory, 11-4. As to the next game – Foothill had lost to El Toro at the South Coast tourney, but had recently reversed that. The Knights had also lost to Santa Barbara by a goal later that same day. Could they reverse that tonight? The Dons were certainly equally determined – they had driven 138 miles to Newport Harbor and 134 miles to get here. But maybe the drives were grinding on them. Foothill jumped out to a 3-1 half-time lead and seemed in control at the end of three, 7-2. The Dons then scored four straight goals to close to 7-6 with 2:07 left in the fourth period. The Knights, however, converted a 6-on-5 situation to go up 8-6 with 1:30 remaining. Then, says the Register, “Foothill goalie Jay Lovero grabbed an errant pass by Santa Barbara with 35 seconds left, and Stephen Donoghue added an insurance goal with 10 seconds left.” Foothill had triumphed, 9-6.

Foothill and El Toro returned to Woollett Aquatics Center for the final match, held Sat., Nov. 22. Game time was 8 p.m. – the capper to six other title matches starting with the new Division VII at 9:30 a.m. Nearly 12 hours, then, of Water Polo fun! For the second time in three years, the final match featured two Sea View League teams, which contributed to a near record. The Knights and Chargers had played their league game just 17 days before. This surpassed Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills in 1983, when only 18 days separated their season-ending non-league and final game face-offs. I don't keep exact records, but 17 days is the fastest rematch since at least 1960, and is probably only surpassed in 1955 and/or 1956 – when Whittier and El Segundo were in the same league and then meeting at the end of three-round playoffs. As mentioned earlier, the Knights and Chargers had been among the most successful teams for nearly 20 years, led all that time by two of the most respected coaches of the day – Jim Brumm of Foothill and Don Stoll of El Toro. Now their teams were meeting at last in the finals, a rubber match following two one-point games.

Like some rubber matches of the past, this one turned out differently from eager expectations. Foothill established a 2-0 lead at the end of the first quarter, then made it 4-0 into the second. El Toro didn't score until there was only 2.7 seconds left in the half, making it 4-1 at intermission. Perhaps the key moments of the game occurred in the final minute of the third period. According to the Register, "After El Toro drew within, 4-2, (Foothill's) Paul Reynolds scored essentially an empty-net, man advantage goal with 49 seconds left after El Toro keeper Tommy O'Connell was excluded." Then, Foothill's Conor Golden lodged "a strike from center with 11 seconds left in the third that gave Foothill a 6-2 lead." The Knights made it 7-2 with just under six minutes to play before the Chargers attempted to stage a comeback: "El Toro drew to 8-6 with 1:58 left in the fourth." But, the Chargers could get no closer in the final two minutes, and 8-6 turned out to be the final score. After the game, at least one member of the Knights emphasized the importance of their Nov. 5 league win over El Toro. Paul Pickell said, "That was the main factor in our win today – confidence. That was the only reason we won today – because we were fully confident in ourselves." The Register concluded, "That overtime victory sparked the Knights to a section title." Griffin White of El Toro was among four players that led scoring with two goals, while Foothill's Jay Lovero had 14 saves. Like El Toro in 2006, it was Foothill's first championship in 13 years, and one that Coach Brumm particularly savors. In an interview with me Brumm said, "2008 was truly the neighborhood team. It was one of the closest teams I ever had." Notably, they were the first team since 2001 to win the title with seven losses, and remain the last to do so.

Woollett Aquatics Center was becoming everyone's home away from home as the Masters Tournament took place, Fri.-Sat., Nov. 28-29. The tourney repeated the pattern of the previous two years – the division champions mailing it in or, perhaps better said, using the event to give senior reserves and underclassmen a chance to play; meanwhile, the near-miss contenders sought to end the year on a more positive note. Santa Barbara and Los Alamitos faced each other in the quarter-finals, with the Dons winning, 9-6. Newport Harbor was beaten in the Elite Eight by Mater Dei, 6-3, the Division II champion. In the Final Four, Santa Barbara beat Foothill, 9-5, while

El Toro defeated Mater Dei, 7-6. In the final match, the Chargers beat the Dons, 6-4. El Toro had finished second in the Masters the two previous years, but it was that second place finish one week earlier that was on their minds. According to the Register, “(El Toro goalie Tommy) O’Connell said the sting of losing to Foothill in the Division I final Nov. 22 motivated the Chargers to capture the Masters, or as he called it, ‘the next-best thing.’ ‘After losing CIF, the guys were pretty down,’ the senior said. ‘We decided to bounce back.... We came together and decided to win this (tournament).’” It would turn out to be the last Masters Tournament game ever played. On April 20, 2009, the CIF-SS Council voted to end the event for both Boys and Girls Water Polo. The Daily Pilot reached Corona del Mar Girls Coach Aaron Chaney, whose remarks were certainly applicable to the Boys: “It never really turned out to be what they wanted it to be. They wanted to bring teams from San Diego, Central California, up north, but it’s just anti-climactic because everybody really shoots for (a section title in) CIF.” Attempts at a post- post-season tourney for 2009 were actually not abandoned until two days after that year’s CIF-SS division title games. No one wanted a Masters, but there were hopes of organizing a regional tournament involving at least the CIF-SS and CIF-SDS division champions (Boys Water Polo in CIF-LACS was only in its second year in 2009). But invitations were generally met with declines and the event was cancelled. Even then the idea was not forgotten, but it would take until 2017 before a regional tournament became a reality.

The Masters’ last day was unfortunately accompanied by great sadness in the CIF-SS Water Polo community. Katella’s head coach “Grafton Weiss, 49, died from an apparent heart attack Saturday,” reported the Register. Katella had won the inaugural Division VII title, with Weiss’ son, Garrett, the lone senior starter. It was the first Water Polo division title for a team from the Anaheim Union High School District. Katella had been eliminated from the Masters on Friday. Assistant Coach Dave Mikesell said, “He (Weiss) is the greatest guy I’ve met in this sport.... Heart of gold.”

2009

El Toro and Newport Harbor already had one of the great playoff rivalries in the history of the Division 1 tournament (regular numbers replaced Roman numerals this year in CIF-SS). There was only one thing lacking from their rivalry resume – a battle in the final game. That last missing piece would be filled-in this year.

A good place to start the story of the 2009 season begins in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 24-26. This is because it involved all five of the eventual league champions and top five playoff seeds. In the Elite Eight, Mater Dei beat Villa Park, 14-7, at Santa Margarita; El Toro (at home) defeated Dos Pueblos, 9-7; Newport Harbor (at home) whipped Bishop’s, 5-2; and Loyola visited Corona del Mar, beating the Sea Kings, 8-5. (The three teams not in CIF-SS Division 1 were Mater Dei, which would win the Division 2 title for the second year in a row; Villa Park, a Division 2 semi-finalist; and Bishop’s, a CIF-SDS Division II semi-finalist.) The next day at Newport Harbor, the semi-finals saw El Toro beat Mater Dei, 9-3, while Loyola beat the Sailors, 8-6. In the consolation games, Newport Harbor

defeated Mater Dei, 7-5, for third place; Dos Pueblos beat Corona del Mar, 13-5, for fifth place; and Villa Park beat Bishop's, 8-7, for seventh place. In the final match, both Loyola and El Toro were terrible in extra-man situations – the Cubs went 1-for-6 and the Chargers were even worse, 1-for-8. But Loyola, as the Register observed, “was more balanced on both ends of the pool.” After trailing in the first period, the Cubs led 4-3 at half-time and 7-5 after three periods. Loyola added a goal in the fourth to make the final score, 8-5. Thus, the Cubs – with victories over Corona del Mar, Newport Harbor and El Toro – had won their first South Coast tourney. In fact, it was their first title for any of the traditional major tournaments.

Starting our story in the South Coast tourney is also useful because of the unusual, foreordained circumstances of the remainder of the season. The top three tournament finishers – Loyola, El Toro and Newport Harbor – did not have any non-league games scheduled with each other, and they were entered in different subsequent tournaments. Therefore, with the season only two weeks old, it was known that Loyola wouldn't be playing El Toro or Newport Harbor again, and the Chargers and Sailors wouldn't be playing each other at all. The three teams, then, went separate ways as they marched through their respective schedules.

For Loyola, it was already their second tournament title. One week prior, Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 17-19, the Cubs had played in the Riverside Invitational, hosted by Riverside Poly. This was an important event in the development of Water Polo in the Inland Empire, giving teams in Riverside and San Bernardino counties some good competitive opportunities – without having to drive many miles to find them. It perhaps succeeded only too well in that it attracted very strong out-of-the-area teams, including Loyola (63 miles away) and the Cubs' opponent in the tourney finals, Dos Pueblos (165 miles). According to Loyola's coach Erik Healy in an email to me in January 2021, “we beat a very talented Dos Pueblos” – Loyola triumphed, 13-12 in overtime. So, when Loyola exited the South Coast tourney, they had already beaten all four of the other 2009 league champions. Loyola itself went on to claim its second straight Mission League title, with two conference victories over Harvard – 11-7 at home on Thurs., Oct. 15, and 11-8 visiting on Tues., Nov. 3. Towards the end of the season, the Cubs won a third tourney, the Hank Vellekamp Tournament #2, which concluded on Sat., Oct. 31. Loyola defeated JSerra, 11-7, at Northwood to claim the championship. It was their second victory of the year over the Lions, the first occurring on Tues., Sept. 29. The Cubs were almost the victims of a let-down just three days after winning the South Coast tourney – they got past the Lions, 7-6, at JSerra in San Juan Capistrano. (JSerra, founded only in 2003, would finish second in Division 2.) Loyola, in fact, won 28 games in-route to an undefeated season. Yet, the Cubs seemed a little off the radar among major contenders. In the chatter on websites like Water Polo Planet, for instance, the argument over who was the top team in Southern California inevitably involved El Toro, Newport Harbor...and Mater Dei. It's true that the Cubs had only gotten as far as the playoff semi-finals once, back in 1996. When seedings were announced, the Register noted, “Because of its limited playoff profile, Loyola coach Erik Healy said recently that his team considers itself an underdog this postseason. ‘(We) enjoy that role,’ he said at (Vellekamp #2).”

El Toro, meanwhile, moved from the South Coast Tournament straight into the Villa Park Classic the following weekend, Thurs.-Sat., Oct. 1-3. In the semi-finals, El Toro beat Ventura, 13-9, while Carlsbad defeated JSerra, 8-6. In the third place game, JSerra was victorious over Ventura, 15-11. In the final match, the Register reported, "The 'R & R Boys' helped El Toro's boys water polo team belt out a familiar tune. Nick Rascon and Russell Renteria combined for 10 goals as the Chargers defeated Carlsbad, 11-8, to capture the Villa Park Classic for a third consecutive season." Rascon and Renteria would eventually be named co-Players of the Year. (And Carlsbad would go on to win its fifth straight CIF-SDS Division I title.) Just two days after winning the "Classic," El Toro returned home to play Mater Dei, Mon., Oct. 5. It was also just nine days since the two teams had met at the South Coast tourney. This time, says the Register, "(Mater Dei's Christian Grant) shot from about nine meters, ... (scoring) on a side-armed skip shot with one second left to lift Mater Dei past El Toro, 10-9, in a nonleague match." El Toro would lose another tough non-league game at home on Fri., Oct. 16, against Corona del Mar. The Register again: "The Chargers twice tied the score in the fourth period, but the Sea Kings responded each time to post an 8-7 victory. Corona del Mar attacker Max Bergeson snapped a 7-7 deadlock by taking a pass from Blake Terry and scoring from the perimeter with 3:20 left in the fourth." (Bergeson was the son of Garth, the 1970 Player of the Year, and nephew of James, who received the honor in 1977 and 1978.) The loss was El Toro's third and last of the year. The next weekend, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 23-24, the Chargers traveled up to the Palo Alto area to play in the North-South Challenge. In the semi-finals, El Toro once again beat Carlsbad, 12-6, while Mater Dei defeated Cathedral Catholic, 9-8. Carlsbad would triumph over Cathedral Catholic for third place, 8-6. (Cathedral Catholic – known before fall 2005 as University [San Diego] – would claim the CIF-SDS Division II championship.) This left El Toro to face off a third time with Mater Dei in the final match. The Chargers were on fire this weekend, winning all four of their tournament matches by four goals or more. El Toro had a 9-3 lead over Mater Dei in the third period, and cruised to a 14-9 win. So, El Toro had two tournament titles to its credit – plus the Sea View League crown, which they easily won this year. None of their league games were decided by less than seven goals, including the circuit's deciding match, a 13-6 win over visiting Northwood, played Wed., Oct. 14. Another seven point win came with a 17-10 decision over Foothill, Wed., Nov. 4, at Beckman. It was the first meeting between the two teams since last year's playoff final. Foothill's loss consigned them to fourth place in league, with a 7-20 season record. Like Long Beach Wilson in 2006, the Knights had graduated a boatload of seniors following its championship of the year before. Foothill missed the playoffs entirely – the first defending champ to do so since El Toro, as a matter of fact, in 1991. In 2010, the Knights would rejoin Villa Park in the Century League – down in Division 2. Foothill would not be seen again in Division 1 until 2016.

Newport Harbor, lastly, won three straight games after the South Coast tourney. The Sailors then entered the S&R Sport Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 9-10, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated Coronado, 10-6, while Miramonte beat Corona del Mar, 8-7. In the third place game, the Sea Kings beat the Islanders, also by an 8-7 verdict. (Miramonte once again won the CIF-NCS' single-level title,

while Coronado finished second in CIF-SDS Division II.) In the final match the Sailors faced the defending tourney champ, and defeated Miramonte, 9-6. It was Newport Harbor's first S&R Sport Cup title since 2005 – until it wasn't. Back in the Sailors' semi-final with Coronado, the game began with a 3-3 tie after the first period. However, reported the Register, two players in Newport Harbor's line-up "had received game misconducts against Long Beach Wilson in the quarterfinals Friday. Game misconducts carry a one-game suspension, which mean both players would have been ineligible for the semifinals." Newport Harbor's mistake led to a discussion between periods, and agreement was reached to simply restart the match without the two suspended players. Miramonte's coach told the Register that "he liked the decision to replay" the game. But the next Tuesday Sailors coach Jason Lynch contacted the CIF-SS office and "the section determined that the Sailors should forfeit their victories" (Register) – in spite of the good intentions of all. The semi-final game was a forfeit. And, since the two players had not fulfilled their suspension and played in the final game, that had to be forfeited as well. Newport Harbor went from 14-1 at the end of tournament play to being saddled with two 5-0 losses, bringing their season record to 12-3.

The two ineligible Sailors served their suspensions on Oct. 14, when Newport Harbor hosted Los Alamitos in the match that ultimately decided the Sunset League title. Shorthanded as they were, the Sailors still posted a going-away 13-7 win. The Sailors had another success on Oct. 24, when they dealt with a tough "Corona del Mar to emerge with a 10-9 victory in an intense 'Battle of the Bay' match in front of a large crowd at Newport Harbor" (Register). This brought the Sailors (and the Sea Kings) to the FINIS Memorial Cup in San Jose, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 30-31. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor beat Corona del Mar for the second Saturday in a row, 7-5; meanwhile, Mater Dei defeated Coronado, 10-5. Just like at the S&R Sport Cup, Corona del Mar beat Coronado, 16-11, in the third place game. In the finals, the Sailors led 6-5 at half-time and 8-7 heading into the fourth period. But then Mater Dei erupted for four goals to win, 11-10. Mater Dei had claimed the tourney in their first time participating in it – and they might have won by two goals had the Sailors not scored on the final play of the game. The Monarchs were getting very good, indeed, now reversing their loss to the Sailors at the South Coast tourney. But, Corona del Mar had an opportunity soon afterwards to humble them – and assert their own standing as a contender. On Nov. 3, the Sea Kings visited Mater Dei and defeated the Monarchs, 10-9. Corona del Mar won the Pacific Coast League title, the deciding match played on Oct. 14, when the Sea Kings beat Irvine, 12-9, at Woollett Aquatics Center. (Thus, the decisive games in all three Orange County leagues were played on the same day.)

Playoff pairings were announced Mon., Nov. 9, with the five league champions seeded one through five. Loyola (Mission, 28-0) was not "off the radar" with tournament organizers – they were a deserving top seed as the first team to enter the playoffs undefeated since Long Beach Wilson in 2002. The Cubs were followed by second Newport Harbor (Sunset, 23-4); third Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast, 22-5); fourth El Toro (Sea View, 25-3); and fifth Dos Pueblos (Channel, 21-7). Like last year, the Channel League winner was the only champ to not go unbeaten within its own circuit. Dos Pueblos tied Ventura with a 7-1 record, but got the nod for first place. Ventura

(18-9) was seeded right behind them at sixth. The remaining top seeds went to seventh Harvard (Mission, second, 13-9) and eighth Los Alamitos (Sunset, second, 15-12).

The two Wild Card round games were played Tues., Nov. 10. Last year only one of the three At-Large entries had to play in the Wild Card round. This year, tournament organizers seemed to fix that – putting all three in this round, where they belonged. As a result, Buena of Ventura (Channel) was the only At-Large team to survive into the Sweet 16, beating their visitors from Fountain Valley (Sunset), 10-7. Huntington Beach (Sea View, third) also advanced – they hosted Beckman (Pacific Coast) in their first playoff appearance on any level, and defeated the Patriots, 13-7. First round games took place the next day, Wed., Nov. 11. There were no upsets and the only close games were the ones you would expect – Ventura scored with :16 left in the game to defeat visiting Northwood (Sea View, second), 11-10; and Los Alamitos got past Irvine (Pacific Coast, second), 10-8, at the Joint Forces Training Base. Harvard had a somewhat surprisingly easy time while hosting Santa Barbara (Channel, third), beating the Dons, 11-4. The Wolverines were now under the direction of Robert Lynn, their second new coach in four seasons. Corona del Mar, on the other hand, had a somewhat tougher-than-expected match while hosting Esperanza (Sunset, third). On Tues., Oct. 6, the Sea Kings had beaten the visiting Aztecs, 18-9, but today Corona del Mar only had an 8-7 lead with 1:20 left in the third quarter. The Sea Kings finally took control from there, putting up four straight goals to win, 12-7.

Quarter-final matches were played on lucky Fri., Nov. 13. The games on the whole were routine. With the calculations that are applied to produce seedings judged “fair,” there was certainly a logic to El Toro’s fourth spot. But, the Chargers’ game against Dos Pueblos was a total mismatch, El Toro beating the visitors (also known as the Chargers), 16-7 – the largest margin of the round. A bit closer was Newport Harbor’s home game against Harvard. The Sailors and Wolverines battled to a 1-1 tie at the end of the first period. Newport Harbor then gradually widened their leads – 4-2 at half-time, 8-4 after three periods, and then a 10-5 final score. Loyola hosted Los Alamitos at the John C. Argue Swim Stadium, where the tourney’s first and eighth seeds battled to a 4-4 tie at half-time. The Cubs then asserted themselves in the second half, moving out to an 8-5 lead after three periods, and winning, 12-7. (The Swim Stadium, of course, is the current name of the great pool that is part of the Los Angeles Coliseum complex. It was a busy place this day. Loyola and Los Alamitos played their game at 2 p.m. At 4 p.m., the third place game of the CIF-LACS playoffs took place. The final game was then played at 6 p.m., Birmingham defeating Cleveland, 9-5. Birmingham was now two-for-two in CIF-LACS Boys Water Polo titles, and they won the Co-ed title in Spring 2008 as well.) The most hotly contested game of the Elite Eight was Corona del Mar’s hosting of Ventura. The Sea Kings moved out to a 7-5 half-time lead, but then Ventura exploded for six goals to even the score at 11-11 at the end of three periods. Finally, Max Bergeson scored the winning goal with only :04 left to carry the Sea Kings to a 15-14 win.

The semi-final games were played on Wed., Nov. 18 and were held in separate locations for the first time since 2003. El Toro faced Loyola at Argue Swim Stadium

at 3:15 p.m., while Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar convened 42 miles south at Woollett Aquatics Center at 5 p.m., joined by the semi-finalists for Divisions 2 and 6. Perhaps the “Battle of the Bay” was growing a little routine – the Sailors and Sea Kings were meeting for the seventh time in two years (eighth counting a 2008 Masters tourney game). And, indeed, this was probably the least interesting of their playoff encounters – though the neighborhood bragging rights were still at stake. Newport Harbor leaped out to a 6-3 lead after the first period, then led 9-4 at half-time. The Sailors stayed way ahead after three, 11-6, and cruised to a 14-10 victory. (Corona del Mar now said goodbye again to Division 1 for two years. In 2010, the Sea Kings would join Long Beach Wilson down in Division 2 – where the Bruins had finished in the quarter-finals this year and the year prior.) Up in Los Angeles, everything seemed right for Loyola to get to the final game for the first time. They didn’t have to take the long, freeway bus ride to Irvine – in fact, they were less than three miles away down Vermont Avenue. At the South Coast tourney, they had kept El Toro to a season low of only five goals scored. And today, after a 3-3 tie ending the first period, the Cubs were in control – leading the Chargers 6-4 at half-time and 7-5 after three quarters. Well into the fourth, Loyola still led, 9-7. But then, reports the Register, Russell Renteria scored “back-to-back strikes at 2 meters with 2:40 and 2:05 left in the fourth to tie the score, 9-9.” The two teams battled intensely for close to two minutes until El Toro forced a turnover with 8.95 seconds left to play. Finally, left-hander Joey Fuentes of the Chargers scored on a lob shot with just 2.22 seconds remaining. Loyola managed a last desperation shot that sailed wide, and El Toro had won, 10-9. The Chargers were headed to the finals for the third time in four years, while Loyola became the first undefeated team to lose prior to the finals since Corona del Mar in 1970. Unfortunately for the Cubs, it would not be the last time they were stopped in the Final Four – they would become the hard luck story of the 2010s.

The final match took place on Sat., Nov. 21, as the concluding game of the seven division title matches held at Woollett Aquatics Center. It was the first time the two finalists hadn’t met in the regular season since 1990. In fact, El Toro and Newport Harbor hadn’t played each other since a quarter-final game in last year’s South Coast Tournament, the Chargers winning, 5-4. It was their 11th meeting in the playoffs dating back to 1982, El Toro leading the series 6-4, and their first final game. The Sailors tended to suffer let downs following a “Battle of the Bay” in the previous round, while El Toro seemed to be riding on a wave of momentum – a 14-game unbeaten streak since losing to Corona del Mar more than five weeks earlier. Both trends seemed at work on this night. El Toro got ahead 2-0 and was never caught. The Chargers had leads of 3-1 after the first period and 5-1 with 4:50 left in the half. Newport Harbor got to within 5-3 with 1:44 remaining in the second, but El Toro’s Nick Rascon (five goals total) scored on an extra-man situation just before half-time to make it 6-3. The Sailors got close again in the third, 7-5, but goals by El Toro at the 1:43, 1:18 and :42 marks brought the period to a close, 10-5. Two of El Toro’s goals in the third, by Joey Colton and Russell Renteria (three total), were fired from near mid-pool. It was still 11-8 with :44 seconds left in the fourth when Newport Harbor called a timeout, resulting in one more goal, making the final score, 11-9. In addition to the “R & R Boys,” El Toro’s goalie, sophomore Garrett Danner, had an outstanding game with 16 saves.

Don Stoll recorded his 600th career win as coach of El Toro earlier this year, which concluded with his and the school's fifth premier division title – spanning 4A, Division I and Division 1. And it was a milestone no one realized at the time. Mater Dei was ready to play in Division 1 and, through 2019, El Toro remains the last public school to win the top title.

2010

In 2010, the CIF-SS divisional structure again underwent revised league assignments. In Division 1, the South Coast and Trinity Leagues were promoted from Division 2, notably bringing Mater Dei to the premier division. Demoted down to Division 2 was the Pacific Coast League, taking with it Corona del Mar. The Sea Kings would immediately translate this into a divisional championship, just as they had done the first time they were demoted in 1999. The Sea View League was sent all the way down to Division 3 because its key competitors of the past few years were all placed in other leagues. Foothill went to the Century League in Division 2; Northwood rejoined Corona del Mar in the Pacific Coast League; and El Toro rejoined the South Coast League, where it would seek to defend its Division 1 title. Thus, the premier division once again had five leagues, with playoff spots for 18 entrants.

Along with El Toro, Mater Dei became the instant co-favorite in this year's title hunt. The Monarchs' upswing began in 2005 with the arrival of 26-year-old new coach Chris Segesman, a member of the 2004 Olympics team, which placed seventh at Athens, Greece. In September 2006, the school opened an on-campus pool and the Monarchs were on their way. Previously, Mater Dei had never won a playoff game – their only appearances were first round losses in 32-team tournaments in Division 2 in 1989 and 1991 (3A at the time). Still in Division 2 some 14 years later, Mater Dei placed in the quarter-finals in 2005, the Sweet 16 in 2006, second in 2007 and then emerged as the champs in 2008 and 2009. Segesman would remain at Mater Dei through 2017, by which time the Monarchs (appropriately named) had established a Division 1 dynasty.

Mater Dei and El Toro got their first look at each other, as they did last year, at the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 23-25. In the semi-finals, El Toro edged Corona del Mar, 6-5, while Mater Dei handled Newport Harbor, 10-4. In the third place game, the Sailors got past the Sea Kings, 9-7. The final match was a meeting of two early-season unbeaten, though Mater Dei had received a tough non-league match from Los Alamitos just before the tournament. Playing at home on Tues., Sept. 21, the Monarchs broke an 11-11 tie with just :53 left in the fourth quarter to beat the Griffins, 12-11. Now against El Toro, the Monarchs moved out to a 9-4 half-time lead. But as Coach Segesman told the Register later, "with El Toro, I'm never comfortable." Rightly so. The Chargers reeled off five straight goals to pull to within 10-9 with 3:43 left in the fourth quarter. The teams then traded goals – the Monarchs scored with about two minutes left while the Chargers added one with 1:31 remaining. El Toro had a 6-on-5 situation in the closing minute, but 6'5" freshman goalie McQuin Baron blocked a shot with :20 left to preserve the victory, 11-10. Eventual Player of the

Year Bret Bonanni accounted for five of Mater Dei's goals. Mater Dei had won its first South Coast Tournament title – and its second “major” in a row, going back to 2009's Memorial Cup.

Yet, the victory for the Monarchs contained the seeds of their first entry in the loss column. On Tues., Sept. 28, Mater Dei visited Harvard and seemed to emerge with an impressive 13-6 win. But, back in the final game of the South Coast tourney, a Mater Dei player had received a game misconduct plenty, requiring him to serve a one-game suspension. That player wound up competing. Mater Dei forfeited the next day, and now had a 5-0 loss. The following week, Thurs., Oct. 7, Mater Dei hosted Harvard's Mission League archrival, Loyola. The Monarchs jumped ahead 3-0 early, but the Cubs ran past them and soundly handed Mater Dei its second loss of the season, 10-7.

Meanwhile, El Toro made its annual appearance at the Villa Park Classic, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept.30-Oct. 2. The Chargers had an easy time of it – perhaps too easy for the event to be worth their while. El Toro outscored their five opponents 77-23 in-route to their fourth straight tourney title. In the semi-finals, El Toro beat Agoura, 15-9, while Royal defeated Damien, 11-8. In the third place game, Agoura got past Damien, 12-10 in overtime. In the final match, El Toro stomped Royal, 17-6. The Chargers' top tourney competitors were all from the lower ranks – Damien would finish second in Division 3, and Agoura would ultimately defeat Royal in the Division 4 title match. Mater Dei also recorded a success on this Saturday, paying a visit to Coronado and winning, 16-10. Bret Bonanni scored 10 goals against the Islanders, who would finish second to Bishop's in CIF-SDS' first-year Division III playoffs.

El Toro continued through their schedule for another two weeks with still only one loss until they hosted Newport Harbor on Sat., Oct. 16. The day before, the Chargers had won a tough match at Corona del Mar, 12-9. But, El Toro also caught the Sailors having perhaps their best week of the season. Newport Harbor recorded a goal at the 5:11 mark of the third quarter, making it 6-4, and that turned out to be the final score. The Sailors would follow this up on Wed., Oct. 20, at home against Los Alamitos, crushing the Griffins, 14-5. This allowed the Sailors to secure the title of the Sunset League, this year's toughest league. Coach Jason Lynch told the Register afterwards, “I'm really proud of them. They played a great game.” Newport Harbor had lost to Los Alamitos, 10-9 in overtime, in the final match of the S&R Sport Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 8-9, at Woollett Aquatics Center. The S&R Sport Cup did not include either of the two eventual Division 1 finalists, as was the case in 2006. This year, though, none of the eventual Final Four participated. Which is not to say the competition wasn't good. In the semi-finals, Los Alamitos beat Corona del Mar, 8-5, while Newport Harbor defeated Long Beach Wilson, 11-6. In the third place game, Long Beach Wilson triumphed over Corona del Mar, 12-10 (the Bruins would finish the season a Division 2 semi-finalist).

Mater Dei and El Toro then faced off against each other twice in six days, in the course of which they handed each other their third and final losses of the regular season. El Toro had beaten Corona del Mar on Friday, lost to Newport Harbor on

Saturday, and then on Mon., Oct. 18, the Chargers hosted Mater Dei. According to the Register, “The score was tied eight times in the first three periods. El Toro scored the first three goals of the fourth to open an 11-8 lead. Mater Dei’s Liam Gaughan scored with 12 seconds left but El Toro ran off the final seconds to secure a bounce-back victory,” 11-10. The two teams then traveled to the Palo Alto area’s Sacred Heart to participate in the North-South Challenge, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 22-23. In the semi-finals, El Toro defeated Loyola, 10-9, while Mater Dei beat Bishop’s, 8-5. Loyola claimed third with a win over Bishop’s, 8-5. In the final match, the Register reported, “Mater Dei led, 5-3, after the opening period and, 8-6, after the third. The Monarchs opened an 11-9 lead in the fourth in-route to capturing the tournament for the first time,” with a final score of 11-10.

Mater Dei had one more tournament to play, returning north the following weekend to participate in the Memorial Cup Invitational at Bellarmine in San Jose, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 29-30. In the semi-finals, Mater Dei defeated Corona del Mar, 11-8, and Newport Harbor beat Long Beach Wilson, 11-6. (It was the third victory for the Sailors over the Bruins this season – their first meeting took place on Tues., Sept. 14, resulting in an 11-2 final score at Belmont Plaza.) In the third place game, the Sea Kings defeated the Bruins, 13-9, reversing their third place outcome at the S&R Sport Cup. In the final match, Mater Dei led Newport Harbor, 6-3, at half-time but the Sailors trimmed the deficit to 6-5 going into the fourth. The Monarchs then took control, dispatching Newport Harbor, 9-6, as they had done back in the semis of the South Coast tourney. Mater Dei had repeated as Memorial Cup champs, and had now won four major tourneys in a row. (You’ll notice that Northern California schools did not make the semi-finals in any of the three inter-regional tourneys this year.)

Back on Oct. 20, Mater Dei had clinched the Trinity League title at Servite, thumping the Friars, 20-6 – the same day as Newport Harbor captured the Sunset League. The other three leagues were not competitive. El Toro in South Coast, Loyola in Mission and Dos Pueblos in Channel all won their respective leagues by three-game margins. Ironically, though, El Toro barely got by Dana Hills in their second circuit meeting on Tues., Nov. 2. Dana Hills visited the Chargers and had an extra-man opportunity with about 22 seconds left in the fourth quarter, but could not convert to break the 8-8 tie. El Toro finally won in overtime, 11-9.

Playoff seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 8, with the top spot going to Mater Dei (Trinity, 24-3), second El Toro (South Coast, 25-3), third Loyola (Mission, 24-3) and fourth Newport Harbor (Sunset, 23-4). The league champions took the top five spots for a second year in a row as the fifth seed went to Dos Pueblos (Channel). In the sixth spot was Los Alamitos (Sunset, second), seventh Santa Barbara (Channel, second) and eighth Harvard (Mission, second).

Wild Card games were played on Tues., Nov. 9, and once again all three At-Large entrants were attempting to play-in to the Sweet 16. Buena of Ventura (Channel) defeated Edison (Sunset), 9-6, at Golden West College. At Brentwood, Notre Dame (SO) (Mission, third) claimed an 8-5 win over St. John Bosco (Trinity). St. John Bosco,

thus, made a quick exit from their very first Division 1 tournament. They had actually finished fifth in their league, but they went in because they had a winning season record and fourth-place JSerra did not. For Notre Dame (SO), it was their first Division 1 win after six losses dating back to 1971. The accomplishment could not be savored for long, however – the two advancing teams were rewarded by having to play the tourney’s top two seeds the next day in first round games, Wed., Nov. 10. In the Sweet 16, technically in an upset, 10th seed Huntington Beach (Sunset, third) traveled to Santa Barbara and pounded the Dons, 16-3.

Quarter-final games were played on Fri., Nov. 12. Mater Dei traveled to Harvard, as they had done on Sept. 28 when they won in the pool but lost by forfeit. This time the final score would stay final – the Monarchs over the Wolverines, 16-11. The remaining three games in the round all involved Sunset league teams. Loyola was taking on Los Alamitos in the Elite Eight for the second year in a row, this time at the Joint Forces Training Base. The Cubs held narrow advantages throughout the game – leading 4-2 after the first period, 6-5 at half-time, 9-7 after three, and then finally defeating the Griffins, 10-8. El Toro visited Huntington Beach, which was making its first appearance in the quarter-finals in more than a half-century (1958). The Chargers also held narrow leads throughout – but this game was even closer. El Toro finished the first quarter ahead, 3-2, widened their lead at half-time, 5-3, and were still on top after three, 7-6. The Chargers were leading by a goal late in the game when James Rude blocked a shot in the field to preserve El Toro’s victory, 8-7. Finally, Dos Pueblos was hosted by Newport Harbor. The two teams had met in the playoffs back in 1973 and 1978 (the Sailors won both). More recently, Newport Harbor had beaten Dos Pueblos, 7-4, in the same pool in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament. But today, Dos Pueblos would deliver the round’s only upset. The Register reported, “Newport Harbor trailed, 6-1, less than a minute into the second period but led, 8-7, on a man-advantage strike by Andrew Duhoux with 5:51 left (in the fourth quarter).” The Sailors’ impressive comeback from five goals down, however, was met when Dos Pueblos staged one of their own. After tying the score, “Dos Pueblos’ Kevin Cappon scored off a cross pass with 3:21 remaining to lift the fifth-seeded Chargers to a 9-8 victory.” Thus, all three Sunset League entrants exited the tournament.

The semi-finals were held on Wed., Nov. 17, with both games returning to the Woollett Aquatics Center, and joined this year by the Division 2, 3 and 4 semi-final contests. Among the “firsts” in this Final Four – 2010 marked the first time two private schools had gotten to the semi-finals. Loyola faced El Toro at 5 p.m. – meeting in the semi-finals again after their memorable face-off in Los Angeles last year. Mater Dei and Dos Pueblos would get their game underway at 7 p.m. Mater Dei was a first time semi-finalist, while Dos Pueblos had only gotten this far once before (in 1978 against Newport Harbor). The Monarchs had already beaten Dos Pueblos twice this year – 12-7 in a non-league match held Wed., Oct. 13 at Mater Dei; and 15-6 on Oct. 22, in the quarter-finals of the North-South Challenge. Further, Dos Pueblos would be playing without one of their top players – Christian Terpening – who received a game misconduct in the fourth quarter of their Elite Eight game, so he’d have to sit out. Dos Pueblos’ chances were not very good, yet the Chargers tied the score, 5-5, with 4:30

left in the first half. But the Monarchs answered with four straight goals to go into intermission leading, 9-5. Mater Dei made it 10-5 at the end of three periods, and added on again in the fourth for a 13-7 final score. Bret Bonanni accounted for six of Mater Dei's tallies. The game that was played immediately beforehand was much closer. El Toro had beaten Loyola by one goal back in the semis of the North-South Challenge. Now, according to the Register, "El Toro led Loyola, 4-0, in the second period and 7-3 with 4:34 left in the third. But when the fourth period started, El Toro led, 8-7. Joey Fuentes and Russell Renteria scored the first two goals of the fourth to extend El Toro's lead to 10-7 with 4:54 remaining. Joey Colton added a strike with 2:32 left in the fourth to give the Chargers an 11-8 advantage. Loyola kept pushing. Alex Fortis scored with 39 seconds left to trim El Toro's lead to 11-10." The Cubs actually regained possession, but committed an offensive foul coming out of a time-out with about nine seconds left, and the Chargers had won.

The winners of the Divisions 1-4 semi-finals returned to Woollett Aquatics Center – and joined by Divisions 5-7 – for final matches on Sat., Nov. 20. Mater Dei and El Toro had by now played each other six times in the past two seasons, with the series knotted at 3-3. And, yes if you have been reading carefully, all three games this year had been 11-10 verdicts. El Toro Coach Don Stoll was asked by the Register for "the key to a victory" and he asked in return, "Can anyone hold the other team under 10 (goals)?" The answer would turn out to be "no." This "Game 7" two years in the making lived up to expectations.

At first, though, it seemed like it would be a runaway for Mater Dei, which built an 8-3 lead by half-time, Bret Bonanni scoring all six of his goals in the first two quarters. Then El Toro stormed back with four goals in the next quarter to make it 8-7 at the end of three. And, in fact, the Chargers actually took a lead of 10-9 with 2:08 left in the fourth and things seemed to be going their way – Bonanni had fouled out at the 2:27 mark. But, Mater Dei's Anthony Daboub knotted the score at 10-10 with 1:51 remaining. The game had a wild finish, commencing with Mater Dei coming out of a time-out with :30 remaining and 26 seconds left on the shot clock. The Monarchs proceeded to lose possession on a "ball under" turnover with about 11 seconds left. El Toro had no more time-outs, so the Chargers moved immediately down pool. Then reports the Register, "Mater Dei blocked a perimeter shot from El Toro's Joey Colton in the field and recovered the rebound on its side of the pool. Dylan Payne then tossed a long pass to an open (Liam) Gaughan on the counterattack. Just in front of the El Toro cage, Gaughan made a spectacular dry catch, turned, put the ball in the water once before tossing the ball into the upper corner for the victory" – 11-10, for the fourth time this year. The winning goal had come right at the buzzer, and "it wasn't immediately clear if Gaughan's goal counted." But it did – and after a short delay the traditional leaping into the pool of the winning team's players and coaches ensued.

In 2009, Mater Dei had won the Division 2 title game, which had a start time of 2:45 p.m., well before El Toro got started at 6:30 p.m. in the Division 1 final. On this day, the two teams had hopped in the pool at the same time, and Mater Dei triumphed in circumstances identical to El Toro in 1990. The Chargers had won the then 3A title in

1989, and graduated immediately to 4A champion. In their first year ever of competing in the premier division, Mater Dei had won it – becoming the first private school to win the final match, after four unsuccessful tries by Harvard. It would not be their last – the Monarchs would be “Team of the 2010s” before they were through.

2011

As a private school, Mater Dei had won an unprecedented championship in 2010. By the end of 2011, the Monarchs had achieved an unprecedented winning streak. Doing their best to stop them were El Toro and Newport Harbor.

The Monarchs’ title defense got underway in earnest during the weekend of Fri.-Sat., Sept. 16-17, with the inaugural Santa Barbara Invitational. It was yet another big inter-regional tournament, and a “major” from the get-go with Mater Dei’s presence. In the semi-finals, Mater Dei beat Loyola, 17-11, while Agoura defeated Miramonte, 8-4. Loyola would squeeze by Miramonte, 11-10, for third place. In the final match, Agoura led at half-time, 4-3, with some impressive play by goalie Dominick Beaudine. But Mater Dei soon tightened up their own defense and began to wear down the Chargers (Agoura went by the same nickname as El Toro and Dos Pueblos). Bret Bonanni put the Monarchs ahead to stay, 6-5, with 2:08 left in the third quarter, and Mater Dei claimed the tournament’s first title with a 13-7 win. Bonanni, now a senior, would become the first repeat Player of the Year since Tony Azevedo in 1998. (Agoura would win the Division 4 title while Miramonte claimed the CIF-NCS’s Division 1 title – this section playing on two levels since last year.)

The following weekend (Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 22-24), the South Coast Tournament – as ever – provided the first true test of strength for the programs vying for the Division 1 championship. In the quarter-finals, Mater Dei defeated Laguna Beach, 16-10, at Capistrano Valley; Newport Harbor hosted Los Alamitos, with the Sailors winning, 9-4; fast-improving Huntington Beach visited Corona del Mar and won, 12-6; and lastly, Loyola surprised El Toro, 10-9, at Foothill. It was the Chargers’ first loss, and the first time they were stopped ahead of the tourney’s final game since 2005. The next day the Register’s blog reported, “Mater Dei blitzed Huntington Beach, 13-8, in the first semifinals this morning at Newport. The Monarchs led, 13-2, early in the fourth and played subs much of the final four minutes or so. Newport rallied past Loyola, 10-7, in the second semifinal. The Sailors trailed, 7-5, with 5:34 left but finished the match with a 5-0 sprint.” Huntington Beach would complete its best finish in the South Coast Tournament ever by beating Loyola, 18-13, for third place. In the final match, Mater Dei held only a 5-4 lead after the first period, but then outscored the Sailors 6-0 in the second period to put the game out of reach. The Monarchs marched to a 16-7 victory, handing Newport Harbor its own first defeat – though it would turn out to be their only one of the regular season. It was Mater Dei’s second straight South Coast tourney championship and they were beginning to pile up an impressive streak of tournament titles – six straight now dating back to the Memorial Cup of 2009. (Corona del Mar would finish second to Long Beach Wilson this year in Division 2, while Laguna Beach would win its second consecutive Division 3 title.)

The third major tournament – through El Toro’s participation – in as many weekends took place Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 29-Oct. 1, with the Villa Park Classic. In the semi-finals, El Toro defeated Santa Barbara, 13-5 and Huntington Beach turned back Rio Americano, 9-3. In the third place game, Santa Barbara defeated Rio Americano, 12-8. In the final match, El Toro scored the first three goals against Huntington Beach and never trailed. Their 13-8 victory gave them their fifth consecutive Villa Park Classic title. (Rio Americano of Sacramento would go on to win the CIF-Sac-Joaquin Section Division II championship.)

As the reader might surmise, our story of Water Polo’s regular seasons is fast becoming one concentrated on tournament play. The very next weekend brought the S&R Sport Cup, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 7-8, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated Los Alamitos for a second time, 12-7, while Corona del Mar defeated Coronado, 14-11. In the third place game, Los Alamitos took care of Coronado, 13-5 (the Islanders would win CIF-SDS’ Division III this year). In the final match, the Sailors scored the first four goals and held the Sea Kings scoreless until only 1:40 remained in the first half. Newport Harbor opened a 7-2 advantage in the third, but Corona del Mar closed to 7-4 by the end of the period. The Sailors held on from there, winning 9-7.

Newport Harbor had a new coach in Robert Lynn, who at age 33 had been a member of John Vargas’ 2000 U.S. Olympics team. Things were made even better for the first year coach when Newport Harbor again beat archrival Corona del Mar, 9-5, in their annual “Battle of the Bay,” held Sat., Oct. 22, at the Sailors’ pool. Lynn had been head coach at Harvard the past two years, and the Wolverines filled their vacancy with an inspired choice. Harvard brought in Brian Flakes, who had graduated from the school in 2006, and whose Varsity career had included playing in the 2003 playoff final match. Harvard offered the job to Flakes at the age of only 23 and having earned a Master’s degree in Education just this year from Loyola Marymount, following four years at UCLA. Flakes took over a program in transition in that the school was finally doing away with its inadequate old pool and building a one befitting a top tier program. In the meantime, though, they would be playing their home games at Los Angeles Valley College, UCLA and other locations.

With El Toro and Newport Harbor having won their respective tourneys, they engaged each other in a non-league match on Sat., Oct. 15 – virtually the only weekend without a major Water Polo fest. Like last year, El Toro might have entered the game a bit “softened up” by having played Corona del Mar the previous day – this time the game went into overtime at El Toro before the Chargers won, 10-8. A day later, the host Sailors led, 7-4, in the third period. El Toro then scored four consecutive goals to take its first lead, 8-7, with 4:11 left in the fourth. Newport Harbor tied it at 8-8, but El Toro regained the lead, 9-8, with 1:11 remaining. At the :50 mark, the Sailors evened the score once again, 9-9. That set up the game winner with only :15 left – a cross-cage shot from about four meters by Newport Harbor’s Dan Stevens. The Register reported, “El Toro had a last-second chance to tie but its man-advantage attempt skipped over the goal,” and Newport Harbor had a 10-9 victory, crucial to the eventual playoff seedings.

The tournament parade got underway again Fri.-Sat., Oct. 21-22 with the North-South Challenge at Sacred Heart in Atherton. Mater Dei actually got up north one day early and played Miramonte on Thurs., Oct. 20, winning 13-6. In the Challenge's quarter-finals, the outcomes were El Toro over Los Alamitos, 10-3; Miramonte over Laguna Beach, 12-9; Agoura over Villa Park, 12-10 (the Spartans finished a Division 2 semi-finalist); and Mater Dei over Loyola, 17-4. The latter contest marked Mater Dei's third victory of the season over Loyola, the Monarchs having visited the Cubs back on Wed., Oct. 5, and won in pummeling fashion, 23-6. On the tourney's final day, the semi-finals saw El Toro over Miramonte, 15-6, and Mater Dei over Agoura, 18-8. Miramonte would claim third by defeating Agoura, 10-7. This left Mater Dei and El Toro to meet up for the first time this year. In the tourney's final match, El Toro took a 2-0 lead in the first period, and only trailed Mater Dei, 5-4, at half-time. But, the Monarchs outscored the Chargers 7-1 in the second half to win, 12-5. It was El Toro's third and final loss of the regular season, while Mater Dei remained undefeated – and would stay that way into the playoffs.

One more big tournament remained, the Memorial Cup Invitational, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 28-29, in San Jose. In the semi-finals, Coronado defeated Corona del Mar, 15-14, while Newport Harbor dispatched Bellarmine, 13-5. Corona del Mar would claim third with a win over Bellarmine, 10-8 (the Bells would win this year's CIF-CCS Division I title). In the final match, Newport Harbor scored three straight goals in the third quarter to break open a 3-3 tie. The Sailors built an 8-5 lead over the Islanders in the fourth quarter, and held on for an 8-6 victory. Newport Harbor had won its second tournament in a season for the first time since – since before I started tracking such things. It was definitely more than 20 years and probably not since the mid-1980s. It was something of a testimony to the proliferation of big tournaments – it seems there were enough for everybody to win one. And, indeed, of the year's major contenders, Mater Dei had won three, Newport Harbor two and El Toro one.

In terms of league play, Mater Dei won the Trinity League by two games and El Toro won the South Coast League by three games. Loyola and Newport Harbor won their respective leagues on the same day, Wed., Oct. 19. Playing at Argue Swim Stadium, Loyola triumphed over Harvard, 12-9, for their fourth straight Mission League title, while Newport Harbor won at home over Huntington Beach, 11-9, to secure the Sunset League. The highly competitive Channel League produced for the third time in four years the only circuit champion to not go undefeated. And, for the second time in three years, a first place tie resulted – this time between Santa Barbara and Dos Pueblos, both with 7-1 records. Santa Barbara would get the nod as top seeded league rep.

As it came time to announce playoff seedings, some debate emerged as to whether El Toro or Loyola would get the coveted third-seed – and thus avoid Mater Dei until the finals. The coaches poll for Mon., Oct. 31, suddenly showed Loyola leap-frogging El Toro into third and, indeed, the Cubs had beaten the Chargers back in the South Coast tourney, their only meeting to that point. El Toro would “make a statement” by defeating visiting Loyola, 14-8, on the last day of the season, Sat., Nov. 5 – but organizers had a 9 a.m. deadline that very day to complete tourney match-ups.

The actual seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 7 and there was no suspense for the top two – first Mater Dei (Trinity, 27-0) and second Newport Harbor (Sunset, 23-1). And for third...it turned out to be El Toro (South Coast, 25-3) after all. Loyola (Mission, 16-8) took fourth, and with it likely defeat in the semi-finals (their three losses to the Monarchs were by an average of 12 goals). Following this projected Final Four were fifth Huntington Beach (Sunset, second); sixth Santa Barbara (Channel); seventh Harvard (Mission, second); and eighth Dos Pueblos (Channel, second).

The Wild Card round, taking place Tues., Nov. 8, was expanded to three games this year, with four At-Large teams attempting to play for one more day at any rate. And, two would advance to the Sweet 16 – at Brentwood, Edison (Sunset) defeated Notre Dame (SO) (Mission, third), 17-9; and at El Dorado, Servite (Trinity) beat Crespi (Mission), 15-2. San Clemente, which had tied Dana Hills for second in the South Coast League, but was designated third rep, had to play at home against the final At-Large entrant, defeating San Marcos (Channel), 25-10.

First round games were conducted Wed., Nov. 9. There were no one point games, but there were two upsets by Orange County schools in what may have been intended as a Channel League doubleheader for local fans. First, Los Alamitos (Sunset, third) traveled 121 miles to Santa Barbara for a game that started at 3:15 p.m. With the score tied 1-1 after one period, the Griffins opened up a 6-3 lead over the Dons at half-time, and extended it to 8-4 after three periods. Los Alamitos closed it out, 10-6, and were on their way to the Elite Eight for the sixth consecutive year. Second, Dana Hills (South Coast, second) drove 168 miles from Dana Point to Goleta to play Dos Pueblos at 5 p.m., just 12 miles from the earlier game. The Dolphins maintained one-goal leads after each of the first three periods, finally winning, 9-7, and earning their first quarter-final appearance since 1991.

Quarter-final games were played Sat., Nov. 12, and were generally uncompetitive. Mater Dei met Dana Hills in a morning game at Capistrano Valley and dominated from the beginning to lead 11-1 at half-time, then cruised to a 14-3 win. Bret Bonanni had scored seven goals in the first round and contributed three goals here, as he would in the semi-finals as well. A doubleheader was played at Newport Harbor, beginning with El Toro facing Los Alamitos. This game was much tighter at half-time, the Chargers leading 6-3. But El Toro scored six times in the third, ending the quarter with a 12-4 lead. El Toro coasted the rest of the way to win, 14-7, and their ticket was punched to a sixth straight semi-final appearance. The second game of the twin bill featured Newport Harbor versus new Coach Lynn's team of last year, Harvard. (Naturally. It always works out that way!) The Sailors were in control the whole way, leading 6-2 at half-time, and then through a scoreless third quarter. Newport Harbor ran away with it in the fourth for a 9-3 victory. Lastly, Huntington Beach faced Loyola at Mira Costa, where the Cubs had also hosted Elite Eight games in 1999 and 2006. The Oilers had beaten the Cubs by five goals exactly seven weeks ago at the South Coast tourney. Today, Loyola never trailed the Oilers, but the Cubs still only managed a 6-5 lead at half-time. The third quarter proved decisive, though, as Loyola took a 10-7 lead by the period's end. By game's end, Loyola had triumphed, 15-11.

The Final Four met on Wed., Nov. 16 at Woollett Aquatics Center, joined again by the semi-finalists from Divisions 2, 3 and 4. Loyola was making its third straight appearance in the semis, but there was little risk of going home broken-hearted this night – they had to know what they were in for. And, indeed, Mater Dei proceeded to deliver a near-historic drubbing. The Monarchs led 11-4 at half-time and 17-4 after three periods. The final score read, 19-5. The 14-goal margin was the second largest for a Final Four contest in tournament history, behind only a 16-goal margin recorded by El Segundo in 1957. Mater Dei's 19 goals was the fourth-most total points for the round, and the most since 20 goals were scored by Downey in 1962.

El Toro and Newport Harbor then met “to renew one of the best rivalries in the county, especially when it comes to the playoffs,” said the Register's preview story. Indeed, they were meeting for the 12th time in exactly 30 seasons, with El Toro beginning to open an edge having won seven of the previous encounters. The Sailors had beaten the Chargers, though, by one goal in their only contest this year. On this night, El Toro started fast and never trailed, opening a 5-1 lead early in the second period. But, Newport Harbor climbed back in it, trailing only 7-6 with 1:44 left in the third. El Toro added two goals to stretch things out a bit, 9-6, by the quarter's end. Newport Harbor once again got close, 9-8, on a goal at the 3:57 mark of the fourth period, leading El Toro's Coach Stoll to call a timeout. What came next, says the Register – “the Chargers then sent Joey Fuentes under water in the 2 meters area and the left-hander popped up to score with 3:47 left in the fourth. ‘It's just Don Stoll,’ Fuentes said of the play. ‘That's him, late at night, thinking up plays....He gets creative at times.’” The trick play made the score 10-8 and would prove the game winner – though the contest was hardly over. About one minute later Newport Harbor got to within one again, 10-9. The two teams battled for about two minutes until the Sailors gained possession and called time-out with :32 remaining. Newport Harbor got to El Toro's two-meter line before goalie Garrett Danner stole the ball and sealed the victory – 10-9, reversing the score of their face-off held just over a month before. It was a characteristic win for El Toro and their veteran coach, who would announce his retirement the following month after 31 years leading the Chargers. Before that, though, Coach Stoll would lead his team into their fifth final game in six seasons.

The final match was held at 7 p.m., Sat., Nov. 19, and represented the first rematch of prior-year finalists since 1997. (Five hours earlier there was the disorienting spectacle of Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson – two of the all-time winningest teams in the premier division – playing for the Division 2 title.) Mater Dei and El Toro had played about even for one-half in their only prior meeting before the Monarchs ran away for a seven-goal win. Could the Chargers stay with them for an entire game? After the first period, it seemed the answer would be no – the Monarchs held a 4-0 lead. But El Toro's game plan began to show results. They put their trust in goalie Garrett Danner's ability to stop the outside shots, while the defense sagged in closer to the goal. The Chargers pulled to within 5-3 at half-time and 5-4 by the end of the third. After trailing the entire game, El Toro finally tied it, 5-5, at the 6:30 mark of the fourth quarter. Mater Dei went back ahead, 6-5, on its very next possession with a goal by Jon Walters, his second. Then says the Register, “El Toro almost tied the score, 6-6,

but with 59 seconds left, its man-advantage goal was disallowed because of an inside the 2-meters violation.” Mater Dei took possession and earned an extra-man situation of their own. Finally, younger brother James Walters scored his second goal with only :17 remaining, making it 7-5. Bret Bonanni added an empty-net goal at the buzzer (his second as well) to make the final score a misleading, 8-5. The Register noted, “(The Monarchs) finally encountered four quarters of sustained resistance....But in a season of one lopsided victory after another, Mater Dei showed it could also perform under pressure.”

Mater Dei not only won a title in 2011, the school also established a consecutive wins record – though it was achieved a couple of games later than what was reported at the time. In a way, I feel a little responsible for the error. As play began on Sat., Oct. 22, Mater Dei’s winning streak had reached 37 games – their last 17 from the previous season, and a 20-0 record headed into the semi-finals of the North-South Challenge. At this point Register reporter Dan Albano – a truly important figure in Water Polo journalism – began to investigate how that stacked up historically. Among the sources he checked with was me. At the time, I wasn’t tracking those sorts of achievements very carefully. I told him that at least among the longest winning steaks had to be Corona del Mar during the 1969-1970 seasons. The Sea Kings racked up 44 wins – an undefeated 1969 and then a spotless 1970 until their loss in the semi-finals. That total rose to 45 if you counted the Sea Kings’ win in the 1968 third place game, which they were playing at the time. Albano did include that in his figuring, and 45 wins from 1968-1970 for Corona del Mar was reported as the longest winning streak in history. By that count, then, Mater Dei tied the record at home with their first round victory over Edison, 16-5. As Albano himself reported, “The history set by the Monarchs in the pool didn’t receive any special recognition from (Coach Chris) Segesman or the game announcer....Mater Dei’s focus remained firmly locked on capturing the Division 1 crown.” However, in 2020 I took a renewed interest in my Water Polo research and discovered that, in fact, 44 or 45 wins was not the record. The true record was 47 wins, set by Newport Harbor from 1977-1979 – the last 14 for 1977, an undefeated 27 in 1978 and the first six in 1979. Therefore, Mater Dei tied the record with their epic win over Loyola. They then established the new record of 48 when they completed their 31-0 undefeated season – in the final game against El Toro. But, there would soon be no need for hairsplitting about the true all-time consecutive wins streak. Mater Dei was far from finished.

2012

The previous year, Mater Dei became the first team since 2002 to record an undefeated season. In 2012, they would see to it that the wait for the next undefeated team was not nearly as long. That undefeated team back in 2002 was Long Beach Wilson. In addition to Mater Dei’s dominance, the story of the 2012 season is one of the Bruins’ uphill battle to make it back to the premier game of the premier division.

Six leagues now made up Division 1. The Channel League was sent down to Division 2 after a four-year run at the top, with Dos Pueblos and Santa Barbara having

gotten to the semi-finals. Two leagues were promoted from Division 2 – the Pacific Coast League, back after a two-year absence; and the Moore League, back after four years. The two leagues, respectively, brought with them Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson, each having won a Division 2 title in the past two years. The playoffs this year would be expanded to 22 teams, the largest field since 1982 – six leagues, three playoff spots each, with four At-Large slots.

When last seen in Division 1, Long Beach Wilson was in a rebuilding mode and failed to win the Moore League title for two years in a row. Still coached by Tony Martinho, the Bruins had put things right beginning in 2008 and returned to Division 1 having captured league four consecutive years. But, their reintroduction into the premier division got off to a rocky start – on Tues., Sept. 11, the Bruins played their traditional Opening Day match against host Newport Harbor. The Sailors triumphed, 10-9, with Long Beach Wilson unable to get the ball in the cage on two good scoring opportunities in the final minute.

Mater Dei got its season rolling by again participating in the Santa Barbara Invitational, Fri.-Sat., Sept. 14-15, hosted by Santa Barbara and Dos Pueblos. “The first major tournament of the season,” according to the Register, saw Mater Dei beat Agoura, 13-4, in one semi-final (they had met in the tourney’s final game last year); while Loyola defeated Sacred Heart, 10-7, in the other. Agoura would take third with an 8-5 win over Sacred Heart. Thus, Mater Dei met Loyola in the final game, having faced each other in the semis the year before. The Monarchs held a narrow lead, 5-4, at half-time, but then stretched it out to 9-5 by the end of three periods. Mater Dei stayed in control for an 11-6 win, and they were now two-for-two in the big new inter-regional. (Agoura would become Division 2 champ, while Sacred Heart captured the CIF-CCS Division II title.)

That brought Long Beach Wilson and Mater Dei to their first collision, at the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 20-22. In the quarter-finals, the Bruins trailed the Monarchs by one goal after the first period, but were outscored 10-2 in the next two frames; Mater Dei then cruised to the win, 15-6. The next day, Agoura defeated Long Beach Wilson, 6-3, in the fifth place game. The traditional site of the tourney’s Final Four – Newport Harbor – was changed to Corona del Mar when the Sailor’s pool broke down on Friday afternoon. In the semi-finals, Mater Dei beat Los Alamitos, 14-5, and Newport Harbor defeated Loyola, 9-8. Third place went to Los Alamitos, beating the Cubs, 10-8. Mater Dei and Newport Harbor – located only 8.3 miles away from each other – were meeting in an advanced round of the South Coast Tournament for the fourth year in a row. In 2009, the Sailors won the third place game; in 2010, Mater Dei won the semi-final; and now they were repeating as finalists. It was probably the toughest game Mater Dei received the entire season. The Sailors led 2-1 at the end of the first period and 3-2 at half-time. This would be one of only two games all year that the Monarchs found themselves behind at intermission. Mater Dei’s defense then kicked-in big-time. The Monarchs went ahead 4-3 after three periods. The Sailors managed to tie the score, 4-4, about one minute into the fourth quarter. Finally, reports the Register, “(Mater Dei’s) Matthew Cuzzo snapped (the) tie by skipping in a short

shot from the wing with 2:05 left. Jon Walters then scored twice from center to cap the Monarchs' third consecutive South Coast title," winning 7-4. The contest's three-goal margin also turned out to be Mater Dei's closest of the season. Jon Walters would eventually win Player of the Year honors. He had played his freshman year at Newport Harbor, then moved to Mater Dei for his sophomore year, But, he had to sit out the season when a state CIF appeals panel ruled the change an athletically motivated transfer. He was in the line-up for the Monarchs for their 2011 championship, however, making a significant contribution, including scoring 18 goals in their four playoff games.

Long Beach Wilson proceeded to stumble twice again in the next big tournament, the S&R Sport Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 5-6, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In the semi-finals, Los Alamitos beat Long Beach Wilson, 8-7; while Newport Harbor defeated Sacred Heart, 11-9. The Bruins then suffered their second loss of the day, beaten by Sacred Heart in the third place game, 11-10. The title game was a rematch of the 2010 tourney final, this time Newport Harbor edging its Sunset League rival Los Alamitos, 9-8. The Sailors had won the event for the second straight year.

Mater Dei had perhaps its most "challenging" stretch over a nine day period starting on Thurs., Oct. 18. The Monarchs journeyed north to participate in the North-South Challenge, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 19-20, at Sacred Heart. The whole idea behind the inter-regionals was to play teams you don't normally see. Of course, it often doesn't work out that way. Hence like last year, Mater Dei visited Miramonte the day before, winning 15-7. (Miramonte would repeat as CIF-NCS Division 1 champs.) The Monarchs opened tourney play by beating Los Altos, 15-3 (the Silicon Valley-based school finished second in CIF-CCS Division II). There followed three games featuring teams Mater Dei had already beaten once in earlier tournaments, beginning with a quarter-final victory over Agoura, 14-7. Then, in one semi-final, Loyola defeated Santa Barbara, 10-6. In the other, the Monarchs faced Los Alamitos – and trailed the Griffins 7-6 at half-time. But, Mater Dei outscored their opponent 5-0 in the third period to go ahead 11-7. The Monarchs triumphed, 13-9, in what would be their second-closest game all year. Los Alamitos claimed third place, defeating Santa Barbara, 13-10 (the Dons would go on to finish second in Division 2). Mater Dei now faced Loyola in the finals, where they notched their second five-goal win over the Cubs, 15-10. The Monarchs had won the Challenge for the third year in a row and their tournament winning streak was now at 10 – dating back to the Memorial Cup in 2009. Returning home, Mater Dei hosted Murrieta Valley on Mon., Oct. 22, winning 14-9 (Murrieta Valley would finish in the Division 2 quarter-finals). Two days later, Wed., Oct. 24, the Monarchs were visited by Loyola. Mater Dei held only a 12-10 lead with less than five minutes to play, before going on a tear to give the game a lopsided appearance, 18-10. The Monarchs completed their eight-games-in-nine-days gauntlet on Fri., Oct. 26, with Los Alamitos now visiting – and they handled the Griffins more easily this time, 17-6.

Long Beach Wilson was involved in the season's final major tournament, the Memorial Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 26-27, at Bellarmine. In one semi-final, Long Beach Wilson defeated Miramonte, 10-8. In the other, Corona del Mar soundly beat

Newport Harbor, 11-6. Exactly one week earlier, Oct. 20, the Sea Kings had hosted the Sailors, losing to the visitors, 9-7. Miramonte would take third place with a win over Newport Harbor, 11-9. The final match represented a rematch of last year's Division 2 championship game – as well as the third meeting this year between Long Beach Wilson and Corona del Mar. The Bruins had won the two previous encounters – on Tues., Sept. 18 at Belmont Plaza, 16-15; and then just four days later in a fifth-place semi-final at the South Coast Tournament, 8-7. Today, though, the Sea Kings avenged themselves a second time in the same day. After trailing, 8-3, at half-time, Corona del Mar rallied to deal the Bruins a one-goal loss of their own, 11-10.

Long Beach Wilson and Mater Dei spent the season's last week with tough opponents – including a match with each other on Tues., Oct. 30 at Belmont Plaza. The Monarchs came away with their second victory over the Bruins, 14-9, marking Long Beach Wilson's seventh loss of the year. (Jon Walters scored nine goals in that game.) The Bruins closed out their campaign at home on Fri., Nov. 2, against Loyola, beating the Cubs, 9-7. This victory turned out to be critical to the second seed Long Beach Wilson received for the playoffs. The Register later reported, "(CIF-SS Assistant Commissioner Kristine) Palle said had Loyola won the match, the Cubs likely would have been the No. 2 seed with Newport Harbor the No. 3." That would have put the Bruins in line to face Mater Dei in the semis. As for Mater Dei, they played another team they hadn't seen since the South Coast Tournament, hosting Newport Harbor on Sat., Nov. 3. Like their first encounter, Mater Dei held the Sailors to four goals – but the Monarchs came up with a lot more this time, winning 15-4.

In the season's league play, the least competitive circuit was the Pacific Coast League, which Corona del Mar won by three games over Northwood and University. All the other leagues were decided by one game, the decisive contests including – Sunset: Newport Harbor 8, Los Alamitos 7, on Wed., Oct. 3, at Ocean View; Trinity: Mater Dei 18, Santa Margarita 5, on Thurs., Oct. 11, at Mater Dei; Mission: Loyola 12, Harvard 11, on Wed., Oct. 17, at Harvard (the Cubs' fifth title in a row); and Moore: Long Beach Wilson 19, Long Beach Poly 5, on Mon., Oct. 29, the Bruins hosting. What remained was the South Coast League, the only circuit to produce a champ with a blemished record. Two-time league champ El Toro was a playoff finalist last year, but now a program in transition with a new coach who would stay for only two years. Dana Hills was rising to challenge the Chargers. The schools split two league contests – on Tues., Oct. 2, Dana Hills won at home, 12-11; and on Thurs., Oct. 25, El Toro won at home, 11-7. The circuit seemed headed for a tie until San Clemente visited El Toro on Oct. 29, upsetting the Chargers, 11-10, and handing the league title to the Dolphins. (Before their league battles began, El Toro and Dana Hills had met in the final match of the Villa Park Classic, held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 27-29. The Chargers won that initial encounter, 10-8, for their sixth consecutive "Classic" championship.)

Playoff seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 5, with Mater Dei (Trinity, 27-0) and Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 20-7) seeded first and second. Following them were third Loyola (Mission); fourth Newport Harbor (Sunset); fifth Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast); sixth Los Alamitos (Sunset, second); seventh Dana Hills (South Coast); and eighth Harvard (Mission, second).

The expanded Wild Card round took place Tues., Nov. 6. With six games there was a chance not any of the four At-Large teams would advance – Beckman (Pacific Coast), Edison (Sunset), Lakewood (Moore) and St. John Bosco (Trinity). One of them did, in the closest game of the round. Edison traveled to Long Beach Poly (Moore, second), with the game tied after each of the first three periods – 2-2, 5-5 and 6-6. Edison finally triumphed, 10-9, and their reward was a date with Mater Dei the next day, Wed., Nov. 7, in the first round. The most interesting games of the Sweet 16 both involved Pacific Coast League teams – Northwood and University (second and third place reps via coin flip). Northwood faced Loyola at Argue Swim Stadium, and gave the Cubs an unexpectedly tough first-half, trailing only 4-2 at intermission. The Cubs pulled away in the second half, though, to win 14-4. University tangled with Dana Hills at San Juan Hills in the round's closest match. University held leads through the first three frames – 4-2 after one; 7-4 at half-time, and 9-7 after three periods. Dana Hills then rallied in the fourth, recording the winning goal with just :23 remaining. Their only lead of the game was the final score – 12-11. And, at El Toro, Harvard won, 15-11, handing the Chargers (South Coast, second) their earliest playoff exit since 1997.

Quarter-final games were played on Sat., Nov. 10. In contrast to last year, the Elite Eight games were all close – except for Mater Dei's visit to Harvard. The Monarchs had already beaten the Wolverines twice this year – 14-9, in the quarter-finals of the Santa Barbara Invitational, and then, 14-5, four days later (Sept. 18) in the same pool as today's game. Mater Dei had a 12-4 lead after three periods and eliminated the Wolverines, 15-6. Los Alamitos faced Loyola at Mira Costa, which by now was the Cubs' quarter-finals home-away-home. It was their third meeting after splitting close prior contests – Los Alamitos winning by two back in the third place game of the South Coast tourney, and then Loyola coming away with a 5-4 victory on Fri., Oct. 12 at the Joint Forces Training Base. Today, Loyola jumped out to a 2-0 lead after the first period. The Cubs still led, 4-3, at half-time and then after three periods, 6-5. The Cubs finally secured another close victory over the Griffins, 12-10. At San Juan Hills, Long Beach Wilson battled Dana Hills. It was the Dolphins' second straight year in the Elite Eight, and their experience showed in their first game against the Bruins this season. Dana Hills got in front, 1-0, by the end of the first period, and the game was tied 1-1 at half-time. Long Beach Wilson finally went ahead, 4-3, after three quarters. In the fourth quarter, the score was tied 5-5 with about three minutes left. The Bruins still only had a 6-5 lead when Dana Hills had a last scoring opportunity with :37 remaining, but Long Beach Wilson took possession and added a final tally to win, 7-5.

The only upset in the Elite Eight occurred in this year's third advent of the "Battle of Bay" – Newport Harbor visiting Corona del Mar in a 5 p.m. match. The Sailors had a 2-1 lead after one period of play and led, 5-3, at half-time. According to the Register, "Newport Harbor opened a 6-3 lead early in the third but Corona del Mar closed the game with a 4-0 run....In the fourth, Corona del Mar's conditioning led (to) a score-tying counterattack by (Colby) Watson with 5:34 left and the go-ahead counter by (Armen) Mavusi with 4:05 left. Mavusi redirected a cross-pass from Watson to give Corona del Mar its only lead, 7-6....Corona del Mar's defense held Newport Harbor scoreless for the final 12:11. The Sea Kings were especially tough against the power

play. Newport Harbor finished 2 for 8.” The 7-6 final score marked the Sea Kings’ first playoff victory over the Sailors since 1987, and Coach Barry O’Dea’s first win over Newport Harbor after three previous losses.

The semi-finals were played on Wed., Nov. 14, at Woollett Aquatics Center, and for the third straight year, Divisions 2, 3 and 4 Final Fours joined the festivities. There was a chance – a remote one – that Corona del Mar and Long Beach Wilson could meet for a second consecutive year in a final match, this time in Division 1. But the Sea Kings first had to get past undefeated Mater Dei in the 7 p.m. game. The two teams had their only prior meeting on Sat., Oct. 13, at Corona del Mar – and the Sea Kings actually opened a 3-1 lead before the Monarchs scored 10 straight goals, winning 13-5. In covering the 2009 season, I observed that Newport Harbor seemed to experience letdowns after “Battle of the Bays” in the previous round. On this night, that seemed to be true of Corona del Mar also – or maybe Mater Dei was just really good. The Sea Kings stayed with the Monarchs initially, trailing only 4-3 at the end of one period. But the second frame proved decisive – Mater Dei had a 9-3 lead by half-time. The Monarchs extended their lead to 14-5 after three periods and cruised to an 18-9 win. Mater Dei had won a semi-final in a blow-out two years in a row – a 14-goal margin last year and nine goals this year, 23 total. It tied an obscure record – for back-to-back blows-outs in the semis. El Segundo had produced the same margins in 1955 (14) and 1956 (nine), 56 years earlier. Mater Dei, though, was on the cusp of something truly extraordinary.

The 5 p.m. game between Long Beach Wilson and Loyola was much different. The presence of these two schools made this the first Final Four since 2004 to feature two teams from Los Angeles County. Their only prior meeting had taken place just 12 days earlier, the Bruins snatching a two-goal victory that made a final game appearance possible for them. Long Beach Wilson established a 3-2 lead after one period, and maintained it to half-time, 4-3. Loyola tied the score, 4-4, early in the third quarter, but Long Beach Wilson countered with two quick goals, going up 6-4, at about the five minute mark. The period ended that way and remained without additional scoring for about five minutes into the fourth quarter. Finally, after 10 minutes of scoreless back and forth, Loyola added a goal with about two minutes left, making it 6-5. Loyola had one final chance in the time remaining, but a sparkling save by Long Beach Wilson’s goalie Jake Becker preserved a 6-5 win. For the fourth year in a row Loyola had lost in the semi-finals, three times by one goal only. It was no consolation that this had happened more recently than one might think – to El Toro from 2000 to 2003. Long Beach Wilson had made it, though, to the final game for the first time since 2005.

The final game was held at 7 p.m., Sat., Nov. 17, at Woollett Aquatics Center, the caper to seven division championships that had begun at 9:15 a.m. The match-up was reminiscent of the 2010 final between El Toro and Mater Dei – the reigning Division 1 champ against the reigning Division 2 champ. Mater Dei had beaten Long Beach Wilson twice, but the Bruins had played the Monarchs much closer the second time, just 18 days ago. Had they enough time to improve to the point where they could actually win? Not shockingly, given the Bruins’ 11 titles, the answer appeared to be yes for the first three

quarters. The game was tied after the first period, 2-2, and the game went into half-time tied as well, 5-5. Mater Dei had trailed at half-time twice this year – by one goal each time. This tie made three close games for them at intermission. Then, says the Register, “the Bruins tied the score, 6-6, on a power-play goal with 2:34 left in the third after a transition exclusion against Mater Dei. The Monarchs then held the Bruins scoreless for the final 9:34. Kent Inoue snapped a 6-6 tie with a penalty shot goal with 1:34 left in the third. Jon Walters drew the penalty. Walters’ brother, James, set up the next strike, hustling to grab his own rebound and feeding (Matthew) Cuzzo for the goal and an 8-6 lead with 46 seconds left in the third.” With Mater Dei leading, 8-6, after three periods, “Mater Dei won the fourth period, 5-0, behind a 3-for-3 effort on the man-advantage.” Jon Walters finished with three goals for the game and 16 total for the playoffs. Mater Dei had won, 13-6, seemingly in another blow-out, but Coach Chris Segesman confessed to the Register, “We’ve never had a final that has been easy. Today, was no different. We blew it open a little bit in the fourth...but it was a dogfight.”

Mater Dei had achieved three straight titles, something that had been done just five times previously in the tournament era. Even more impressively, the Monarchs completed their second 31-0 season in a row, becoming only the second team to put back-to-back undefeated championship years together. The only other example really isn’t comparable. Whittier had done it in the very first two tournament years, 1952 and 1953, with season records of 11-0 and 12-0 – combined, about three-quarters of just one of Mater Dei’s single season totals. The Monarchs had finished last season barely surmounting the all-time winning streak record of 48 games. Now, they had reached 79 wins in a row. This was already rather like Joe DiMaggio’s 56-game hitting streak – something not likely to happen again. Yet even this number would seem rather small by late next season.

Tragically, as was the case with the 1992 season, the 2012 season ends with the devastating news of the Player of the Year dying very soon after his high school days. On Jan. 8, 2014, Jon Walters died at the age of 19-years-old. The Register later reported the official cause as “multi-system organ failure with aspiration pneumonia.” Walters had just finished playing his freshman year at USC, helping the Trojans earn the 2013 NCAA title. Reflecting the shock of the initial report, Coach Chris Segesman told the Register, “We all have broken hearts.” At a memorial service held on Jan. 18, 2014, one of the many tributes was delivered by Garrett Danner, El Toro’s goalie in the 2011 final match, in which Walters had scored twice. According to the Register, Danner said, “He was the most loyal friend I could ever ask for. He inspired a lot of people by his abilities and talents but what is most important is that he was a true friend.”

2013

Mater Dei had appeared in – and won – three final matches in a row, yet they were only half-way through a string of six consecutive appearances. They would be joined these next three years by Harvard, the first instances of two private schools meeting in the finals. Harvard had been the first private school to ever make it to a final game back in 1992 and had been unsuccessful in a total of four tries. Mater Dei had only come on

the scene in 2010 and already had three rings. There must have been a sense among the Wolverines that it was high time they collected one. The two privates were the clear favorites in 2013, with Newport Harbor, Loyola and Long Beach Wilson in pursuit.

The narratives of the individual seasons often start with the South Coast Tournament, as the traditional early “test of strength.” The story of 2013 has to start one week earlier with the three-year-old Santa Barbara Invitational, played Fri.-Sat., Sept. 20-21. This tournament was the only one all year to feature all four of the playoff’s eventual Final Four – Harvard, Loyola, Mater Dei and Newport Harbor. Not every team in this quartet distinguished themselves this weekend. Harvard beat Newport Harbor, 20-11, in the quarter-finals. The next day the Sailors settled for sixth place, beaten by Los Osos, 9-8, who would go on to become Division 4 champs. Loyola finished even further back. The Cubs lost in the opening round and twice more on Saturday to place 12th. The Sailors and Cubs eventually linked-up once this year – in a non-league game held, Thurs., Oct. 3, with host Newport Harbor winning, 9-7. The Invitational’s semi-finals saw Harvard beat Cathedral Catholic, 11-6, while Mater Dei mauled Agoura, 13-2. Agoura would become Division 2 champ, and Cathedral Catholic would do likewise in CIF-SDS Division III. For now, Agoura defeated Cathedral Catholic, 7-5, to take third place. The two favorites of pre-seasonal prognosticators, then, had their first encounter right off the bat, with Mater Dei and Harvard meeting in the final game at Dos Pueblos. According to the Register, “Mater Dei opened a 5-3 lead against the Wolverines after two periods. The Monarchs then made their move by building an 8-4 lead going into the fourth.” Mater Dei then held on for a 9-6 victory and yet another tournament crown – now 11 in a row.

Mater Dei did not have to wait long to make it 12 straight, with the South Coast Tournament held the following weekend, Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 26-28. Harvard didn’t participate, but Mater Dei, Loyola and Newport Harbor were there – along with Long Beach Wilson. The Bruins were an elite program, but they had some old-fashioned challenges leading up to the season. Belmont Plaza was closed to public use and their on-campus pool was plain broken. As a result, reported the Long Beach Press-Telegram, the Bruins had to “practice in the Colorado Lagoon, once with water temperatures dipping well under 60, in boat slips at the Alamitos Bay Yacht Club, in the open water at Seal Beach, and in the Naples canals.” Long Beach Wilson, however, beat Loyola, 9-7, in the tourney’s quarter-finals, and the Cubs eventually finished seventh. The Bruins would see Loyola a second time, winning 12-11, while hosting them on Tues., Oct. 15. In the tourney semi-finals, Newport Harbor beat Corona del Mar, 10-6. The other semi was a rematch of last year’s playoff final, Mater Dei defeating Long Beach Wilson, 10-5. The Bruins beat the Sea Kings, 10-8, to take third. This brought Mater Dei and Newport Harbor together in the tourney for the fifth consecutive year, and the third straight time in the final match, held at the Sailors’ pool. The Register reported, “Newport Harbor led twice by a goal in the first but mostly chased,” and Mater Dei went on to triumph, 16-10. The victory capped a fast, impressive start to the Monarchs’ season – they opened with two non-league wins on the Wednesday and Thursday before the Santa Barbara Invitational, and by the conclusion of the South Coast tourney they had won 11 games in 11 days.

Newport Harbor and Long Beach Wilson, joined by Harvard, moved on to the next big tourney, the S&R Sport Cup, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 11-12, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In one semi-final, Harvard beat Long Beach Wilson, 13-8. (The Wolverines had also won, 11-8, while hosting the Bruins on Sat., Oct. 5.) In the other semi, Sacred Heart, the eventual CIF-CCS Division II champ, defeated Newport Harbor, 9-8. This marked the Sailor's fourth and final loss of the season – all coming in tournament play. In the third place game, Newport Harbor got past the Bruins, 7-5. (For the Bruins, it was their second loss to a second team on the same day – the Sailors had beaten the Bruins, 9-8, on Tues., Sept. 10, at Newport Harbor.) In the final match, Harvard dealt with Sacred Heart in convincing fashion, 15-8. It was only the second S&R Sport Cup championship for the Wolverines, and their first since 2006.

Just three days later the biggest non-league game of the year took place – Harvard visiting Mater Dei on Oct. 15. According to the Register, “Harvard led, 5-2, at half-time behind three goals by Johnny Hooper. The Wolverines opened a 6-2 lead in the third when Duncan Froomer scored a power-play shot that bounced in off Baron's head with 4:22 left.” This is a rather embarrassing way of introducing the eventual Player of the Year – McQuin Baron of Mater Dei. He became the sixth goalie all-time so honored, and the first since 2008. Baron had been Mater Dei's starting goalie since he was a freshman in 2010, when his height was reported at 6'5”. Playoff final game preview stories would list him now at 6'9” – well, boys do have a growth spurt around this age. Anyway, Mater Dei hadn't trailed at half-time by more than one goal in all of last season. Here they were down by three – and soon four. After Harvard made it 6-2, though, “Mater Dei scored the final six goals and held the Wolverines scoreless for the final 11 minutes, 22 seconds to rally for an 8-6 victory in front of a standing-room-only crowd.” Mater Dei pulled to within 6-4 at the end of the third. Finally, in the fourth, “Jake Sanders scored on a counterattack with 4:19 left to give the Monarchs their first lead, 7-6. Kent Inoue added another counterattack goal with 2:52 left and Baron slammed the door by making two of his 14 saves in the final two minutes.”

Occurring next was one of the distinguishing features of the 2013 season. The North-South Challenge and the Memorial Cup were held on the same dates, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 25-26. As a story in Total Water Polo explained, “The two tournaments, typically held at least a week apart, fall on the same weekend this year due to a conflict with SAT testing at Bellarmine next weekend, according to Bells head coach Colin Mello.” Sacred Heart in Atherton, host of the Challenge, was located just 22.6 miles north of Bellarmine in San Jose, host of the Memorial Cup. For two days, then, 32 of the state's finest Water Polo programs were all in the same vicinity – with the exception of Newport Harbor, which had opted out of the Cup in favor of the Santa Barbara tourney. Combined, these two events constituted the closest thing Water Polo has had to a true State Championship. A number of Southern California programs, in particular Mater Dei, made it their habit to come north a day early and squeeze in an intersectional game. Therefore, a single three-day, five-game, all-state tournament is entirely possible. Yet, it has still never happened.

The Memorial Cup, the original “Nor Cal,” had a less strong field compared to the other tourney, with none of the eventual playoff Final Four present. The semi-finals

were notable for yet another meeting this year between Long Beach Wilson and Corona del Mar. In addition to the South Coast tourney's third place game, the Bruins had beaten the host Sea Kings, 11-10, on Tues., Sept. 17; and in the quarter-finals of the S&R Sport Cup, 12-8. Today, the Bruins were victorious a fourth time over Corona del Mar, 9-6. In the other semi-final, Bishop's defeated Foothill, 12-10. (Bishop's ended up second in CIF-SDS Division III, while Foothill placed second in Division 2.) Foothill took the third place game, defeating the Sea Kings, 11-8. Long Beach Wilson then won the final match over Bishop's, 6-4, to claim their first Memorial Cup title since 2005.

The North-South Challenge, in contrast, included Harvard, Mater Dei and Loyola – though the Cubs once again lost in the first round and finished 10th. In the semi-finals, Harvard beat Sacred Heart, 13-10, and Mater Dei defeated Agoura, 10-4. Sacred Heart claimed third with a 9-6 win over Agoura. In the final match Mater Dei beat Harvard, 11-8. The Wolverines had lost their third and final game of the season, all against Mater Dei – but in each case the outcomes had been close. For now, though, all the focus was on the amazing numbers Mater Dei was piling up – their fourth straight North-South Challenge title, their 13th consecutive tourney victory and their overall unbeaten streak stood at 99 with two weeks remaining in the regular season.

Mater Dei would make it an even 100 victories in a row on Tues., Oct. 29, fittingly at the pool of Olympians – John C. Argue Swim Stadium in Los Angeles. The Monarchs beat Loyola, 11-6, in their first meeting of the year. Mater Dei gained win 104 on Tues., Nov. 5, at home against Long Beach Wilson, 10-4, the Bruins' second loss to the Monarchs and sixth total. Win number 105 for Mater Dei came on Wed., Nov. 6, hosting St. John Bosco, 16-4, in a Trinity League contest. There remained one game left to play on a day notorious for good teams not being at their best. The Monarchs traveled to San Diego to play a worthy opponent – Cathedral Catholic – on the last day of the season, Sat., Nov. 9. Mater Dei trailed 6-3 going into the fourth, but the Monarchs scored three goals to tie the score. After the Dons took a 7-6 lead, the Monarchs tied it again with just :11 remaining. Denied in regulation, Cathedral Catholic then won it in overtime, 8-7. It was the first time Mater Dei had lost since Oct. 18, 2010, to El Toro. The winning streak was over after more than doubling the prior record – and establishing a new 105-game standard that may never be broken.

As for the season's league races, Dana Hills won the South Coast by a three-game margin. Decisive games in the other leagues were – Trinity: Mater Dei over Servite, 15-3, on Thurs., Oct. 10, at Mater Dei; Moore: Long Beach Wilson over Long Beach Millikan, 22-7, on Tues., Oct. 22, the Bruins hosting; Mission: Harvard over Loyola, 14-7, on Wed., Oct. 23, at Loyola; and Sunset: Newport Harbor over Huntington Beach, 13-7, on Nov. 6, at Newport Harbor. Pacific Coast was the only league to yield a defeated champion. Northwood and Corona del Mar split their two games – first, Northwood over Corona del Mar, 11-10, on Thurs., Oct. 17, at Corona del Mar; and then, Corona del Mar evened things with Northwood, 9-8, on Nov. 5, at Northwood. The Sea Kings had won an away-game to force the tie, but then lost the coin-flip held on the pool deck immediately afterwards, so they had to settle for second place representative anyway.

Playoff seeds were announced on Mon., Nov. 11, and showed first Mater Dei (Trinity, 26-1); second Harvard (Mission, 22-3); third Newport Harbor (Sunset, 21-4); and fourth Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 21-6). Somewhat surprisingly, Loyola was seeded fifth (Mission, second, 13-14). Yes, the fifth seed had a losing record – 6-7 in tournaments, 3-1 in league and 4-6 in non-league contests. But there was, in fact, sound reasoning behind Loyola's high position. For years the Cubs had been marked down due to a "body of work" that was considered not as strong as other teams. This year Loyola went out and played a bruising schedule. As we shall soon see, the toughening up would pay off. Critically, Loyola's record included an 11-10 victory over Dana Hills in the seventh place game of the South Coast tourney. Dana Hills (South Coast League) was seeded right behind the Cubs in sixth. The remaining top seeds went to the Pacific Coast League representatives – seventh Northwood and eighth Corona del Mar.

The total playoff field was 21 teams, with the Wild Card round reduced to five games, played Tues., Nov. 12. There were just three At-Large schools this year – Edison (Sunset); Woodbridge (Pacific Coast); and Orange Lutheran (Trinity), making their first playoff appearance on any level. Only Edison advanced, defeating host El Toro (South Coast, third), 16-10. The round also included Santa Margarita (Trinity, third) earning a home victory over Woodbridge, 19-10. Santa Margarita and Edison had met in the final game of the Villa Park Classic, held Thurs.-Sat., Oct. 3-5. Santa Margarita won the title, 20-9. Six-time defending tourney champ El Toro – just two years removed from the CIF-SS final game – finished 16th in the Classic.

First round games were played Wed., Nov. 13. The closest games included Dana Hills' battle with Santa Margarita at San Juan Hills. The Dolphins held only a 4-3 lead at half-time, before going ahead 7-4 after three periods and winning, 8-5. Dana Hills had earned its third straight trip to the Elite Eight. The tightest game of the round was Northwood hosting Servite. The score was tied 3-3 at the end of three periods before the Timberwolves pulled away for a 6-4 win. Northwood's victory was a landmark in that the team was led by first-year coach Joselyn Manderino, who may be the first female head coach to win a Division 1 playoff game. (Next year Kristin Rodriguez of Claremont in Division 5 would become the first female coach of a champion on any level.) Not as close but interesting anyway was Loyola and Los Alamitos (Sunset, third) at Argue Swim Stadium. The Cubs had just hosted the Griffins five days earlier, Fri., Nov. 8, with Los Alamitos winning, 11-10. That was the Cubs' last game of the season – the one that pushed their record below .500. All those narrow losses to good teams taught them something because today Loyola ran away from the Griffins for a 13-8 victory. (Argue Swim Stadium was a much-used placed as the site of the CIF-LACS quarter-finals the day before and semi-finals the day after.)

Quarter-final matches were held Sat., Nov. 16. A clever bit of scheduling made it possible to see all four games that day – starting with Harvard at Northwood at 10 a.m.; then drive 14.5 miles to see Dana Hills at Newport Harbor at 11:30 a.m.; then drive four miles to watch Mater Dei at Corona del Mar at 1 p.m. If you still wanted more you could drive 23.5 miles and catch the end of Long Beach Wilson vs. Loyola at Long Beach State at 2 p.m. – and you would be rewarded because that game went into

overtime. The day started in dull fashion, however, as Harvard jumped out to a 5-0 after one period over Northwood. The Wolverines crushed the Timberwolves, 18-4. Things were much more interesting at Newport Harbor, where the Dolphins and Sailors were tied 9-9 at one point in the third quarter. Newport Harbor scored the game's last five goals, however, to lead 11-9 at the end of three and then 14-9 at the contest's end. Just as interesting were the goings-on across the Newport Bay. Exactly two weeks earlier, on Sat., Nov. 2, Corona del Mar had also played host to Mater Dei, becoming the Monarchs' 102-straight victim in a 15-3 loss. Today, according to the Register, the Sea Kings "led twice in the first half and knotted the score, 4-4, at half....But Mater Dei restored its order by outscoring Corona del Mar, 6-0, in the second half." Three goals in the third and three in the fourth made the final score, 10-4, Mater Dei over Corona del Mar.

The last game of the day was the best one. Long Beach Wilson had beaten Loyola twice in tight contests held more than a month earlier. Today, Long Beach Wilson established a 1-0 lead after the first period, and went ahead again 2-1 in the second quarter, before being caught, 2-2, at half-time. From there, Loyola seemed to explode, outscoring the Bruins 5-1 in the third to close the period with a 7-3 lead. Long Beach Wilson came back with four unanswered goals in the fourth, though, to tie things again at the end of regulation, 7-7. The two teams battled through a scoreless first overtime period, before the Cubs scored the game winner in the second overtime. The 8-7 upset represented a special win for Loyola – their first one-goal victory in the quarter-finals, and it would turn out to be the only one-goal game of the 2013 tournament. (The Cubs' win also negated a nice team effort by Long Beach Wilson – seven goals scored by seven different players.)

The semi-finals were held Wed., Nov. 20, at Woollett Aquatics Center, with the Division 1 Final Four joined – according now to custom – by the quartets from Divisions 2, 3 and 4. For the first time there were three private schools in the semis. There was even a chance of an all-Mission League final match with Harvard vs. Newport Harbor at 5 p.m. and Mater Dei vs. Loyola at 7 p.m. Loyola was on a roll and, besides, this was their fifth straight semi-finals appearance – there was no "just-glad-to-be-here" about them. The Cubs had only trailed the Monarchs by one goal, 6-5, at half-time in their one previous game; they had reason to be thinking of pulling another upset. And, Loyola gave Mater Dei a good game – trailing only 5-3 after three periods, in spite of a goal by the Monarchs at the buzzer before half-time. Mater Dei led throughout, however, and pulled away in the fourth quarter for a 7-3 victory. Loyola now possessed records that were testimony to both their strength as a program and their hard-luck – five straight losses in the semis; and six losses total with their 1996 appearance, without ever getting to the finals. As to the other semi, Harvard had scored 20 goals on Newport Harbor in-route to a nine-goal victory in their one earlier encounter. The Sailors tried to slow the game down, and they succeeded in the first two quarters to lead 3-2 at half-time. But, the third quarter was a track meet, with Harvard scoring five times – including a devastating tally with just two seconds remaining to end the frame, 7-5. Harvard added two more goals to start the fourth quarter, and finished the contest with a 9-6 win. The Wolverines' junior Johnny Hooper led scorers with four goals – all recorded in the second half.

The final game was played Sat., Nov. 23, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Immediately after Wednesday night's semi-final results were logged, the Division 1 final game's start time was swapped with Division 2 – Division 1 starting at 1 p.m. rather than the traditional capper at 7 p.m. As was done in 2001, this accommodated fans wanting to also attend the Girls volleyball finals that night, in which Harvard and Mater Dei were both represented. (The matches were held eight miles away at Santiago Canyon College – Harvard played at 5 p.m., Mater Dei at 8 p.m.; both teams lost.) As a result, the final match was played outdoors in daylight hours for the first time ever. Prior to the game, there was some reporting that the end of Mater Dei's long winning streak was not entirely bad – it removed a distraction. Of course, it also signaled to opponents that the Monarchs could indeed be beaten. And, Mater Dei still had a difficulty – trying to beat a good team not three times in a row, but four. "It's all about making subtle changes. We know them. They know us," Harvard coach Brian Flacks told the Los Angeles Daily News. Subtle – but effective. According to the Register, "Harvard blitzed the Monarchs for the game's first three goals – on its first three shots – and opened a stunning 5-3 lead after the first period." Harvard kept its momentum to lead, 7-3, at half-time. Back in their non-league battle, the Wolverines had lost after mounting a four goal lead in the second half. Tonight it would be different. Mater Dei got one back to make it 7-4 after three periods, but Harvard pushed the lead to four goals again in the fourth, and closed it out, 9-6. Harvard's Warren Snyder led all scorers with four goals. In their fifth try, the Wolverines had at last captured a ring. The 25-year-old coach for Harvard had been on one of those teams turned back in the final game – in 2003. Flacks admitted to the Daily News that he didn't wait for the traditional push into the pool by his players: "Probably jumped – too excited to wait to celebrate with my boys."

2014

The 2014 season was like a mirror image of the previous year, with Harvard and Mater Dei the clear favorites. The mirror-effect was due to Harvard now having the long unbeaten streak and Mater Dei falling to their main rival three times during the season. Harvard, however, was able to finish the deal and win the championship for a second consecutive season. Division 1 underwent one change among its six leagues – South Coast went down to Division 2, taking with it five-time champ El Toro and the more-recently successful Dana Hills; and Marmonte was promoted, bringing along Agoura, the two-time Division 2 defending champ.

Like last year, Harvard and Mater Dei first tangled at the Santa Barbara Invitational – the new early-"early test of strength," played Fri.-Sat., Sept. 12-13. In the semi-finals, Harvard beat league rival Loyola, 15-6, while Mater Dei handled Laguna Beach, 15-9. The third place game went to Loyola, 10-2, over Laguna Beach, the eventual Division 3 champ. In the final match, both teams were missing key players – Harvard, in particular, was without Johnny Hooper, who would be named Player of the Year. The Wolverines made up for it with a nice team effort – six players scored in a 10-8 win. Thus, Harvard ended Mater Dei's string of 13 straight tournament titles, as well as stopping the Monarchs at three titles since the inception of the Santa Barbara Invitational.

Mater Dei secured its position as Harvard's main challenger at the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 25-27. In the semi-finals, Loyola beat Orange Lutheran, 12-6, while Mater Dei defeated Bishop's, 16-3. In the third place match, Orange Lutheran defeated Bishop's, 6-5. (Bishop's would finish second in CIF-SDS' new "Open Division" – the premier division now among four levels of playoffs.) In the final match, Mater Dei took a 9-2 lead late in the first half, then Loyola climbed back in, making it 13-10 with about three minutes left in the fourth. But Mater Dei shut the door to win, 15-10 – claiming their fifth straight South Coast tourney championship.

If Mater Dei had the idea that Harvard was the only team it needed to worry about, that notion got corrected on Tues., Oct. 7, against Long Beach Wilson. The game was played at Belmont Plaza – that is, a "temporary" outdoor pool built adjacent to the soon-to-be-demolished hallowed natatorium. That outdoor pool proved resilient – it's still there as of 2021. The setting was somewhat new – and the Bruins' coach definitely was, with the program now under the leadership of Jeff Nesmith. Long Beach Wilson had finished 16th at the South Coast Tournament, leading the Register to call this game, "the biggest upset of the season." The Bruins never trailed and led 7-4 heading into the fourth quarter. Mater Dei managed to comeback and tie it, 7-7, before the Bruins recorded the game winner with 2:09 left. According to the Register, "The Monarchs... failed to convert on two power-play chances in the final 1:39 of the fourth and fell to the host Bruins, 8-7."

Harvard, on the other hand, further established itself as the leader of the pack at the S&R Sport Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 10-11, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In the semi-finals, Harvard defeated Sacred Heart, 21-9, while Corona del Mar beat Foothill, 11-10. Sacred Heart had been undefeated until being routed by Harvard. The third place game ended with Sacred Heart 11, Foothill 10 – the eventual CIF-CCS Division II champ defeating the eventual Division 2 champ. In the final match, Harvard held only a 7-4 lead at half-time over Corona del Mar, but then proceeded to win their second straight Sport Cup title in resounding fashion, 22-7.

Harvard and Mater Dei then encountered each other in what is no doubt the most widely-covered regular season game I have ever found. Unlike tournament games, which are often held out of the area, and always subject to uncertainty as to actual match-ups, this was a scheduled non-league game, held Tues., Oct. 14, at Harvard. With the two teams being so dominant last season and now in 2014, reporters were at poolside from the Register, Los Angeles Times and Los Angeles Daily News, all producing large stories. Harvard led throughout, though Mater Dei had a chance to tie the score at 4-4 in the second period, but failed to convert a man advantage situation. The Wolverines scored twice more themselves and went into half-time leading, 6-3. Things became a little unhinged in the third period. Reports the Register, "Mater Dei coach Chris Segesman watched the final 1 1/2 periods from the stands after receiving a red card for arguing with the officials. The ex-Olympian departed with his team trailing, 8-4." The Wolverines extended their lead to 10-4 while still in the third, and Harvard finished the triumph, 11-7. The two teams had played each other twice, but both the Los Angeles Times and Daily News noted they were likely to play twice more,

as they did last year. “It’s a chess match,” Harvard coach Brian Flacks told the Daily News. “They are such tight contests, they can go either way....It was a great test for us at this point of the season.”

And, in fact, Harvard and Mater Dei did see each other just 11 days later in the final match of the North-South Challenge, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 24-25, at Sacred Heart. If the reader will scroll up five paragraphs, one will notice that the outcomes among the Final Four here were remarkably similar to that of the Santa Barbara Invitational. In the semi-finals, Harvard beat Loyola, 12-6, while Mater Dei defeated Laguna Beach, 17-3. In the third place match, Loyola beat Laguna Beach, 9-6. (Laguna Beach had also been at the South Coast Tournament, though they didn’t place as well – finishing 11th.) In the final match, Mater Dei held a 5-4 lead after three periods, but Harvard rallied with four goals in the fourth quarter to win, 8-6. Impressively, the Wolverines had beaten the Monarchs this third time without the help of a key goal-producer, Ben Hallock, who had to serve a one-game suspension resulting from their semi-final game. It was Harvard’s first North-South Challenge title, and stopped Mater Dei’s streak of four straight. In a Los Angeles Daily News blog that must have made Coach Flacks cringe, it was stated: “It’s safe to say the Harvard-Westlake boys water polo team owns Mater Dei.”

When Harvard met Loyola in the North-South Challenge, it was actually for the third time. Earlier in the week, Tues., Oct. 21, Harvard had won the decisive game of the Mission League race, paying the Cubs a visit and winning, 14-5. It was the only interesting battle for a league title, with all of the champions going undefeated. Long Beach Wilson won its decisive Moore League game in a laughter at Long Beach Poly, 18-4, on Thurs., Oct. 9. The other four league titles were won by two games or more – Corona del Mar in Pacific Coast, Huntington Beach in Sunset, Mater Dei in Trinity and Agoura in Marmonte.

Playoff seedings were reported on Mon., Nov. 10, with no surprises for the top two seeds – undefeated Harvard (Mission, 25-0), followed by Mater Dei (Trinity, 23-4). Loyola (Mission, second, 19-6), was seeded third, their reward perhaps for three tough battles with Harvard and two with Mater Dei. In addition to their South Coast tourney meeting, the Cubs visited the Monarchs on Tues., Oct. 28, losing 10-8. Like Mater Dei, Loyola also had a loss to Long Beach Wilson, 11-10, at home on Wed., Oct. 15. Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast, 22-5) was seeded fourth. The Sea Kings had placed fifth at both the South Coast Tournament and the Memorial Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 31-Nov. 1, in San Jose. In the latter tourney, Corona del Mar was actually the top Division 1 placer. For the record, Coronado beat Sacred Heart, 15-13, for the Memorial Cup title (the Islanders would finish a CIF-SDS Open Division semi-finalist). Rounding out the playoff top seeds were fifth Long Beach Wilson (Moore, 17-10); sixth Huntington Beach (Sunset, 19-6); seventh Agoura (Marmonte, 15-10), and eighth Orange Lutheran (Trinity, second, 16-7).

Wild Card games were played Tues., Nov. 11. Irvine (Pacific Coast, third) and Notre Dame (SO) (Mission, third) advanced, but this round is primarily useful as a platform for explaining how two playoff regulars were locked out. According to the Register,

“A new rule passed by the Southern Section Council last year hit boys water polo hard, leaving the sport without at-large playoff berths in any of its seven divisions.” Travel and costs were cited as the reasons. Thus, this year’s tourney featured only 18 teams for the first time since 2010 – three teams from each of the six leagues and that was it. In past years, third-place ties could be accommodated by flipping a coin and taking the loser in as an At-Large entrant. This year, there were not one but two three-way ties for second, necessitating a chain of coin flips and play-in games. In the Trinity League on Wed., Nov. 5, Mater Dei hosted Orange Lutheran, beating them 15-6. This created a tie for second between Orange Lutheran, Santa Margarita and Servite. Right there on the pool deck, the coin flip decreed second place to Orange Lutheran. The following day, Thurs., Nov. 6, Santa Margarita visited Servite, coming away with a 9-8 victory and third place. Servite’s season was over – the first time they had missed the playoffs since 1989 (Divisions 1 and 2 combined). In the Sunset League, also on Nov. 5, Edison visited Los Alamitos and won, 4-3, forcing a three-way tie between those two teams and Newport Harbor. In this case, the coin flip only decreed who would play for second – Edison playing Los Alamitos for a second day in a row, Nov. 6, at Newport Harbor. Edison won more easily this time, 7-3, and their playoff ticket was punched. The unfortunate Griffins, however, had to play Newport Harbor for third – and that game took place immediately. The presumably worn out Los Alamitos lost to the Sailors, 17-4, and Newport Harbor was in. Los Alamitos was left out of the playoffs for the first time since 1984 (Divisions 1 and 2 combined).

First round games were played Wed., Nov. 12. The two closest games included host Huntington Beach defeating Santa Margarita, 12-8. Huntington Beach was already having a season to be proud of – not only were they champions of a tough league, but the Oilers had also proven resilient amid a coaching change six games into the season. Interim coach Chris Kaps didn’t assume the reins until the day before game seven, played Tues, Sept. 23. Santa Margarita’s season was at an end, but not before they had won their second straight Villa Park Classic, played Thurs.-Sat., Oct. 2-4. In the title match, the Eagles won 10-9 over Righetti, the eventual Division 4 champion. The other close game in the round was Agoura vs. Newport Harbor at Westlake. The Sailors also had an interim coach, Marco Palazzo, who assumed duties less than three weeks before their first game. Newport Harbor had gone 10-16 on the season and had entered the playoffs by the skin of their teeth. The game against Agoura was closely watched because Newport Harbor had won at least one game in every playoff they had entered going back to 1962 (though they missed the post-season entirely in 1963, 1965, 1966 and 1996). This year, the Sailors would have to pull an upset to get past the first round. And, Agoura led, 3-2, after the first period. Newport Harbor tied it by half-time, 5-5, and the score was still tied, 6-6, at the end of three periods. The Sailors had lost nine games in the regular season by one goal, but today they pulled it out, 9-8.

Quarter-final games were played Sat., Nov. 15. Orange Lutheran had made its playoff debut in the Wild Card round last year, and now visited Harvard for their introduction to the advanced rounds. Harvard led 14-2 at half-time and won, 22-8. It was the price of an education – “OLu” would make a much better showing in the not too distant future. Mater Dei also had little trouble at Newport Harbor. The Monarchs

led 6-1 at half-time, 9-3 after three, and ended the Sailors' season with an 11-4 win. Much more interesting was Corona del Mar's visit to Long Beach Wilson and the great outdoors of Belmont Plaza. One of Corona del Mar's five losses had been to the surprising Bruins – yes, Long Beach Wilson had beaten all three teams seeded immediately in front of them. In Corona del Mar's case, the Bruins won a 13-8 decision back on Sept. 23, at the same new-concept Belmont Plaza. However, the Sea Kings had defeated Long Beach Wilson more recently – a 12-8 verdict in the fifth place game of the Memorial Cup. Today, Corona del Mar jumped out to an 8-1 lead at half-time, and then almost let it get away. Long Beach Wilson got back into it in the third to finish the quarter down only 9-6. The Bruins got even closer in the fourth quarter, but Corona del Mar held on for the victory, 10-9.

Back at Newport Harbor's pool, Huntington Beach and Loyola were playing the "nightcap" of a doubleheader (11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. start times). The result would be the only upset of the round. Like Loyola, Huntington Beach came into the game with six losses. Their first one had been delivered by the Cubs, 7-5, in the opening round of the Santa Barbara Invitational (the Oilers finished ninth; in their two other tournaments, they placed seventh at South Coast and sixth at the North-South Challenge). Today, Huntington Beach led after the first period, 2-1, and maintained leads of 4-3 at half-time and 5-4 after three periods. Huntington Beach had a brief 6-4 lead in the fourth before Loyola came back to tie it, 7-7. This set up the final drama. With only :35 remaining, Huntington Beach was awarded a man-advantage situation. After four passes around the perimeter, a second Loyola player was ejected. With just 1.25 seconds remaining, Huntington Beach's Quinten Osborne took aim from five meters. The shot "blasted in off the bottom of the crossbar," according to the Register, which added that it was "the biggest shot in more than 50 years for the Oilers." Indeed, Huntington Beach's 8-7 win put them in the semi-finals for the first time since 1958.

The semi-finals were held Wed., Nov. 19, at Woollett Aquatics Center, with just the Division 2 and 3 Final Fours joining the festivities this year. Harvard and Mater Dei had dominated opponents in the first two rounds, winning by total margins of 35 and 24, respectively. That degree of superiority hardly lessened in the semis, with a pair of blow-outs not seen in the Final Four since 1997. (In fact, before the Wolverines were through, they would rack up a 49-goal total margin, a record for four tournament games.) Harvard and Corona del Mar were meeting in the playoffs for the seventh time in their history, the Sea Kings leading the series 4-2. However, they hadn't met in the post-season since 2005 – when Coach Flacks was a senior at Harvard and Coach Barry O'Dea was in his first year at Corona del Mar. Harvard had crushed Corona del Mar earlier this year, but that S&R Sport Cup match was close at half-time. Here, it was over by half-time. After a competitive first quarter, which saw Harvard establish a 3-1 lead, the Wolverines broke it open for an 8-1 advantage at intermission. Their lead grew to 12-1 after three periods and the game's final count was 13-2, with Harvard's Johnny Hooper scoring four goals. In the other semi-final, Mater Dei and Huntington Beach were meeting for the first time ever in the playoffs and the first time in 2014. The Oilers scored the game's initial goal, but Mater Dei made it 3-1 by the end of the first quarter. Huntington Beach again asserted themselves to tie it, 3-3, early in the second quarter.

Mater Dei, however, answered with four straight goals before taking a 7-4 lead into half-time. The Monarchs then ran away with it in the third to lead 13-6 by the end of the frame. Mater Dei kept things under control in the fourth to win, 16-10. A hopeful sign for the Monarchs was four goals contributed by Nick Lavayen, who had been out of the line-up for a month due to a thumb injury.

Mater Dei and Harvard reconvened at Woollett Aquatics Center on Sat., Nov. 22, for their second consecutive final game. I have remarked with semi-amazement previously when two teams met seven times over two years. The Monarchs and Wolverines were playing for the eighth time, just one more testimony to their dominance. What more can a coach tell his players about the other team? Brian Flacks said to the Los Angeles Daily News, “There is nothing I am teaching them at this point or anything they haven’t heard from me about them already. It all comes down to the little things. We just have to be a little bit better everywhere.” After last year’s schedule conflict with the Girls volleyball finals, it appears organizers took a step to reduce the risk of needing to make last minute changes in the future. The Division 1 Water Polo game was now planned for 5:30 p.m., so that the premier division championships in the two popular sports wouldn’t be taking place at basically the same time. (In fact, Mater Dei appeared in both of these respective matches again this year, as well as in 2015 and 2017.) So, Division 1 settled into being the year’s second-to-last game. In 2014, Division 3 was showcased in the 7 p.m. match.

The game started promisingly for Mater Dei as the Monarchs’ Matt Payne scored the first goal. Harvard evened it, 1-1. Mater Dei went back ahead, 2-1, on a goal by Nick Lavayen (his first of two) with 2:10 left in the first period. Harvard’s Johnny Hooper tied it at 2-2 with :48 remaining in the first. Mater Dei did a fine job containing Hooper – it was his only goal of the night. But, the Wolverines had other weapons as a total of five players would contribute goals. After the Wolverines went ahead, 3-2, in the second period, they were never caught or trailed the rest of the night. The game was essentially won in the middle periods. Harvard’s lead grew to 6-3 midway through the second period before Mater Dei closed the gap by half-time, 6-4. The Monarchs got even closer at the 5:29 mark of the third quarter on a goal from nine meters by Will Lapkin, making it 6-5. It was the last time Mater Dei got within one. The Daily News reported, “the Wolverines answered with a pair of counterattacks to open an 8-5 lead,” the score after three periods. Mater Dei could only trade goals with the Wolverines in the fourth quarter. Harvard’s Ben Hallock put the game out of reach on a rebound shot with 1:30 remaining to give the Wolverines a 10-7 advantage, and that was the final score. Hallock, who was celebrating his 17th birthday that very day, had a match-high four goals. The scoring totals might have been higher but the teams were mutually frustrated in 6-on-5 situations. Mater Dei went only 2 for 8 while the Wolverines finished 2 for 7.

Remarkably, CIF-SS Division 1 had its third undefeated champion in four years. The closest comparable period was three in six years from 1973 to 1978. Coach Flacks gave some credit for their success to Mater Dei, telling the Daily News before the game, “We used Mater Dei as a blueprint. We had to learn from that program. We

didn't want to be them. We wanted to be better. They proved what it can be like in the modern era." It was the age-old story of each successive winner upping the ante on their immediate predecessors. Harvard's winning streak now stood at 37 games – the last eight contests of 2013 and a perfect 29-0 in 2014. But, Mater Dei would be spending the off-season figuring out how they could up the ante themselves.

2015

Harvard and Mater Dei's dominance continued in 2015, with the two teams meeting in the final game once again – and again after three regular season meetings. That adds up to an incredible 12 games between them over three years. It also meant that they became the first pair to meet in the finals three years in a row since Newport Harbor and Sunny Hills in 1978-80. Their encounter "under the lights" at the end of the season was widely predicted, yet it wasn't entirely fated. It never is in sports – "that's why they still play the games." There were two other teams capable of giving them good contests, even upsetting them if everything went right. Loyola and Huntington Beach joined the Wolverines and Monarchs in this year's Final Four. Let's walk through the season by focusing mainly on the 11 times these four teams faced each other.

If the final two teams left standing in the playoffs was not fated, perhaps the Final Four was. Harvard, Mater Dei, Loyola and Huntington Beach comprised the Final Four of the Santa Barbara Invitational, played Fri.-Sat., Sept. 11-12. There can be no stronger validation of the Invitational's status as a "major" than this rare occurrence. (I'm personally familiar with one prior instance – the 1974 Anaheim Tournament, forerunner to the South Coast tourney, previewed the playoff Final Four.) Three of the teams had coaches of long-standing – and they were now joined by Huntington Beach's first year coach, Sasa Branisavljevic. In the tourney semi-finals, Mater Dei defeated Loyola, 10-7, while Harvard beat Huntington Beach, 11-7. In the third place game, Loyola edged the Oilers, 7-6. In the final game at Dos Pueblos, Harvard's Ben Hallock – the eventual Player of the Year – scored five goals to help the Wolverines open a 7-3 lead by half-time. Harvard proceeded to hold Mater Dei scoreless in the second half and lodge a 12-3 victory, easily the most lopsided game among their nine meetings in two-plus years. The Wolverines had won their second straight Invitational – and now they and the Monarchs had won all five of the tournament's titles. The semi-final matchups here would be exactly the same 67 days later in the playoff semis, with the same results. (But it wasn't fated!)

Members of our Final Four next met at the South Coast Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 24-26. In the semi-finals, Loyola handled Foothill, 11-6, and Mater Dei beat Corona del Mar, 11-7. In the third place game, Foothill whipped the Sea Kings, 11-4. So, Mater Dei and Loyola met for the second time in two weeks in the final match at Newport Harbor – which also constituted a rematch of last year's tourney final. The Monarchs had things well in hand at half-time, leading 5-1, but then they really ran away from the Cubs in the third period, finishing the frame with a 12-3 lead. Mater Dei cruised to a 13-5 win and their sixth straight South Coast Tournament title. Huntington Beach had been at the tourney as well, but lost in the quarter-finals to Corona del Mar,

8-7. The next day the Oilers lost the fifth place game to Dana Hills, 7-5. (Dana Hills and Foothill would eventually face each other in the Division 2 final game in one of the all-time great title matches on any level. The Knights would win, 6-5, well into the second sudden death period.) Harvard did not attend the South Coast tourney, as usual, but they did have a chance to visit Huntington Beach for a non-league match held one week later, Sat., Oct. 3. The Wolverines handled the Oilers much more easily than in their initial encounter three weeks earlier, this time winning, 18-5.

The following weekend, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 9-10, Harvard entered its second tournament of the year, the S&R Sport Cup at Woollett Aquatics Center. On the tourney's first day, Harvard won two more games to bring their season record to 11-0 and give them the second-longest winning streak in history at 48 games. In the semi-finals, Foothill beat Coronado, 12-9, and Harvard defeated Corona del Mar, 14-7. Coronado beat the Sea Kings, 8-7, in the third place game. (The Islanders would finish second in the CIF-SDS Open Division.) Foothill had not gotten to the tournament's final match since 2004, while Harvard was seeking its third straight title. That did not prove difficult, as the Wolverines manhandled Foothill, 18-7. Harvard's winning streak now stood at an even 50 games.

Just four days later, Wed., Oct. 14, Harvard paid a visit to Mater Dei for what was once again the biggest non-league game of the season. Last year, the game had been extensively covered by the Los Angeles-based papers but, perhaps because this year's contest was held in Santa Ana, they didn't turn up. The Register was there, however, to see what Mater Dei could do to stop their six-game losing streak against Harvard. "The Monarchs never trailed, and their lead reached 7-3 after Jack Seybold's perimeter strike from 7 meters with 4:25 left in the first half," the Register reported. Mater Dei continued to hold a four-goal lead into the fourth quarter until Harvard's Ben Hallock scored his second goal at the 4:52 mark, making it 11-8. Harvard closed to 11-10 with :32 remaining, but Mater Dei drew a kick-out call against the Wolverines with :19 left, and the Monarchs ran out the clock for the victory. The Register: "'We were tired of losing to them,' said (Mater Dei coach Chris) Segesman, who bear-hugged his players as they exited the pool. 'This is a statement game for us.'" Anytime you end a team's 50 game winning streak, it's a statement. Interestingly, the two longest winning streaks in history occurred consecutively – Mater Dei's 105 from 2010-2013, and Harvard's 50 from 2013-2015. In fact, for eight days they ran concurrently – from Wed., Oct. 30, 2013, Harvard's first win, to Wed., Nov. 6, 2013, Mater Dei's last win. Interestingly also, in the past 10 games in which the two teams had faced each other, this was the first decided by a single goal.

When Mater Dei's winning streak came to an end, a player was quoted as saying it was sort of a relief to the team. In Harvard's case, they seemed to take it hard. The Los Angeles Daily News quoted goalie Sam Krutonog saying, "I don't think that Mater Dei loss will ever go away, certainly not for me." Their solution was to deliver a beat-down on their very next opponent, who just so happened to be their crosstown rival, Loyola. The Cubs paid the Wolverines a visit on Wed., Oct. 21, for their annual battle to decide the Mission League championship. Harvard went out and scored the first 10 goals of

the game. Loyola didn't score until the 5:08 mark of the fourth quarter. The Cubs got one more goal with 3:32 left to play, but that was it – Harvard recorded a 12-2 win.

Two days later, Harvard and Loyola, along with Mater Dei and Huntington Beach, arrived to play in the North-South Challenge at Sacred Heart in Atherton, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 23-24. Perhaps Loyola hadn't quite gotten over the bellringing they got on Wednesday, because they proceeded to lose in the quarter-finals to Sacred Heart, 9-7. The Cubs would take the fifth place game in a victory over Cathedral Catholic, 11-6. (Sacred Heart would win its fifth straight CIF-CCS Division II title while Cathedral Catholic would champion the CIF-SDS Open Division a second year in a row.) Moving to the semi-finals, Harvard beat Huntington Beach for the third time, 12-6, while Mater Dei demolished Sacred Heart, 16-5. Huntington Beach would also handle Sacred Heart easily in the third place game, winning 15-6. This put Mater Dei and Harvard in a tourney final once again. The score was tied 10-10 entering the fourth quarter. Harvard gained the first possession and immediately earned an extra man opportunity, which they failed to convert. Mater Dei took the ball and promptly scored when "Lefty Luke Wyatt skipped in a hard, side-armed shot" (Register). It would turn out to be the only goal of the fourth period, as Mater Dei fended off three more extra-man chances for Harvard. Mater Dei had won by the same score as their most recent game, 11-10. It was the Monarchs' fifth title for the tournament in six years.

Mater Dei had fully reasserted itself coming out of the North-South Challenge, while Loyola had placed disappointingly. Perhaps it was the Cubs this time who were tired of losing when they hosted Mater Dei at USC on Wed., Oct. 28. After two prior defeats to the Monarchs, Loyola stunned Mater Dei, 8-7. "Shocked" would be an equally appropriate word. At the time seedings were announced, the Register reported, "When I heard about (Loyola beating Mater Dei), I was shocked," said Kristine Palle, the section's assistant commissioner in charge of water polo. "Some of these teams are coming up hot right now."

Indeed, some teams were getting hot at the right time. If there were two other schools capable of breaking into the Final Four, it was Orange Lutheran and Corona del Mar. They had a chance to make a statement themselves at the Memorial Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 30-31 at Bellarmine. In terms of Division 1 talent, the North-South Challenge had recently been attracting teams in the top half of the Top 10. The Memorial Cup was bringing in teams from the bottom half. As a result, not a single Division 1 team got to the tourney's Final Four last year. This year, at least, two teams got to the semi-finals before falling – Foothill over Orange Lutheran, 11-6, and Coronado over Corona del Mar, 10-9. In the third place game, Orange Lutheran beat Corona del Mar, 14-11. And, for the sake of completeness – Foothill had beaten Coronado in the semi-finals of the S&R Sport Cup. Now, Foothill faced the Islanders in the final match and won, 12-9. It was the Knights' first Memorial Cup title since 1997.

The "final standings" for the 11 games between the eventual Final Four were – (1) Harvard, 5-2 (.714); (2) Mater Dei, 4-2 (.667); (3) Loyola, 2-3 (.400); and (4) Huntington Beach, 0-4 (.000). If applied to the playoffs, this order would produce

projected semi-final match-ups of Wolverines vs. Oilers and Monarchs vs. Cubs. The actual playoff seedings were reported on Sun., Nov. 8, and ranked the teams a little differently – though the semi-final pairings would be exactly the same. Mater Dei had beaten Harvard twice in three games, so Mater Dei (Trinity, 25-2) was first seed, while Harvard (Mission, 21-2) was second. Huntington Beach (Sunset, 21-6) moved up to third seed. Loyola (Mission, second, 22-4) had to be fourth, to avoid a match between league rivals prior to the final game. This meant that the likely semi-final contestants would be playing each other a fourth time – and the likely finalists would be doing so as well. (Maybe it was fated after all!) The other top seeds went fifth Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast); sixth Orange Lutheran (Trinity, second); seventh Agoura (Marmonte); and eighth Long Beach Wilson (Moore).

The Wild Card round was played Tues., Nov. 10. Like last year, there were no At-Large teams in this six-league, 18-team tournament. Host Irvine (Pacific, third) defeated Long Beach Poly (Moore, third), 16-6. It was the second year in a row that Irvine advanced out of this round at the expense of a Moore League team (Long Beach Millikan was the victim in 2014). In the other game, host Crespi (Mission, third) beat Thousand Oaks (Marmonte, third), 9-6. It was Thousand Oaks' second straight Wild Card loss to a Mission League team (Notre Dame [SO] beat them last year).

First round games were played Wed., Nov. 11. Six of the eight games were won by 10 goals or more. At Oaks Christian, Agoura met JSerra (Trinity, third) in a game that was competitive through three periods. Agoura led only 7-5 heading into the fourth quarter, before pulling away for a 13-8 victory. The most widely followed game was held at Belmont Plaza, outdoors and under stadium lighting, for a 5 p.m. start time (eight minutes after sundown). Long Beach Wilson was facing Newport Harbor (Sunset, second) for the first time in the playoffs since 2006. They had met in the first round that year also but, of course, more importantly the two great rivals had fought in final games twice. The Sailors had a first year coach in Ross Sinclair, a 2003 graduate of Newport Harbor. He had been a major contributor to Newport Harbor's teams as a junior and senior, and played Varsity as a sophomore on the 2000 title squad. Tonight, as the Register put it, "The two most storied boys water polo programs in Southern Section history woke the ghosts of past classic matches Wednesday night with roars from the crowd and a sudden death overtime thriller." The first quarter was scoreless, and then Newport Harbor managed a 2-1 lead at half-time. The Sailors seemed to pull away in the third period, leading 6-2 heading into the fourth. According to the Register, the Sailors still led "7-5, with less than two minutes left. The Bruins scored twice in the final 1:50 of regulation to tie the score, 7-7, and force overtime. The Sailors then scored the first three goals of the first three-minute overtime, . . . but were caught, 10-10, in the second three-minute overtime." The Bruins might have won it in that period, except Newport Harbor goalie Joe Ferraro blocked a breakaway in the final seconds to bring on sudden death. Now in the seventh period, the Bruins' "Kobe Jackson scored off a long cross pass from Daniel Schmidt with 35 seconds left in sudden death. . . . The Bruins took their first lead on Jackson's winner," 11-10. The Register noted it was Newport Harbor's first playoff appearance without recording a victory – a track

record going back to 1962. That is literally correct, but the Sailors had failed to get to the playoffs at all four times during that stretch. Still, there were always very high expectations for Newport Harbor. Sinclair, the Sailors' third new coach in five years, would soon have things back on track.

The playoffs moved to the quarter-finals on Sat., Nov. 14. Long Beach Wilson returned to Belmont Plaza to play Mater Dei, with a start time the same as their first round game. The Monarchs had already beaten Long Beach Wilson twice by large margins – 18-3, in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament; and 17-3, at Mater Dei on Tues., Oct. 6. If the Bruins thought they might somehow recapture the magic of three days ago, the Monarchs quickly dispelled it – Mater Dei won going away, 21-7. Harvard's home game against Agoura did not figure to be competitive either. Exactly two weeks earlier in the same pool, the Wolverines had defeated Agoura, 16-3. Today's game was little different – Harvard over Agoura, 14-4. The more interesting games involved Loyola and Huntington Beach and the two teams with the most potential to take their places in the Final Four. At USC, Loyola was facing Corona del Mar for the first time this year. The Cubs jumped out to a 3-0 lead after one quarter, but the Sea Kings won the middle two periods. Loyola stayed ahead narrowly, 4-2 at half-time and 7-6 after three frames. The Cubs won the fourth period, though, and finished things out with an 11-9 win. At Santiago Canyon College in Orange, Huntington Beach was taking on Orange Lutheran. The Oilers had beaten the Lancers twice already – 14-7, in the quarter-finals of the Santa Barbara Invitational; and 12-8, at Huntington Beach on Sat., Oct. 17. But this game was not so easy for Huntington Beach. The score was tied, 2-2, after one period. Orange Lutheran moved out to a 5-2 lead in the second quarter, but the Oilers caught them by half-time, 5-5. Huntington Beach then shut-out the Lancers in the third period to take a 7-5 lead into the fourth. The Oilers still led, 8-7, says the Register, until “Orange Lutheran forced overtime on Matt Kacura's extra-man strike that tied the score, 8-8.” The Lancers gained a 9-8 lead early in the first three-minute overtime period, before “a skip-shot by Hannes Daube” of Huntington Beach tied it again, 9-9, by the period's end. Finally, Huntington Beach's “Ethan Wojciechowski scored from center 45 seconds into the second three-minute overtime and Curtis Jarvis made a steal at 2 meters with about 15 seconds left.” That sealed the victory, 10-9, “in an intense quarter-final.”

The semi-finals convened at Woollett Aquatics Center on Wed., Nov. 18, with the Final Fours from Divisions 2 and 3 joining in. The 5 p.m. game featured Huntington Beach looking for a way to beat Harvard after three prior defeats, all by four or more goals. Harvard got off to a fast start to lead 4-0 by early in the second period. Huntington Beach finally got rolling and closed the gap by half-time, down only 5-3. The Wolverines took control in the third period, scoring the first five goals to take a 10-3 lead and enter the fourth leading, 10-4. Harvard then cruised to a 12-9 win. Ben Hallock contributed three goals for the Wolverines after missing their previous six games over three weeks due to a thumb injury. Huntington Beach had been stopped in the semi-finals for the second year in a row – but they had now established they belonged at this level. At 7 p.m., Loyola was hoping for their second straight win over Mater Dei and advance to an all-Mission League final game. The first half was nearly

all Mater Dei, though, and the Monarchs took a 6-3 lead into intermission. But, Loyola held Mater Dei scoreless in the third period with some strong play by their goalie, William Rubschlager. The Cubs got back in it, down only 6-5 as the fourth quarter began. Loyola then tied it, 6-6, on a lob shot by Miles Schridde at the 6:20 mark of the fourth. Nearly three minutes of scoreless trading of possessions ensued. Finally, reports the Register, Mater Dei freshman “Ian Minsterman scored the go-ahead goal with 3:31 left in the fourth period and senior Will Lapkin collected a field block and two steals at 2 meters during the ensuing challenges,” enabling the Monarchs to hold off the Cubs, 7-6. Loyola had now been turned back in the semi-finals six times in the last seven years – and seven times total in their history – without ever getting to the finals. Four of those recent setbacks had been by a single goal.

Mater Dei and Harvard now made their way to their third straight encounter in the final match, held Sat., Nov. 21, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Exactly four weeks had passed since their 11th contest in three years, Harvard holding a 6-5 advantage. Mater Dei was in its sixth straight final match, something not achieved since Corona del Mar in 1989. If the Monarchs could win, they would equal the Sea Kings’ total of four titles during that 1980s streak. Mater Dei and Harvard began to find out at 5:30 p.m., followed like last year at 7 p.m. by the Division 3 game.

Mater Dei led after one period, 3-2. During the second quarter, Ben Hallock scored his only goal of the night to give Harvard its first lead, 4-3. After Mater Dei evened things at 4-4, Harvard’s Luke Henriksson scored just before half-time to make it 5-4. Both teams recorded three goals in the third period. The Wolverines notched what would be their last goal of the game at the 1:30 mark to end the third quarter leading, 8-7. In the fourth period, Mater Dei’s Elias Lule tied the score, 8-8, on an extra-man situation with 4:15 left. Next, the Monarchs’ Luke Wyatt scored the go-ahead goal with 3:10 remaining on a counterattack following an unconverted 6-on-5 situation for Harvard. There was plenty of time left, but Mater Dei’s defense held. Harvard’s final shot from the perimeter bounced off a goal post and the Monarchs had won, 9-8. Mater Dei’s Sean Duncan led the team’s scoring with three goals, but their win was at least equally due to keeping the ball out of Hallock’s hands – something they had improved upon with each meeting. Hallock scored five times in their first contest and then held to two goals in each of the next two games. Harvard coach Brian Flacks told the Register, “Ben Hallock is the best player in the United States. For him to get so few touches in a game like that, it hurts. . . . A lot of credit to Mater Dei.” Relative success in extra-man situations was also a big factor – Mater Dei went six for eight while Harvard only went three for 10. Mater Dei and Harvard had suddenly played three one-goal games in a row, all won by Mater Dei. And, this match marked the first one point game in the finals since 2010, and only the third since 1997.

The past three years had been an amazing run for both Mater Dei and Harvard. The Wolverines had won it all twice, but Mater Dei won the latest title, which is always the sweetest until next year. Other teams were rising up, though, and I took care not to overlook them this season.

2016

At least three factors led to a much different look to the 2016 regular season and playoffs than in the past few years. First and most importantly, on Jan. 27, 2016, the CIF-SS Council adopted a “competitive equity format” for team placement in playoff tournaments. Instead of specific leagues assigned to specific competitive levels, explained the Register, “The plan would place teams in divisions based on a power ranking, which includes two years of postseason data and strength of schedule.” The aim was do what in theory should always be the case – the 16 best teams throughout the section play for the Division 1 championship, no matter what league they are in. The second factor impacted the roadmap of top contenders, with Harvard introducing a new early season tournament, the Elite Eight. When the last era in Water Polo ended in 2005, there were three major tourneys. Now there were six, and if you counted the 32-team Villa Park Classic, you had a big Water Polo fest going on every weekend for the first seven weeks of the season. The third factor had to do with Mater Dei and Harvard. After three years of dominance, Mater Dei was in a rebuilding mode, and Harvard started strong but faded as the season went on. This gave an opening to two recent challengers, Orange Lutheran and Huntington Beach, who would become the first “all new” final game pairing since 1991. Mission League rivals Harvard and Loyola would join them in the Final Four. The story of the tournaments, non-league games and league battles – for these titles still mattered, as we will see – can be told through this quartet.

Orange Lutheran announced itself as a leading contender at the Santa Barbara Invitational, held Fri.-Sat., Sept. 9-10. In the semi-finals, Orange Lutheran defeated Dana Hills, 17-5, while Loyola handled Sir Francis Drake, 13-8. In the third place game, Drake beat Dana Hills, 8-7. (Drake would end up a CIF-NCS Division 1 semi-finalist.) The final match featured the first major clash of the year. Orange Lutheran established leads of 3-1 after one period and 7-3 by half-time. The Lancers and Loyola played even in the second half, and Orange Lutheran collected an 11-7 win.

The inaugural Elite Eight Tournament followed on Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 15-17, at Harvard. There were only eight invitees, initially divided into two brackets of four. “Pool Play” ensued over the first two days as each team played the other three teams within their brackets. The two teams with the best records from each bracket advanced to the semi-finals on the third day of competition. In one bracket on the first day, Sacred Heart beat Loyola, 13-10; then, the next day Harvard defeated Loyola, 15-8. Sacred Heart and Harvard, thus, advanced out of this bracket, while Loyola secured fifth place on Saturday. In the other bracket on the second day, Mater Dei defeated Huntington Beach, 9-7, but both had strong enough records to advance to the championship rounds. In the semi-finals, Harvard defeated Huntington Beach, 10-3, while Mater Dei beat Sacred Heart, 15-9. Huntington Beach then took third by handling Sacred Heart, 9-3. (The Gators would go on to win the CIF-CCS Division II title for the sixth year in a row.) Losses for even very good teams can accumulate quickly in this tourney format, with both Huntington Beach and Loyola losing twice in two days! The final match featured Mater Dei and Harvard playing in their seventh tourney title collision in four years. Harvard grabbed a narrow lead after one period, 4-3. In the second period,

reported the Register, “Mater Dei trimmed the Wolverines’ lead to 7-6 on Jackson Seybold’s third perimeter strike of the quarter with 1:17 left. But Harvard capitalized on a defensive miscue by the Monarchs with 36 seconds left and received a power-play strike by Felix Brozyna-Vilim with three seconds left to lead, 9-6, at half-time. Mater Dei never drew closer than two goals in the second half.” Harvard won, 15-9, to claim the first title of their own tourney. Unfortunately, Brozyna-Vilim suffered a knee injury during the tournament and the Mater Dei game was his last of the season, a key blow for Harvard. The Wolverines and Monarchs would play each other one more time this year, in a non-league game at Harvard on Fri., Oct. 21. Harvard won, 10-9, giving the Wolverines an 8-6 advantage in their 14 games played over four seasons. (Harvard and Long Beach Millikan had co-sponsored the Jim Toring Tournament for about a decade in the wake of the former Player of the Year’s death in 1998. This tourney apparently reverted back to the “Millikan Varsity Classic” sometime after Harvard Coach Richard Corso’s departure. The honoring of Toring’s memory seems to have been consolidated with the Jim Toring Memorial Golf Tournament, sponsored annually by UCLA, where he played college ball.)

Not too long ago the South Coast Tournament was the first major tournament of the year. Now it was third on the calendar, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 22-24. And, Loyola was present for their third big tourney in as many weekends. The Cubs did not get far, however, losing to Agoura, 8-6, in the first day’s Sweet 16 round. Loyola would finish the tournament in ninth place. (Agoura would end the season a Division 2 quarter-finalist.) Also participating in the tourney was none other than Harvard – which hadn’t entered in all these years as a top Division 1 program. In the semi-finals, Harvard beat Orange Lutheran, 12-8, while Huntington Beach defeated Corona del Mar, also by a 12-8 count. In the third place game, Orange Lutheran edged Corona del Mar, 11-10. Both Harvard and Huntington Beach were playing for the first time in the finals of the South Coast tourney – and facing each other for the second Saturday in a row. The first half ended with a 3-3 tie. In the third period, Huntington Beach went ahead, 5-4, but Harvard took over from there. With about two minutes left in the third, the Wolverines began a 5-0 run that would take them to a 9-5 victory over the Oilers. It was the third and final loss of the season for Huntington Beach, while Harvard made it two big tourney wins in two weeks.

Orange Lutheran and Loyola had kicked off the season’s major tournament contests. Now they met for the first big non-league affair, played at Loyola, Wed., Oct. 5. The Lancers thoroughly embarrassed the Cubs at home, leading 4-2 after the first period and 10-5 at half-time. By the third quarter’s end, Orange Lutheran had run away with it, 17-7, and they completed the victory, 20-11.

Only Harvard among our eventual Final Four was at the S&R Sport Cup, which began two days later, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 7-8, at Woollett Aquatics Center. In one semi-final, Harvard defeated Sacred Heart, 9-2 (the Wolverines had also beaten the Gators, 16-9, in “Pool Play” at the Elite Eight tourney). In the other semi, Corona del Mar turned back Foothill, 8-5. Sacred Heart then won the third place game over Foothill, 8-3. In the final match, Harvard took a 7-3 lead over Corona del Mar into half-time. The Wolverines

added on in the second half to win, 10-4, marking their fourth straight S&R Sport Cup title and their third tourney title of the year.

The North-South Challenge, now in its 11th go-round, was held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 14-15 at Sacred Heart. On the scene were Huntington Beach – and Loyola, in their fourth tournament of the year. It is popularly thought that CIF-SS teams are only allowed to participate in three tourneys per season. However, a school's schedule is determined by a somewhat intricate point system. If arranged just right, a program can squeeze in a fourth tourney. Once again, though, Loyola made an early exit, losing in the quarter-finals to Miramonte, 12-10. It was Loyola's sixth and final loss of the year, and they would finish in fifth place. (Miramonte ended up CIF-NSC Division I champs.) In the semi-finals, Huntington Beach defeated Sacred Heart for a second time this year, 9-5. In the other semi, defending tourney champ Mater Dei edged Miramonte, 10-9. In the all-Nor Cal third place game, Sacred Heart defeated Miramonte, 12-8. In the all-So Cal final match, Huntington Beach beat Mater Dei, 11-6, avenging their loss to the Monarchs at the Elite Eight.

Huntington Beach had won its first North-South Challenge title, but the attention the accomplishment deserved was stolen a bit by the fact that on the very same night (Oct. 15) Harvard and Orange Lutheran were playing for a second time – a non-league game at the Wolverines' pool. Orange Lutheran built a 3-0 lead in the second period before Harvard finally got on the board with 3:18 left before half-time. The Wolverines did not gain a lead until about one minute into the fourth quarter, 5-4. Harvard extended its lead to 7-5 with 2:11 remaining. Orange Lutheran pulled to within one on an extra-man situation – but there was only :02 left on the clock. Harvard triumphed, 7-6, their first one-goal margin of the year – but they still came away with a spotless 19-0 record.

The Memorial Cup was played a week earlier than usual. But, it felt late after so many tourneys preceding it. The fest took place Fri.-Sat., Oct. 21-22, in San Jose with Orange Lutheran present. In one semi-final, Orange Lutheran beat defending tourney champ Foothill, 9-7. The other semi was a battle of CIF-CCS superpowers, as Sacred Heart defeated Bellarmine, 9-6. Foothill would edge the Bells, 6-4, for third place. (Bellarmine would claim the CIF-CCS Division I title for the second year in a row.) In the Memorial Cup's final match, Sacred Heart jumped out to an early 3-0 lead against Orange Lutheran. The Lancers climbed back into it quickly, though, in this high scoring affair. Finally, Orange Lutheran's Sam Sasaki scored with 1:06 left in the fourth quarter, giving his team an 11-10 lead. That turned out to be the final score as the Lancers fought off an extra man opportunity for Sacred Heart in the final minute. Orange Lutheran's Ash Molthen – the eventual Player of the Year – scored a total of six goals in the final and semi-final. It was the Lancers' first Memorial Cup title after finishing third last year – and they had won both the first and the last of the year's major tournaments.

A full two weeks remained in the season, with three of the biggest games of the year still to be played. The first two were non-league contests, beginning with Santa Margarita's visit to Harvard on Tues., Oct. 25. Santa Margarita had won the other

large tournament – the Villa Park Classic, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 29-Oct. 1. Santa Margarita defeated a somewhat revived El Toro in the final match, 12-9, for their third Classic title in four years. The Eagles were having a good season and it would get a lot better – they would win the Division 2 championship. In fact, it started getting really good this day against Harvard. Santa Margarita simply stayed with Harvard – the Eagles' A.J. Rossman scored five goals, including the game winner with about two minutes left, to earn a 10-9 victory. Harvard's bid for an undefeated season was stopped at 21-0. The second big game featured Huntington Beach playing Orange Lutheran on Sat., Oct. 29, at Ocean View. The Oilers got ahead 2-0 after one period and stayed in the lead at half-time, 4-1, with all four goals scored by Quinten Osborne. The third period was scoreless, then Huntington Beach matched three goals by the Lancers in the fourth quarter to win, 7-4. It was a satisfying victory for the Oilers, but perhaps not a true test – the Lancers' Ash Molthen played only 3:20 of the fourth. He and another key player – Josh Orrick – were limited by illness and minor injuries. It was Orange Lutheran's third and final loss.

The third big contest was Harvard's visit to Loyola to decide the Mission League title, Wed., Nov. 2. Harvard had beaten Loyola by seven goals in an early morning game at the Wolverines' pool during the Elite Eight tourney. But now playing a night game at home, the Cubs upset Harvard, 6-4. At the time, Harvard was the number one ranked team in the division in the coaches poll, while Loyola was sixth. It was Harvard's second and final loss – and one that ultimately turned the playoff seedings upside down. Two other deciding games for league championships should be noted. First, Huntington Beach again won the Sunset League while hosting Newport Harbor on Wed., Oct. 19 – the Oilers triumphing, 10-7. And, one week earlier, Wed., Oct. 12, Orange Lutheran visited Mater Dei and came away with a landmark 13-11 victory. It was Mater Dei's first league loss since 2006. Orange Lutheran had first entered the Trinity League in 2013, the year it also debuted in the playoffs. Quite an achievement for the Lancers and their coach, Steve Carrera – the same person who had led Northwood to its first final game appearance back in 2006.

Playoff seedings were reported on Sun., Nov. 6, and were both completely logical and shocking. Seeded first was Loyola (Mission, 21-6); second Harvard (Mission, second, 23-2); third Huntington Beach (Sunset, 21-3); and fourth Orange Lutheran (Trinity, 22-3). Loyola had to go in front of Harvard by virtue of their league victory over the Wolverines. Harvard had to go ahead of Huntington Beach and Orange Lutheran because of their two wins against both of them. Huntington Beach had to go before Orange Lutheran because the Oilers had won their only meeting. Yet, Loyola was one of the most vulnerable number one seeds in the history of the tournament. Among the teams that would make it to the quarter-finals, the Cubs' only other victory came against Mater Dei, 12-10, Wed., Oct. 26, at Mater Dei. Loyola had a combined 2-3 record against the playoff Elite Eight.

The new “scramble” format had an immediate, transforming effect on the Division 1 tournament, with seven different leagues represented in the top eight seeds, and three additional leagues showing up below that. Here's the remainder of the new-look

playoffs – 5) Corona del Mar (Pacific Coast); 6) Santa Barbara (Channel); 7) Foothill (Crestview); 8) El Toro (South Coast); 9) Newport Harbor (Sunset, second); 10) Dana Hills (South Coast, second); 11) Mater Dei (Trinity, second); 12) Mira Costa (Bay); 13) San Marcos (Channel, second); 14) Damien (Baseline); 15) Righetti (PAC-8); and 16) Los Osos (Baseline, second). It was the first appearances ever for Damien, Righetti and Los Osos, and the first entry by two-time runner-up Mira Costa since 1982.

With no Wild Card games this year, the first round was played on Wed., Nov. 9. The new competitive equity format did yield two technical upsets in the round, though neither was too surprising or close. First, Newport Harbor visited El Toro to play one of the few teams that had given the Sailors fits in earlier playoff encounters. El Toro held an 8-4 edge in their previous games, but this was their first meeting since 2011. Today, Newport Harbor established a 6-3 lead by half-time and widened the margin to 10-4 after three periods. The Sailors then cruised to a 13-8 win over El Toro. In the other upset, Mater Dei drove up to Santa Barbara to face the Dons in the playoffs for the first time ever. The Monarchs led 10-4 at half-time and 15-6 after three periods, closing out the win over Santa Barbara, 15-10. The best game of the round featured Foothill, which hadn't played a Division 1 playoff game since 2008 – when they won the championship. The Knights hosted Dana Hills and the game remained tight through three quarters, Foothill holding only a 7-5 lead. The Knights put it away in the fourth, however, beating Dana Hills, 10-6.

The quarter-finals were played Sat., Nov. 12. Only one of the games could be called a blow-out – and how surprised people would have been a year ago to learn who got blown-out. Mater Dei hosted Huntington Beach, with the two teams splitting their prior meetings – the Monarchs winning at the Elite Eight tourney, the Oilers winning at the North-South Challenge. Now, Huntington Beach gained a 5-0 lead by mid-way through the second period and went into half-time in front, 8-1. The Oilers held Mater Dei at bay in the third, finishing the quarter ahead, 10-4. Mater Dei's string of six straight final game appearances then came to an end as Huntington Beach triumphed, 11-5. The next two games could be described as examples of superior teams grinding down good opponents over the course of four periods. At Santiago Canyon College, Orange Lutheran faced Corona del Mar for the second time, having beaten the Sea Kings at the South Coast tourney. A wild first period ended with Orange Lutheran leading, 5-4. The second period was perhaps decisive, as the Lancers extended their lead at half-time, 8-5. Orange Lutheran continued to gradually pull away, leading after three quarters, 12-8, and finally winning, 15-10. Ash Molthen contributed three goals to the Lancers' total. If Orange Lutheran eventually buried their opponent with offense, Harvard did so with defense while hosting Foothill in their first meeting of the year. Harvard took a 3-0 lead after the first period, but still only held a 5-2 advantage at half-time. The Wolverines then shutout Foothill in the third to go up, 7-2, and advanced to the semi-finals with a 7-3 victory.

That leaves the one close game of the round. The only night game of the quarter-finals found Newport Harbor hosting Loyola in their first game of 2016, and their first playoff match since 2007. The Sailors had only one lead the entire game – 1-0, when

they scored on their opening possession. The score was tied, 3-3, at the end of the first period, then the Cubs moved out to leads of 8-5 at half-time and 10-8 entering the fourth quarter. Newport Harbor rallied, tying the game 10-10 at the 4:26 mark of the fourth. Loyola got a goal, then the Sailors tied it again, 11-11, with 3:18 remaining. The Daily Pilot then reported, "Loyola had a response. (Sophomore Stefan) Vavic passed to his older brother, Marko. He flipped in his fourth goal with 1:58 left," making it 12-11. The Pilot continued, "Newport Harbor did try to draw even again, on the power play. But freshman Makoto Kenney had his goal disallowed with 1:23 to play. After the referees huddled together and talked to the coaches, Newport Harbor had to restart its six-on-five advantage. This time, Loyola's Miles O'Brien Schridde (four goals) came up with the field block at the end of the possession. 'The explanation I got was that it was a desk error,' Newport Harbor Coach Ross Sinclair said of the disallowed goal. 'Any desk error, you replay it...tough break.'" The Sailors had two more possessions in the final minute, including a shot on goal with :05 remaining, but Loyola escaped with a 12-11 win.

The semi-finals took place at Woollett Aquatics Center on Wed., Nov. 16, the Division 1 Final Four joined again by Divisions 2 and 3. Loyola and Orange Lutheran met in the 7 p.m. game. The Lancers had already beaten the Cubs twice, including a nine-goal, non-league triumph exactly six weeks prior. It would be no different tonight, in what can be viewed as an upset in only a strict sense. Orange Lutheran raced to a 5-0 lead before the Cubs scored at the 2:32 mark of the second quarter. Half-time showed the Lancers ahead, 6-1. The Cubs closed to within 6-4 in the third, but Orange Lutheran scored the last three goals of the quarter to make it 9-4. A quiet fourth quarter ensued, with the Lancers locking down a 9-5 win and Ash Molthen recording two goals. The 5 p.m. game paired Huntington Beach with Harvard, who had beaten the Oilers at both the Elite Eight and South Coast tourneys. But the most recent meeting had been 7.5 weeks ago and things were indeed different now. The Wolverines led 3-1 after the first period, but were tied, 4-4, at half-time after Ethan Wojciechowski scored his second goal for Huntington Beach (he finished with three). The Oilers moved ahead, 6-5, in the third before Harvard scored at the 2:54 mark and the quarter ended, 6-6. The only goal of the fourth period occurred on what the Register described as "a spin move" and the Los Angeles Daily News called "an improbable goal." The L.A. paper continued, "With 4:21 left, (Huntington Beach's Garrett) Zaan was in a battle near the net and was caught underwater yet somehow he poked a shot past (Harvard goalie) Sam Krutonog that proved to be the eventual game-winner.... Twice Harvard had (man) advantages after a Huntington Beach exclusion but the Wolverines could not score. Pierce Maloney's shot with 30 seconds left was saved by Huntington Beach's Patrick Saunders." And that was it, Huntington Beach had pulled off a true upset, 7-6. More than that, Coach Sasa Branisavljevic's Oilers had done what no Huntington Beach team had ever done dating back to their first playoff appearance in 1955 – they were going to the finals.

The two first-time finalists returned to Woollett Aquatics Center on Sat., Nov. 19, to decide the championship. Huntington Beach had beaten Orange Lutheran in the quarter-finals of last year's playoffs, and exactly three weeks earlier had defeated them in their only regular season meeting. The Oilers represented the first public school in

the finals since 2012, and it was the first all-Orange County final match since 2011. The Division 1 game started 15 minutes later than the previous two years – at 5:45 p.m. This seems to have been because there was an eighth final game played at Woollett this day – the CIF-SDS Division I final between Westview (San Diego) and San Marcos (not the CIF-SS school in Santa Barbara). Their game was originally scheduled for this date, to be played at 4:45 p.m. at La Jolla High School. The pool was unavailable for some reason and the game was moved 75.3 miles north, keeping their original start time. The thinking must have been to have the CIF-SS Division 1 game get underway at about the same time the CIF-SDS game was ending; some San Diego fans might stick around to watch. (Division 4 closed out the season at 7 p.m.)

The game itself was tightly played for three quarters, with Orange Lutheran leading 2-1 after one period and 4-3 at half-time. The contest was still close at the conclusion of the third, with the Lancers ahead, 6-5. The Register, however, noted that Orange Lutheran “(took) the lead for good late in the third period and (surged) to a pair of three-goal leads in the fourth.” The Lancers then captured the title with a 9-7 win. The Register pointed to two key factors that decided the game – “In a stunning move, the Lancers . . . pressed the perimeter and left (Huntington Beach’s) powerful center Quinten Osborne to effective one-on-one coverage from Parker Killion and his crashing teammates. Osborne finished with two goals. Orange Lutheran also received five drawn exclusions from its center, Josh Orrick, in route to a 6-for-9 effort (67 percent) on the power play.” Ash Molthen was also able to contribute a goal, after barely playing in the first meeting of the two schools. The Lancers’ rise was truly meteoric – from Wild Card round loser in 2013 to 2016 champs. The only comparable example is Corona del Mar’s 1965 title, in the school’s fourth year of existence.

“Competitive equity” was probably only partially successful in its first year. There’s no perfect solution. But, it produced a raft of “fun facts” I jotted down at the time, including: The top three divisions all produced champions from religious-based private schools – Orange Lutheran (1), Santa Margarita Catholic (2) and Oaks Christian (3); Division 4’s Royal was the only school among the seven champions to have won a title previously, and they hadn’t done so since 1995 (before anyone playing now had been born); Division 5 held the first full five-round, 32-team tournament on any level since 2007, when there were still only six divisions (Burroughs [Burbank] emerging with the title); Division 6 champ Eleanor Roosevelt became the first school on any level to win each of their last four tournament games by one goal; and Division 7’s Shadow Hills of Indio became only the second championship team to have a female head coach (Alicia Chailigny).

2017

The Masters Tournament of 2006-08 had been Water Polo’s first attempt at organizing something to play for beyond the section title. In 2017 that effort was revived with the SoCal Championships involving CIF-SS, CIF-SDS and CIF-LACS entries competing on two levels. The ultimate aim was to incorporate Northern California schools in a statewide tourney. This called for moving the entire season up

one week to accommodate an additional weekend of competition before Thanksgiving. The “competitive equity format” for the playoffs remained, but the Division 1 tournament was limited to an Elite Eight. For the first time since 1960, then, the playoffs began in the quarter-final round. The compensating factor was that the tourney came complete with a consolation bracket and all eight teams qualified for one of the two levels at the SoCal Championships. Each team would play four to six post-season games and, as it happened, they all played at least five. It was definitely a two-edge sword, though, as Huntington Beach lost four of its five post-season games. When your dream of a section title vanishes, it’s hard to stay motivated. The section title certainly remained the most coveted, and Mater Dei was reloaded and the clear favorite. Their surprising challenger was Oaks Christian, the defending Division 3 champ, who would become the first team to move up two divisions and head straight to the final game. To tell our story at a manageable length, we’ll concentrate mainly on our finalists.

Mater Dei opened its season promisingly on Thurs., Sept. 7, when they hosted Harvard and won, 8-4, with eventual Player of the Year Jackson Seybold scoring three goals. The next day the Monarchs began play in the Santa Barbara Invitational, Fri.-Sat., Sept. 8-9. In one semi-final, Campolindo upended Mater Dei, 13-12 in overtime, in spite of six goals from Seybold. Orange Lutheran beat Oaks Christian, 11-9, in the other semi. Thus, Mater Dei and Oaks Christian had their first and only regular season encounter in the third place game, the Monarchs winning, 12-10. Orange Lutheran went on to win the tourney as they had done last year, downing Campolindo, 12-8. Ash Molthen, back for his senior year, scored four goals for the Lancers. (We’ll encounter three CIF-NCS Division 1 teams this year – Campolindo would eventually defeat Miramonte in a semi-final battle, then lose to Sir Francis Drake in the final match.)

Oaks Christian made clear it was a Division 1 contender the next weekend at the Elite Eight Tournament at Harvard, Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 14-16. In the semi-finals, Oaks Christian beat Harvard, 9-6, while Sacred Heart defeated Huntington Beach, 11-9. In the third place game, Harvard edged Huntington Beach, 12-10. In the final match, Oaks Christian took a 3-0 lead into half-time. Sacred Heart closed to within 3-2 in the third period, but that was as close as they got. The Gators pulled to within 7-5 with 3:26 remaining in the fourth quarter, but Oaks Christian bagged their first major tournament title with an 8-5 victory. (Sacred Heart would eventually win the Open Division championship, the new premier division among three in CIF-CCS.)

It became Mater Dei’s turn to win a major when the South Coast Tournament arrived, Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 21-23. In one semi-final, Mater Dei defeated Newport Harbor, 6-4. The other semi was a rematch of the previous year’s playoff finalists – Orange Lutheran vs. Huntington Beach. Once again, the Lancers triumphed over the Oilers, 15-13. Huntington Beach claimed third place with a victory over the Sailors, 9-8. In the final match held at Newport Harbor, “Mater Dei’s boys water polo team made itself heard loud and clear on multiple channels,” reported the Register. The Monarchs just kept pushing further ahead of Orange Lutheran, leading 4-1 after the first period, 7-3 at half-time, 9-4 after the third and 12-6 at game’s end. Mater Dei had won their seventh South Coast tourney championship in eight years. (Like last year, Harvard

attended but lost to Huntington Beach, 10-6, in the quarter-finals. The Wolverines finished sixth with a loss to Santa Margarita, 8-7.)

Applying the theory that a tournament is a “major” if a Division 1 playoff finalist is in it, then this year the America’s Finest City Invitational in San Diego is to be counted among them. Held the same weekend as the South Coast Tournament, the AFC Invitational attracted Oaks Christian. This was a uniquely configured tourney with 32 teams playing five games, but over just two days – two games on Friday, and an exhausting three more on Saturday. In the semi-finals, Campolindo defeated East Valley (Redlands), 11-4, while Oaks Christian beat Cathedral Catholic, 11-9. The third place game saw East Valley (Redlands) handle Cathedral Catholic, 11-6. East Valley (Redlands) ended up a Division 2 semi-finalist and Cathedral Catholic lost in the quarter-finals of the CIF-SDS Open Division. As to the tourney’s final match, La Morinda Weekly reported, “The (Campolindo) Cougars played the semifinal and final back-to-back due to the team’s tight travel schedule, and prevailed over Oaks Christian 12-11 on a golden goal 18 seconds into the sudden death overtime period for the championship.” After three major tournaments over three weekends, Oaks Christian had finished fourth, first and second, accumulating only three losses. However, the pace may have begun to wear a bit on the Lions. Oaks Christian was already playing its 17th contest of the season when they paid a visit to Orange Lutheran on Fri., Sept. 29, for a non-league game. The Lancers took an 8-5 lead into the final quarter and then held on to deal Oaks Christian its fourth loss, 11-10.

Neither of our two finalists participated in the S&R Sport Cup, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 6-7, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Not participating either was Harvard, who would eventually be a member of the playoff Final Four, and who had won this tourney the previous four years. It did, however, attract the other Final Four member – Newport Harbor. The semi-finals saw Foothill defeat the Sailors, 10-7, while Sacred Heart beat Corona del Mar, 14-8. In the third place game, Newport Harbor edged its Battle of the Bay rival in a wild one, 16-15. The final match featured Sacred Heart soundly beating the Knights, 13-6. The Gators, thus, represented only the second school from Northern California to win the S&R Sport Cup – Miramonte having done it in 2008 and 2009, the latter year by forfeit. (Foothill and Corona del Mar would go on to face each other in the Division 2 final match, the Knights triumphing, 10-7. Notable in Foothill’s line-up was freshman goalie Liam Harrison. He is the first among many players I will be mentioning whose high school playing careers were sidelined in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

The next big event on the season’s calendar was the North-South Challenge, hosted by Sacred Heart, and to be played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 13-14. Unfortunately, Northern California was in the grip of wild fires that had ignited on Sun.-Mon., Oct. 8-9, and within a few days the air quality was horrendous. The 2007 season had been similarly disrupted in Southern California. The Challenge’s manager, Brian Kreutzkamp, was forced to cancel the event the Thursday afternoon before it started. Among the teams that had already arrived from the south, however, were Harvard, Huntington Beach, Mater Dei – and Oaks Christian, hoping to play in its fourth tournament of the

year. To Kreutzkamp's great credit, he quickly arranged two days filled with one-off intersectional matches held at the venerable indoor pool at the prestigious Olympic Club in San Francisco. Mater Dei ended up playing the same number of games they came north to play. On Friday, the Monarchs beat Sacred Heart, 11-10, but lost to Campolindo, 9-8. On Saturday, Mater Dei beat Sir Francis Drake, 12-6, while losing to Miramonte, 10-3. The latter was Mater Dei's third and final loss of the season. Oaks Christian got in two games on Saturday. The Lions beat Cathedral Catholic for a second time, 16-6, but then lost to Huntington Beach, 11-9, for their fifth and final defeat. A tough weekend for the Monarchs and Lions!

The air quality in Northern California had improved sufficiently by the following weekend to allow the playing of the Memorial Cup at Bellarmine, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 20-21. As with the S&R Sport Cup, the only eventual Final Four member involved here was Newport Harbor. However, Campolindo defeated the Sailors in the quarter-finals, 7-6, and Newport Harbor finished fifth. Division 1 did not go unrepresented in the tourney's championship rounds, however. In the semi-finals, Orange Lutheran defeated Sir Francis Drake, 10-6, while Campolindo beat Sacred Heart, 6-5. In the third place game, Sacred Heart edged Drake, 5-4. (Yes, like Oaks Christian, it would have been the Gators' fourth tournament if the Challenge hadn't been cancelled.) In the final match, Orange Lutheran faced Campolindo for a second time, winning again, 11-9. The Lancers had successfully defended their 2016 tourney title and no doubt fortuitously in their minds, they had won the year's first and last major tournaments, just as they did last year.

The Division 1 playoffs ended up involving teams from four different leagues – not an unusual number by the time of the quarter-finals. With one week left in the season, let's see how the league races turned out. In the Marmonte League, Oaks Christian won it with two victories over Agoura, which was consigned to the Division 2 playoffs and ended up a semi-finalist. In the Mission League, the decisive match as always was Harvard vs. Loyola. Played at Harvard on Sat., Oct. 7, the Wolverines won, 9-8. (Harvard had previously defeated Loyola, 9-8 in overtime, in a fifth place semi-final match at the South Coast Tournament.) In the Sunset League, Newport Harbor won its first title since 2013 with a victory over Huntington Beach, 12-11, played at the Sailors' pool on Wed., Oct. 25. The toughest circuit was the Trinity League. The matches that placed the competitors first, second and third were: 1) Mater Dei over Santa Margarita, 9-8, at Santa Margarita on Thurs., Sept. 28; 2) Mater Dei over Orange Lutheran, 11-6, at Mater Dei on Wed., Oct. 18 (thus, the only two losses of the season for the defending champs were to the Monarchs); and 3) Orange Lutheran over Santa Margarita, 14-12, at Santa Margarita on Oct. 25.

Playoff seedings were reported on Sat., Oct. 28, and found – first Mater Dei (Trinity, 24-3); second Orange Lutheran (Trinity, second, 24-2); third Oaks Christian (Marmonte, 21-5); fourth Newport Harbor (Sunset, 22-5); fifth Santa Margarita (Trinity, third, 17-4); sixth Huntington Beach (Sunset, second, 16-7); seventh Harvard (Mission, 15-12); and eighth Loyola (Mission, second, 16-11). Newport Harbor and Huntington Beach are the only two public school teams in the tournament. Division

1 may have been small in numbers, but it was more than made up for by the other six divisions. A total of 164 teams participated in this year's playoffs across all seven levels, a record.

The first round – the quarter-final round – was held Thurs., Nov. 2. Befitting a tournament exclusive to a true Elite Eight, all four games were excellent. And, it included a major upset. A study of the seedings and season records makes it clear tournament organizers expected Mater Dei to see Orange Lutheran in the finals. The Register did not send a reporter to cover the Orange Lutheran vs. Harvard quarter-final – the paper naturally figured the Newport Harbor vs. Santa Margarita would be the more interesting contest. The story that ran the next day was transparently reprioritized to devote the lead paragraphs to the shocking result at Harvard. Orange Lutheran had hosted the Wolverines in a non-league game played, Tues., Oct. 17, whipping them 12-7. Harvard, in fact, came into today's game with a full 10 more losses than Orange Lutheran. (The Wolverines racked up losses in bunches – over the weekend of the cancelled North-South Challenge, for instance, they lost three out of their four games.) Yet Harvard, explained the Register, “drew the home match because it won its league and Orange Lutheran was a league runner-up.” League titles still mattered in this age of competitive equity. When the first-half ended, it did not appear that an upset was in the making – the Lancers led, 6-3. But then the Wolverines shut-out Orange Lutheran in the third, and tied the game by the quarter's end, 6-6. Orange Lutheran had let Harvard play with them, and now Harvard won the fourth period – and the game, 9-8. As to the contest at Newport Harbor, the Sailors had previously beaten Santa Margarita in the quarter-finals of the South Coast Tournament, 9-8 in sudden death – another good reason the Register focused on this playoff match. And it appeared at first that if an upset was going to take place in the round, it would be in this game. Santa Margarita led 3-2 at half-time and stayed ahead after the third, 4-3. Newport Harbor rallied, however, as the Register reported, “(The Sailors' Ryan) Brosnan pump-faked and then tied the score 5-5 with a goal from 6 meters with 3:01 left in the fourth period. He scored from 7 meters 38 seconds later to give Newport Harbor the lead for good at 6-5.” That turned out to be the final score.

At Mater Dei, the Monarchs hosted Loyola in their third meeting of the year. Mater Dei was up two-games-to-none – the Monarchs beat the Cubs, 13-8, in the quarter-finals of the Santa Barbara Invitational; but a non-league game played just eight days prior (Oct. 25) at USC had been closer, 8-6. The Monarchs made it three-for-three, winning today by the same 8-6 score, with Jackson Seybold contributing two goals. Mater Dei had also now won all four of its playoff encounters with the Cubs. Finally, Oaks Christian hosted Huntington Beach, to whom the Lions had lost during “The Lost (Challenge) Weekend.” Today, Oaks Christian trailed Huntington Beach at one point in the second half, but rallied and won on a late goal by Jake Ehrhardt, 11-10. The Oilers were stopped short of the semi-finals for the first time since 2013.

This year's semi-final matches were once again held on a Wednesday at Woollett Aquatics Center with the Final Fours from Divisions 2 and 3 also present. This year's round was distinguished by the fact that it wasn't played until Nov. 8, six days after

the quarter-finals. This marked the longest separation between the two rounds since 1970 (seven days). The 7 p.m. game paired Mater Dei with Newport Harbor, who were meeting for the third time. In addition to the Monarchs' two-goal victory over the Sailors at the South Coast tourney, Mater Dei had hosted Newport Harbor in a non-league game played on Mon., Oct. 23. The Monarchs won, 11-8, for the Sailors' fifth and final loss of the regular season. Now seeing each other again just 16 days later, this game bore little resemblance to either prior encounter. The contest was competitive in the first half – the score was tied after one period, 1-1, and Mater Dei went into intermission with a narrow lead, 3-1. However, the Monarchs broke it open with five unanswered goals in the third period to finish the frame leading, 8-1. Mater Dei cruised to a 9-3 final score, Jackson Seybold again scoring twice.

The 5 p.m. game featured Harvard, who were playing in the semi-finals for the 14th time, and Oaks Christian. The Lions had only played in one Division 1 playoff previously – in 2015. Their win last week was their very first in Division 1. Yet Coach Jack Kocur's Lions had beaten Harvard by three goals at the Elite Eight Tournament and were favored to advance. Oaks Christian proceeded to take a lead into half-time, 2-1. The Wolverines turned things around in the third period, however. Harvard went ahead 3-2, and built a 6-3 lead before Oaks Christian regained their balance and brought the quarter to an end trailing by one, 6-5. The Lions tied it in the fourth, 6-6, but Harvard moved ahead again, 7-6, on a goal with 1:22 remaining. Then, Oaks Christian got a goal from Jacob Watson with only :12 left to force overtime, 7-7. A scoreless first overtime period ensued. Finally, with 1:27 left in the second overtime, the Lions' Jake Ehrhardt drew a penalty shot, which he converted for his only goal of the night. Oaks Christian held on for an 8-7 victory.

The final match took place on Sat., Nov. 11, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Oaks Christian represented the third “new” team to the final match in two years. When the Lions were in the Division 3 final last year, they played in the bright fall sunlight of a 1 p.m. start time. This year they would be under the lights at 5:30 p.m. Getting some showcasing at last this evening was Division 7. Their final games typically started in the morning, but it was “Division 7 at 7 p.m. in 2017!” Oaks Christian was also the first school north of Los Angeles to enter the finals, with its campus overlooking the 101 freeway on the northbound side in Westlake Village. The drive from Oaks Christian to Woollett Aquatics Center is 75.8 miles – the farthest drive for any Division 1 finalist ever. Of course, the lower divisions would say “Suck it up, D1!” Dos Pueblos in Division 3 drove 145 miles to get to the immediately preceding game at 4 p.m. Lastly, Oaks Christian and Mater Dei were meeting exactly nine weeks – 63 days – since their only previous game, which Mater Dei won by two goals at the Santa Barbara Invitational. This in-season separation of games between finalists inched past 1999 (61 days) and 2005 (60 days) to be the longest stretch since 1974 (76 days). It was quite an achievement that the Lions were even here – but Mater Dei was a prohibitive favorite.

Mater Dei took control immediately, scoring the first three goals and finishing the first period already up, 5-1. The Monarchs added incrementally to their lead in the middle periods, going up 8-3 at half-time and 12-6 after three quarters. In the

fourth, Oaks Christian finally seemed to gain their footing, and went on a 3-0 run that cut Mater Dei's lead in half with 2:50 remaining. But Mater Dei's Jackson Seybold then converted a penalty shot 16 seconds later, which brought the final score to 13-9. Seybold notched four goals total to lead the eight Monarchs who scored. It was Mater Dei's fifth title in eight years. There was no catching them now, they were the Team of the Decade.

This isn't where the story ends, though. As the semi-finals and finals were played, the consolation bracket was proceeding – fifth place semi-finals were played Tues., Nov. 7; fifth and seventh place games were held Thurs., Nov. 9, and the third place game took place Fri., Nov. 10. Combined with the final game outcome, the ordering of teams for the first SoCal Championships were 1) Mater Dei, 2) Oaks Christian, 3) Newport Harbor, 4) Harvard, 5) Orange Lutheran, 6) Loyola, 7) Santa Margarita and 8) Huntington Beach. Teams 1 to 4 entered the SoCal Division I tournament, while teams 5 to 8 entered SoCal Division II, both played Fri.-Sat., Nov. 17-18. The quarter-final matches for Division I were held at Newport Harbor, and Division II's were played at Corona del Mar. Semi-final and final matches for both divisions were held the second day at Corona del Mar. The superiority of the CIF-SS teams over the six CIF-SDS and two CIF-LACS teams was pronounced – all eight CIF-SS teams won their quarter-final matches in their respective divisions. The only game that was closer than a 10-goal margin was Oaks Christian's victory over Vista, 14-11, the CIF-SDS Open Division third place team. Orange Lutheran would go on to win the Division II title, defeating Santa Margarita in the final match, 14-8. In one Division I semi-final, Mater Dei defeated Harvard, 10-7. It marked the 16th contest in five years between the two schools, with their series now knotted at 8-8. In the other semi-final, Newport Harbor upset Oaks Christian, 10-8. The end of the SoCal Championships, then, was simply a rematch of a CIF-SS Division 1 semi-final – with the same lopsided result, Mater Dei over Newport Harbor, 12-4. Still, this regional tourney was something of a fine reunion in that the three sections involved all used to be within CIF-SS. It was the first time since Jan. 29, 1942, that a post-season game had been played between CIF-SS and CIF-LACS schools. And, CIF-SS and CIF-SDS teams had never met in the post-season – even when San Diego schools were part of CIF-SS through the 1959 Water Polo season.

“This tournament has been special just for them to play one more (time) together,” the Register quoted Mater Dei Coach Chris Segesman. “I told the guys... ‘you might as well play the way we play and finish it the right way.’” They certainly did that and it turned out to be particularly meaningful as Coach Segesman announced his resignation from Mater Dei the following month, citing a desire to spend more time with his family and pursue a career in business. No doubt, the coaches who had been competing against him the past 12 years wished him all the success in the world in his future endeavors outside of high school Water Polo.

2018

Both Harvard and Newport Harbor had played in the same playoff tournament for 25 of the last 26 years (the Sailors did not qualify in 1996). And, they both

almost always won some games before they were through (Harvard only failing to do so in 2008, Newport Harbor in 1996 and 2015). Yet, they didn't see each other as much as those stats might suggest. They had only met five times, Harvard holding a 3-2 advantage, all played between 2001-2013. They had also both claimed two championships since 2000. Another playoff meeting was overdue and a first bout with the title on the line was way overdue. This is the year it would happen.

The Santa Barbara Invitational, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 6-8, needs to be the place to start. The tourney did not attract Harvard or Newport Harbor. It did not feature Oaks Christian, who would make it to the Final Four. However, it did gather the other five schools that would comprise the eight-team Division 1 playoffs – including Loyola, also a Final Four member. In the semi-finals, Loyola defeated Laguna Beach, 13-5, while Campolindo beat Mater Dei, 7-5. In the third place game, Mater Dei handled Laguna Beach, 13-9. Further down, Santa Margarita took fifth place and San Clemente ended up in seventh. In the tourney's final match, Loyola edged Campolindo, 14-13. (Campolindo would win the new Open Division in CIF-NCS, now played on three levels.) It was a special win for the Cubs – they had been coming to this tournament since its inception in 2011, and had finished second in 2012 and 2016. Now they had finally captured the championship. (The Santa Barbara Invitational was by now a unique 24-team affair. A 16-team play-in round took place on Thursday, with the eight winners advancing to Friday's Sweet 16 [joining eight seeded teams]. The eight losers entered “pool play” within two brackets, places 1-4 then facing their counterpart. Thus, 16 teams got five games, including Laguna Beach, a play-in game winner.)

Harvard, Newport Harbor and Oaks Christian enter the scene at the Elite Eight Tournament, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 13-15, at the Wolverines' pool. Joining them from Division 1 was Loyola, already looking for their second tourney championship. During pool play on Friday, Harvard clobbered Oaks Christian, 14-1. In fact, Oaks Christian had a disappointing weekend, losing four out of five games to finish eighth. Also on Friday, Sacred Heart edged Harvard, 11-10. But, both schools advanced out of bracket play and into the championship rounds. In the semi-finals, Sacred Heart defeated Loyola, 13-12, while Harvard beat Newport Harbor, 11-6, for the Sailors' only loss of the regular season. The Daily Pilot reported, “The Sailors had a bad start... falling behind 3-0 in the first three-plus minutes of the game. The Wolverines... were drawing exclusions and converting them. They scored on their first five power plays, taking a 7-3 half-time lead. The Sailors played Harvard even in the second half, but it was too late.” Newport Harbor then took third place by downing the Cubs, 12-8 (the Sailors had also won a pool play game against Loyola the day before, 13-11). The final match revealed that in this tourney format “It ain't over 'til it's over.” Harvard avenged their loss to the Gators of just one day earlier. Harvard led at half-time, 7-5, then pulled away in the second half to beat Sacred Heart, 12-5. The Wolverines had won their own event for the second time in three years. (Sacred Heart was joined here by Bellarmine. The two schools would share the CIF-CCS Open Division title – for reasons we'll explain later.)

The South Coast Tournament came next, played Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 20-22, with the championship rounds at Newport Harbor. The tourney was distinguished by the presence of all eight eventual Division 1 playoff contenders. In one semi-final, Newport Harbor defeated Loyola, 12-8, for their third victory over the Cubs in nine days. In the other semi, Harvard beat Campolindo, 12-11 in overtime. Campolindo and Loyola had faced each other two Saturdays prior in Santa Barbara, but today it was the Cougars edging the Cubs for third place, 9-8. So, now the Wolverines and Sailors faced each other for the second Saturday in a row. In the final match, Newport Harbor never trailed, but the decisive goal didn't come until late in the fourth quarter. The Register reported, "(Newport Harbor's Jake Liechty) scored just as Harvard was coming even after fighting off a power-play to give the Sailors a 13-10 lead with 2:15 left." The Sailors closed it out, 13-11, for their first South Coast Tournament title since 2007 – a championship year for them. As to the rest of the tourney's Division 1 teams, Mater Dei finished fifth; Oaks Christian, sixth; Santa Margarita, seventh; Laguna Beach, ninth; and San Clemente, 15th.

The following weekend, Sat., Sept. 29, saw two of the most meaningful wins for both Newport Harbor and Harvard. The Sailors hosted Cathedral Catholic, the eventual CIF-SDS Open Division champion, and came away with an 11-10 victory. It was Newport Harbor's closest game all season, other than their one loss to Harvard. The Wolverines hosted defending champ Mater Dei, and won convincingly, 10-5. Just a few years ago it had become almost customary for them to face each other four times per season. It would turn out to be the only meeting of the two teams this year.

Harvard's big win over the Monarchs led to an 11-day stretch that was their rockiest of the season. The Wolverines' very next game was against visiting Oaks Christian on Wed., Oct. 3. In a stunning reversal of the Elite Eight tourney outcome, the Lions beat Harvard, 8-5. The Wolverines' next game after that was a return visit to Newport Harbor's pool to play the Sailors on Sat., Oct. 6, the third meeting of the two teams in the past four Saturdays. Harvard moved out to a 3-1 lead in the first period. But then, the Daily Pilot reported, "Newport Harbor took its first lead at 6-5 in the final minute of the first half....The Sailors then blanked Harvard 5-0 in the third quarter, for a commanding 11-5 advantage." Newport Harbor went on to triumph, 14-9.

The Wolverines then traveled to Sacred Heart in Atherton to play in the North-South Challenge, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 12-13. Harvard was joined there by four other Division 1 contenders. The host school, in fact, had just come north themselves – or returned from the south, that is. During Fri.-Sat., Oct. 5-6, Sacred Heart won their second straight S&R Sport Cup at Woollett Aquatics Center, defeating Huntington Beach, 12-7, in the final match. (For Huntington Beach, the second place finish was a highlight – they would end the season with a losing record and not qualify for the playoffs at all. Their 2016 final game opponent, Orange Lutheran, was also having a down year – the Lancers would finish in the Sweet 16 of Division 2.) In one Challenge semi-final, Sacred Heart defeated Mater Dei, 10-8. In the other semi, Harvard was facing Campolindo a third time – they had played at the South Coast tourney, and Harvard had additionally arrived north early to get in some intersectional games. On Wed.,

Oct. 10, Harvard beat Campolindo at home, 12-11 in sudden death. Now, Harvard won in regulation, 8-7, for their third one-goal win over the Cougars. Campolindo would capture third place, beating Mater Dei, 14-9. This left Harvard and Sacred Heart to face each other a third time as well, they having split two games at the Elite Eight tourney. According to Palo Alto Online, "SHP never trailed in the game. . . . Walker Seymour scored twice to put the Gators up, 5-2, but the Wolverines chipped away, drawing within 5-4 with 3:54 left in the third period. Kyle Ballock gave the Gators a 6-4 cushion 28 seconds later and Harvard-Westlake answered again. Will Riley made it 7-5 with 5:24 remaining to play. The Wolverines cut it to 7-6 with 2:42 left to play. It took a pair of Griffen Price saves and an Andrew Churukian steal to seal the win," 7-6. Sacred Heart had never made it to the finals of their own tourney. Now the Gators had won it – beating Harvard a second time for their third loss in 11 days, and fifth on the season. As to the remaining Division 1 teams, Santa Margarita finished fifth; Oaks Christian, seventh; and San Clemente, eighth.

Only Newport Harbor represented Division 1 at the Memorial Cup, played Fri.-Sat., Oct. 19-20, at Bellarmine. In one semi-final, Newport Harbor defeated Bellarmine, 11-4. In the other semi, Campolindo beat Sacred Heart, 12-9 – yes, both teams were playing in their fourth tournament. Sacred Heart edged the Bells, 12-11, for third place. Newport Harbor then captured the tourney with a 12-8 victory over Campolindo. It was the Sailors' first Memorial Cup title since 2011 – and the first time since that year they had won two tourneys in a season. On the same Saturday in Irvine, another Water Polo fest was wrapping up – the Steve Pal Memorial Tournament at Beckman (Pal was an influential age-group referee who died in February 2010). In the final match, Laguna Beach claimed the title for the second year in a row, defeating Northwood, 9-4 (the Timberwolves would finish in the quarter-finals of Division 3). And, that brings us to a complete accounting of the tournament involvement of the Division 1 playoff contenders.

Harvard had one remaining test in the last week of the season – its annual rivalry match with Loyola to decide the Mission League championship. With the game played at Harvard on Wed., Oct. 24, the Wolverines got past the Cubs, 11-9. The Division 1 playoffs would comprise teams from a total of five leagues. The Trinity League also produced a decisive game – Mater Dei over Santa Margarita, 9-6, at Mater Dei on Thurs., Oct. 4. In the South Coast League, San Clemente won by two games over Dana Hills, who were consigned to Division 2 and lost in the semi-finals. The Marmonte League was also decided by a two-game margin – Oaks Christian bested Newbury Park, who were sent to Division 3 and lost in the Sweet 16. And, there was a new league this year – the four-team Surf League. Newport Harbor won the inaugural title by three games over Laguna Beach. All five league champions went undefeated within their circuits.

Playoff seedings were reported on Sat., Oct. 27. Newport Harbor (Surf, 27-1) had started the season ranked behind Harvard, but they were the clear number one seed now. Rounding out the Elite Eight were second seed Harvard (Mission, 22-5); third, Loyola (Mission, second, 20-6); fourth, Oaks Christian (Marmonte, 17-9); fifth,

Mater Dei (Trinity, 18-8); sixth, Santa Margarita (Trinity, second, 17-8); seventh, San Clemente (South Coast, 17-10); and eighth, Laguna Beach (Surf, second, 18-10). It was Laguna Beach's first appearance in the playoffs since 2005. The seeding arrangement created the unusual circumstance of league rivals facing each other in the quarter-finals (the Breakers would play Newport Harbor). But organizers had little choice in this era of attempting to abide by what the rating formula dictated. Laguna Beach had a 1-5 record against the other teams in the playoffs. This year's competition would proceed as it did in 2017, with a complete consolation bracket to determine finishers down to eighth place. However, only the Final Four would advance to the regional SoCal Championships.

The quarter-finals took place on Thurs., Nov. 1. This year's Elite Eight again produced four competitive games, though there were no one-goal outcomes and no upsets. The match least-covered in the press was Loyola hosting Santa Margarita at USC. (This year the Register moved their Water Polo coverage off the print edition to almost exclusively on-line. That wasn't so bad – Dan Albano could now “write long” about the games. But this day he had to cover three other games involving Orange County teams.) The Cubs and Eagles had last met in the playoffs in 2011, and they also played a milestone 1996 game – the first premier level match between two private schools. Now two such games were taking place in this round alone. The schools actually hadn't seen each other at all since a doesn't-really-count fifth place semi-final in last year's playoff consolation bracket. Today, Loyola took leads of 4-1 after one period and 7-3 into half-time. The game included a penalty-shot block by Santa Margarita's goalie, helping to keep things fairly close, but Loyola continued to lead after three periods, 8-4. The Cubs closed it out with an 11-8 victory.

There had been a 10-season stretch – 1993 to 2002 – when Harvard played San Clemente in the playoffs four times, but they hadn't faced off in the post-season since then. More recently, Harvard soundly defeated San Clemente, 11-4, in the Sweet 16 of the South Coast Tournament. Now, with the Wolverines hosting, the two teams battled aggressively to a tie after the first period, 3-3. The Register reported, “In the first half, there were 13 exclusions, 10 on San Clemente and three on Harvard. The Wolverines defense pressured San Clemente and limited the Tritons to one goal in the second period,” allowing Harvard to go into half-time ahead, 7-4. The Wolverines maintained their distance after three periods, 9-6. Then, the Wolverines' “(Ethan) Shipman scored his third goal with an elegant lob over keeper Trevor Bengé and Harvard led 11-7 with 2:52 remaining in the fourth quarter.” Harvard finished with a 12-9 win.

Newport Harbor and Laguna Beach had to reach back the furthest to remember the last time they had met in the playoffs – not since 1972 at the Sailors' landmark 50-meter pool in its inaugural season. Now they were meeting again at the very same pool, having played two league games earlier in the year. The Sailors had won them both – 11-7, at Newport Harbor on Mon., Sept. 17; and 8-4, at Corona del Mar on Oct. 10. Today's game was quite a bit tougher for the Sailors. According to the Daily Pilot, “Trailing for much of the match, the Newport Harbor High boys' water polo team needed a spark to avoid an upset loss....The Sailors trailed 4-3 at half-time against

Laguna Beach, and didn't take their first lead until sophomore Eli Liechty scored a six-on-five goal late in the third quarter. But Breakers freshman Will Kelly answered with a strike from about seven meters, tying the score at 5-5 entering the fourth. Newport Harbor's seniors came through. (Jack) White scored inside, then Jake Liechty scored outside as the Sailors opened up a 7-5 advantage with 5:49 left. ...Newport Harbor pushed the lead to 8-5 when junior Makoto Kenney scored from long-range with the shot clock running down. The Sailors were on their way (to a 9-6 win)."

That brings us to the best game of the round, Oaks Christian hosting Mater Dei in a rematch of last year's playoff final. The two teams had split two previous meetings this season. First, Mater Dei won, 13-3, in the fifth place game of the South Coast Tournament. But just as the Lions had reversed an earlier lopsided loss to Harvard, they did so also against the Monarchs. In fact, they did it just three days after that upset win against the Wolverines – and again as the visiting team. On Oct. 6, Oaks Christian beat Mater Dei, 7-5. Now, with a 7 p.m. start time, the Register noted the game attracted "a packed...raucous crowd" of the Oaks Christian fandom. Still, Mater Dei scored the game's first two goals and led after one period, 2-1. The Monarchs, in fact, never trailed throughout regulation, though they were caught at half-time, 3-3. The game turned into a truly tough defensive battle in the second half, with a scoreless third period leading to a fourth period that ended, 4-4. The Register then reported, "In the decisive overtime, Oaks Christian was finally too much. (The Lions') Zach Frazier rolled out and scored from center off the opening sprint to the first three-minute overtime and Tanner Frost scored on the power-play with 34 seconds left in the second overtime to seal the Monarchs' fate." Thus, Oaks Christian exacted some revenge for 2017's verdict, 6-4.

The 2018 Final Four met at Woollett Aquatics Center on Wed., Nov. 7, joined as usual by the Division 2 and 3 semi-finalists. In the 5 p.m. game, Newport Harbor was facing Oaks Christian for the first time this year and first time ever in the playoffs. The Sailors knocked the Lions back on their heels early, taking a 2-0 lead, and never trailed in the game. Oaks Christian did, however, tie the score at half-time, 2-2. Newport Harbor moved back out to a 4-2 lead before Oaks Christian converted an extra-man situation with 1:40 left in the third quarter. Then, reports the Register, "Reed Stemier scored for the Sailors in the final seconds of the period to give the Sailors a 5-3 lead." Oaks Christian closed in again, 5-4, after converting another extra-man situation early in the fourth. Newport Harbor then scored the next three goals – one by Tommy Kennedy with 4:56 remaining, another by Makana Sanita and finally, "(Jake) Liechty scored from 5 meters out to give the Sailors a four-goal cushion and essentially put the match away." Leading now 8-4 midway through the fourth period, the Sailors secured a 9-6 victory. Newport Harbor was back in the finals for the first time since 2009, when Head Coach Ross Sinclair had been an assistant coach. It was a real achievement – taking over in 2015 and losing in the Sweet 16, his teams finished in the quarter-finals in 2016, semi-finals in 2017 and now Sinclair's initial freshman class had a chance at the title.

The 7 p.m. game featured the long-awaited playoff showdown between Mission League rivals Harvard and Loyola – it wasn't the final game, but it was taking place. Their only

prior meeting this season was still fresh in their minds – Harvard winning by two goals exactly two weeks ago. And, these two great programs did not disappoint. According to the Los Angeles Daily News, “There were three lead changes. Harvard carried a 3-1 lead into the second period before Loyola scored three consecutive goals to take a 4-3 lead. The Wolverines then fired off four straight goals (all by Pierce Maloney) to take a 7-4 lead – the largest of the match.” Maloney had a game-high five goals total. The Cubs climbed back into it, though, 7-6. Finally, “With less than a minute remaining, Harvard...had to rely on defense....Not once, but twice. Loyola had two full shot clocks to conjure up an equalizer in the final period, but the first ended in a field block by Harvard’s George Avakian and the second ended with a match-clinching steal from Ryan Neapole to give the Wolverines a 7-6 win over the Cubs....‘Ryan Neapole is one of the best high school water polo players in the country, if not the best,’ Harvard coach Brian Flacks said.” Indeed, Neapole would go on to be a unique Player of the Year selection – a defensive specialist and ball-stealer extraordinaire. Harvard was back in the finals after missing the previous two years. For Loyola, the heartbreak continued – it was their ninth trip to the semi-finals without ever advancing, five of those times by one-goal losses.

A glorious day of Water Polo was planned for the seven CIF-SS divisions at Woollett Aquatics Center on Sat., Nov. 10. In fact, eight games were to be played – the Division 1 third place game was added to the festivities as both Loyola and Oaks Christian would be advancing to the SoCal Championships. Then, disaster literally struck. California had a particularly bad wildfire season in 2018, and it revved on Thurs., Nov. 8, throughout the state. In Northern California, the wildfires first led to the cancellation of the NorCal counterpart to the SoCal regional. Then, after repeated attempts at rescheduling, the CIF-CCS Open Division final match between Sacred Heart and Bellarmine was called off and the two teams were declared co-champions. There was a real possibility that could happen in the south as well, with the Woolsey Wildfires raging on the border of Ventura and Los Angeles Counties. Oaks Christian is located right on the county line and the campus was endangered by the flames. Harvard was less than 26 miles from Oaks Christian. If Harvard wasn’t in imminent peril, the team would find it hard to get down to Orange County given traffic detours and congestion. And, of course, air quality was worsening by the hour. The goal became one of just getting the games in. On the day before the finals, the Division 1 third place game was postponed and the Harvard vs. Newport Harbor final match took its place at 2:50 p.m. The Division 5 title game – the day’s finale – was moved up to Division 1’s spot, now starting at 5:45 p.m. Thus, as in 2013, the final match would be played outdoors and in sunlight. The Sailors held a 2-1 advantage this season in three games with the Wolverines, though they hadn’t seen each other in exactly five weeks. (An interesting sidelight to the final is that both coaches were graduates not so long ago of the schools they were now leading – Brian Flacks, Harvard Class of 2006; and Ross Sinclair, Newport Harbor Class of 2003.)

The Register rightly stated that the game itself was a “defensive masterpiece” by Harvard. The paper reported, “Ryan Neapole set the tone with a steal on the perimeter early in the first period, leading to a counterattack strike by Piece Maloney. The goal

gave Harvard an early lead that it wouldn't relinquish. Neapole finished with four steals." Harvard established a 2-0 lead at half-time before the Sailors finally got on the scoreboard at the 4:49 mark of the third period, making it 2-1. The Wolverines added two relatively quick goals to go up 4-1 with 2:29 left in the third. Heading into the fourth quarter with a three goal lead, Harvard kept Newport Harbor contained to win, 5-3. Amazingly, the Sailors did not score a single even-strength goal and went only 3-for-10 on extra man situations. Their three-goal total was exactly half of Newport Harbor's lowest prior output – six, which had come in their first loss to Harvard. In fact, it was the lowest scoring final contest in terms of total goals (eight) since 1967, when quarters were a minute shorter. The Wolverines had their third title in six years (outdoors and in daylight works for them – they had won it in 2013 as well).

The postponed third place game was played on Wed., Nov. 14. With Harvard providing the pool, Oaks Christian defeated Loyola, 8-7. The Final Four proceeded to enter the Division I tournament of the SoCal Championships, played Fri.-Sat., Nov. 16-17 (the Championships were expanded to three levels this year). This tourney's Elite Eight included Foothill and Mira Costa, who placed first and second in Division 2, along with Cathedral Catholic and Bishop's, the finalists in CIF-SDS Open Division. On the first day of competition, Oaks Christian became the first Division 1 team to lose in the quarter-finals, beaten by Bishop's, 10-9. Saturday's championship rounds were held at Ocean View, with Harvard defeating Loyola, 12-9, and Newport Harbor beating Bishop's, 17-5, in the semi-finals. This set up the typical circumstance of post-post-season tourneys – a rematch of a title game played one week before, but with little meaning attached. Just as with the Masters Tournaments of a decade prior, it was the team defeated in the section final that took more of an interest. Newport Harbor held a 3-0 lead over Harvard after the first period and had an 8-2 lead at one point in the third – and still led, 10-6, at the period's end. The Wolverines made it interesting in the fourth, but Newport Harbor prevailed, 10-9. The Register reported, "Newport Harbor's boys water polo team didn't celebrate by tossing Coach Ross Sinclair into the pool....(But) Newport Harbor earned a degree of redemption and sent its seniors off on a positive note." The paper recorded Harvard's Brian Flacks saying, "It's a long season and it was an opportunity to get a lot of other players playing time this weekend and continue to compete...and enjoy our last week with these seniors. It would be wonderful at some point to get a state championship."

2019

Every year is unique – 2019 was a replay of 2018...without the wildfires. If the outcome seemed repetitive at the time, the events of the following year would have us longing for it.

The eight-team playoffs featured the return to Division 1 of the two 2016 finalists – Huntington Beach and Orange Lutheran. Ousted from the Elite Eight this year were San Clemente, which finished second in Division 2; and Laguna Beach, which ended their season in the Sweet 16 of that division. Everyone else from last year was back for

more – Harvard and Newport Harbor leading the way, along with Loyola, Mater Dei, Oaks Christian and Santa Margarita.

Like last year, five Division 1 playoff teams were involved in the Santa Barbara Invitational, held Fri.-Sat., Sept. 6-7. In the semi-finals, Loyola beat Huntington Beach, 14-11, while Mater Dei defeated Woodbridge, 11-9. The third place match showed Woodbridge over Huntington Beach, 10-9 (Woodbridge finished in the quarter-finals of Division 2). Santa Margarita claimed fifth place while Orange Lutheran settled for 10th. The final match was played at Santa Barbara, with Loyola completing a successful tournament title defense by triumphing over Mater Dei, 11-7.

Like last year also, the South Coast Tournament held the distinction of attracting all eight of the eventual playoff entrants. The Water Polo fest was held Thurs.-Sat., Sept. 19-21, with the championship rounds at Newport Harbor. The Sailors got a particularly good look at their future playoff compatriots during the tourney. In the Sweet 16, Newport Harbor beat Orange Lutheran, 12-7, and in the quarter-finals the Sailors got one of their toughest games all year, edging Santa Margarita, 10-9. In the other quarter-final games, Mater Dei beat Oaks Christian, 9-7; Huntington Beach got past Loyola, 12-11; and Harvard defeated Bishop's, 14-9 (Bishop's would win the CIF-SDS Open Division title). The final day of competition opened with semi-final victories by Newport Harbor over Mater Dei, 9-5, and Harvard over Huntington Beach, 13-10. The third place game went to Huntington Beach, defeating Mater Dei, 12-9. Harvard then faced Newport Harbor in the tourney's final match for a second year in a row, the Sailors having won last year. Newport Harbor was missing two key players due to injuries and their short-handedness showed, trailing throughout the game. The Wolverines held leads of 4-1 after one period and 5-2 at half-time, then extended their advantage in the second half to win, 11-7. It was Harvard's second South Coast Tournament title in the four years they had been taking it in. The tourney also saw Santa Margarita defeat Oaks Christian, 11-5, in a fifth place semi-final match. In the fifth place game itself, Loyola beat Santa Margarita, 10-8. Finishing further back were Oaks Christian, eighth, and Orange Lutheran, 10th.

The following week, Thurs., Sept. 26, Harvard traveled to Oaks Christian and faced one its strongest challenges of the season. Last year in their non-league face-off, the Lions had scored a startling upset over the Wolverines in their own pool. Harvard seemed to approach this year's game with the memory still fresh in their minds, and they came away with a narrow victory, 11-10.

Corporate sponsorship may have had a hand in the S&R Sport Cup and rechristened S&R Sport Elite 8 tournaments being played on the same weekend. Perhaps the thinking was to have "S&R" emblazoned everywhere you turned. In any case, the 26-year-old Sport Cup was played at the usual time and place, the first weekend of the month, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 4-5, at Woollett Aquatics Center. Huntington Beach was the only Division 1 team represented, and they won it for the first time. While they were at it, the Oilers also got some revenge from the Santa Barbara Invitational of four Saturdays prior – they pounded Woodbridge, 21-12, in the final match.

The Elite 8 had gotten underway one day prior and 52.5 miles north at Harvard, with four eventual playoff teams participating. In Newport Harbor's opening game of pool play, they were beaten by Campolindo, 10-9. The next day the Sailors defeated Oaks Christian, 13-7; and then Loyola, 10-9, to escape with their second one-goal win of the season. Fortunately for the Sailors, both Oaks Christian and Loyola helped their cause with victories over Campolindo. (Campolindo would go on to win the CIF-NCS Open Division title, defeating Miramonte in their playoff final match.) Thus, Newport Harbor and Loyola advanced to the championship rounds on Saturday – Oaks Christian would finish in fifth place. In the semi-finals, Harvard beat Mission League rival Loyola, 9-8, while Newport Harbor had an easy time over Bishop's, 16-5. In the third place game, Loyola also soundly defeated Bishop's, 15-8. The Sailors and Wolverines squared off again in a tournament final match, but this one was closer than the encounter at the South Coast fest. Harvard moved out to a 5-2 half-time lead then, according to the Register, "The Wolverines blocked a penalty shot in the second half and held on to defeat (Newport Harbor) 8-7." Harvard had won its third Elite 8 title in the four years of the tourney's existence. Making it even more satisfying, they had won their second and third one-goal victories of the season in one day's work. For Newport Harbor, it marked their third and final loss of the season.

Newport Harbor and Harvard were not done with each other. Again like last year, the two teams met for the third Saturday in four in a non-league game – right back at Harvard, Sat., Oct. 12. According to the Daily Pilot, "(Senior Ike) Love scored five goals for the Sailors, who did not trail after the first quarter and led 7-4 at half-time. But Harvard rallied to tie the score at 9-9 with 3:56 left in the fourth quarter, on senior George Avakian's power-play goal." Love then scored a go-ahead goal with 3:31 remaining in the period and Mason Hunt added a final tally on an extra-man situation to give the Sailors an 11-9 victory. It was Harvard's first loss of the season. Nicholas Tierney – the eventual Player of the Year – and Ethan Shipman led Harvard's scoring with three goals each. Encouragingly for the Sailors, they were finally at full strength with two starters back in the line-up – Makoto Kenney had been out with a broken finger, Tommy Kennedy slowed by a bad back.

Five of the eventual playoff teams – like last year – assembled at Sacred Heart in Atherton for the North-South Challenge, Fri.-Sat., Oct. 18-19. In the quarter-finals, Oaks Christian defeated Mater Dei, 6-4, in their third meeting of the year. The Lions had lost to the Monarchs at the South Coast tourney, but won their non-league game played on Sat., Sept. 28, at Mater Dei, 14-10. Mater Dei would finish this tournament in sixth place. It was an all-Division 1 semi-final round – Harvard defeated Santa Margarita, 12-10, and Loyola beat Oaks Christian, 12-7. In the third place game, Santa Margarita handled Oaks Christian, 12-5. This was Loyola's fourth tournament of the year, and they were beginning to develop a talent for them. In the final match, Loyola proceeded to upset Harvard, 8-7. It was Loyola's second major tourney championship of 2019 and their first North-South Challenge title. For Harvard, it was their second and final loss of the season.

Newport Harbor and Orange Lutheran between them had won the last three Memorial Cup tournaments, and they traveled to Bellarmine in San Jose once again to compete in the event, held Fri.-Sat., Oct. 25-26. In the semi-finals, Newport Harbor defeated Miramonte, 11-9, while Bishop's beat Orange Lutheran by the same 11-9 outcome. Miramonte then beat Orange Lutheran, 12-10, for third place. Newport Harbor hadn't much trouble with Bishop's back at the Elite 8. In fact, the Sailors had also visited Bishop's in their very first game of the season, winning 15-12 on Sat., Aug. 31. Now, they won easily as well, 14-7, for Newport Harbor's second straight Memorial Cup title. (Thus concluded a season in which Miramonte here was the only Northern California school to get into the Final Four in any of Water Polo's six major tournaments.)

The Division 1 playoffs would feature teams from four leagues, with all champs going undefeated. Oaks Christian won the Marmonte League by three games over Thousand Oaks, who finished in the Sweet 16 of Division 4. Harvard hosted Loyola on Wed., Oct. 30, in their Mission League showdown, after splitting two one-goal tournament verdicts. A lot was at stake for both teams – the rubber match of three meetings, the league title and, most importantly, a playoff seed ahead of the other. The Wolverines left no doubt when it counted, triumphing over the Cubs, 12-7. Newport Harbor won the Surf League via two victories over Huntington Beach. It could have easily been a tie. The two teams met on Wed., Oct. 16, at Corona del Mar in the second round of league play. According to the Register, “The Oilers stayed close to Newport Harbor throughout. The Sailors led 5-4 at half-time and 7-6 going into the fourth period,” finally winning, 9-8. Thus, Newport Harbor – like Harvard – had three one-goal victories during the season. The Trinity League, as in 2017, would contribute three teams to the playoffs. In the decisive match, Orange Lutheran defeated Santa Margarita, 11-10, played Thurs., Oct. 10, at Santa Margarita. Third place in Trinity was decided on Wed., Oct. 16, at Santa Margarita, with the Eagles besting Mater Dei, 7-4.

The playoff seedings were reported on Sun., Nov. 3, with the teams placed as follows – first, Harvard (Mission, 25-2); second, Newport Harbor (Surf, 24-3); third, Loyola (Mission, second, 23-5); fourth, Orange Lutheran (Trinity, 16-9); fifth, Huntington Beach (Surf, second, 17-8); sixth, Santa Margarita (Trinity, second, 18-8); seventh, Oaks Christian (Marmonte, 21-7); and eighth, Mater Dei (Trinity, third, 13-13). The Division 1 contenders had played each other a grand total of 41 times, the outcomes for which are rendered in the table on the next page.

Record of Head to Head Competition for Playoff Entrants										
Team	HAR	NH	LOY	OLu	HB	SM	OC	MD	Total	Prec.
HAR	x	2-1	2-1	1-0	1-0	2-0	1-0	1-0	10-2	.833
NH	1-2	x	1-0	1-0	2-0	1-0	1-0	2-0	9-2	.818
LOY	1-2	0-1	x	1-0	1-1	1-0	2-1	2-0	8-5	.615
OLu	0-1	0-1	0-1	x	1-0	1-0	0-0	1-0	3-3	.500
HB	0-1	0-2	1-1	0-1	x	1-0	0-1	1-0	3-6	.333
SM	0-2	0-1	0-1	0-1	0-1	x	2-0	1-0	3-6	.333
OC	0-1	0-1	1-2	0-0	1-0	0-2	x	2-1	4-7	.367
MD	0-1	0-2	0-2	0-1	0-1	0-1	1-2	x	1-10	.091

The teams are placed in the order in which they had been seeded. Glancing down the far right column, though, one will notice that Oaks Christian had a higher winning percentage than either Huntington Beach or Santa Margarita. Looked at this way, Oaks Christian could have been seeded fifth. And, in the past their status as a league champion might have put them ahead of the two second-place teams. Let me point out also Loyola's total of 13 games against playoff competitors – the Cubs were not lagging in “body of work”! Loyola and Oaks Christian played one another three times – like three other Division 1 pairs already reported on. Loyola had beaten Oaks Christian at the Elite 8 (9-7, in pool play) and at the North-South Challenge. Four days after that second contest, the Lions won, 10-7, in a non-league game played at Loyola, Wed., Oct. 23. Lastly, notice Oaks Christian and Orange Lutheran were the only teams that did not face each other at all.

The 2019 playoffs were different in one respect – this year there was no consolation bracket down to eighth place. Only a third place game would be played to round-out seeds 1-4 for the Division I SoCal Championships. Quarter-final losers would be done for the season, and that round got underway on Thurs., Nov. 7. Let's look at the games clockwise geographically and chronologically, beginning with Mater Dei at Harvard for a 5 p.m. clash. The Monarchs and Wolverines had not seen each other in the playoffs since 2015, when they were battling in their third consecutive final match, won by Mater Dei. Of 2019's four quarter-final games, this contest featured the two teams that had met most recently. Harvard had visited Mater Dei on Tues., Oct. 22, and came away with a 12-7 non-league victory in their only regular season encounter. On this day, Harvard easily dispensed with Mater Dei in the round's least competitive match, 11-3.

Nearly 53 miles southeast at Santiago Canyon College two other former final game combatants were squaring off at 6 p.m. Orange Lutheran had won that 2016 tangle with Huntington Beach, but the two had also met in 2015 in this same pool and same round, the Oilers winning that one. This season, Orange Lutheran had edged the Oilers, 13-12 in sudden death, in a non-league game played Tues., Oct. 15, at Huntington Beach. It was assumed this game between fourth and fifth seeds would be a white-knuckler. Instead, Huntington Beach never trailed. The score was tied, 3-3, at the end of the first

period, but then Huntington Beach moved ahead by half-time, 6-4. The key point in the game came in the third quarter when the Oilers scored four unanswered goals and finished the period leading, 11-5. That turned out to be the final score, and Huntington Beach's measure of revenge for 2016 produced the only upset of the round.

At the same start time of 6 p.m. less than 18 miles west of Santiago Canyon College, Newport Harbor was hosting Oaks Christian in a rematch of last year's semi-final encounter won by the Sailors. Nearly five weeks earlier Newport Harbor had trounced Oaks Christian during pool play at the Elite 8 event. Today, the Lions had managed to tie the Sailors, 4-4, on an extra man situation late in the second quarter. Then, according to the Daily Pilot, "(Junior Eli) Liechty scored two goals in the final 1:01 of the half to give Newport Harbor a 6-4 lead. The first was assisted by his freshman brother, Ben Liechty....He then scored on a sweep shot with 23 seconds left in the half....Newport Harbor sophomore Mason Hunt and senior Tommy Kennedy added third-quarter goals for the Sailors, who began to pull away." Eli Liechty ended up with five goals total, and Newport Harbor advanced to the semi-finals on an 11-8 triumph.

Loyola and Santa Margarita got underway at 6:30 p.m., 39.5 miles northwest at Mira Costa, where the Cubs had hosted four previous quarter-final matches from 1999 to 2012. Loyola had beaten the Eagles by three goals in last year's quarter-finals, and by two goals in their only prior meeting of 2019, at the South Coast Tournament. It turned out to be the most hotly contested battle of the round, featuring the two teams that had waited the longest between meetings. (The reader may also notice a steady decline in the intensity of prior playoff histories between each successive match pairing.) A Loyola Athletics story reported, "Although the game stayed close throughout, the Cubs managed three goals in the closing minutes to push to a 9-6 victory....While Santa Margarita seemed to be holding their own against the higher-ranked Cubs throughout the game, senior Travis Reynolds' deep goal in the final minutes secured Santa Margarita's fate....(Dylan) Ortiz was lethal when the Cubs most needed it. During a contested second and third quarter, Ortiz went in to bury two much-needed shots....Without Ortiz, overtime could possibly have (been) a part of the late-game plan." Instead, Loyola now made plans for yet another trip to the semi-finals.

The semi-finals were held at Woollett Aquatics Center on Wed., Nov. 13, along with the Division 2 and 3 Final Fours (this line-up has been continuous since 2014). Coaches of the past few seasons generally didn't like to be asked about private vs. public schools, but this evening's games made it hard to resist the observation – a private school from the Mission League against a public school from the Surf League in each game. In fact, Newport Harbor and Huntington Beach were the only two public schools in the tournament. Newport Harbor and Loyola met in the 5 p.m. contest. The Cubs had beaten the Sailors in their most recent playoff encounter, in 2016, but Newport Harbor had won the five prior meetings between 1992 to 2007. The Sailors had also defeated Loyola this season during the Elite 8 tournament, but only by one goal. Tonight, though, Newport Harbor dominated early, getting off to a 5-0 lead by half-time, and then making it 6-0 in the third period. The Loyola school newspaper

reported, “The Cubs scored more goals in the second half than the Sailors did and were able to cut the Newport lead down to three goals at one point, but they ultimately fell short after missing some vital shots late in the third quarter.” In fact, Loyola went 0-for-5 in extra man situations. The Cubs scored a goal in the final minute to make it sound somewhat close, but Newport Harbor prevailed, 9-6. The Sailors’ goal production came from three sources, each scoring three times – Tommy Kennedy, Makoto Kenney and Ike Love. Loyola’s student paper wrote, “the Cubs have plenty of time to prepare for next year and bulk up to try and end the semi-final elimination streak.” That streak now stood at an even 10 without ever getting to the finals. (The next closest school with this unfortunate distinction is University – turned back five times.)

The 7 p.m. game was much more interesting, at least for the first three quarters. Harvard and Huntington Beach had faced each other twice before in the playoffs, both times in the semi-finals – in 2015 the Wolverines won, in 2016 the Oilers triumphed. In this year’s regular season, Harvard had defeated Huntington Beach by three goals at the South Coast Tournament. Now, the two teams battled closely, and Huntington Beach even managed to take the lead, 5-4, with 1:05 remaining in the third quarter. The Oilers’ only lead of the game, however, was short-lived. As the Daily Pilot reported, “A quick goal at center by Harvard’s Mot Stothart with two seconds remaining tied the score at 5-5 entering the fourth quarter. Then, the Wolverines exploded. Harvard scored five more goals, turning the tight contest into a 10-7 victory.” In addition to Stothart’s pivotal goal, Harvard got contributions from four other players, including George Caras with three goals, and two each from George Avakian, Ethan Shipman and Nicholas Tierney.

So far there hadn’t been a game decided by less than three goals, and only two contests had been close in the fourth quarter. Maybe things would be different in the finals, played Sat., Nov. 16, back at Woollett Aquatics Center. The battle was a rematch of last year’s final, with Harvard leading their all-time playoff series, 4-2. For Newport Harbor, it was their first back-to-back final games since they completed their string of 11 straight appearances in 1984. Last year, Newport Harbor had won two of three regular season meetings against Harvard; now the reverse was true – though like last year, it had been exactly five weeks since they last met. The Division 1 final took place at 5:30 p.m., and was preceded by the third place game at 4:10 p.m. With no wildfires this year, that game came off as scheduled and Loyola defeated Huntington Beach, 10-9. It marked the first time since 1973 that a playoff third place game went immediately before the final match. Division 7 got to cap things off with the 6:50 p.m. game, as was done in 2017.

The Sailors and Wolverines played a near-duplicate of the 2018 final. As the Register reported, “Coach Brian Flacks’ Wolverines used their stellar defense to again slow rival Newport Harbor. . . . The Wolverines surprisingly shut out. . . . Ike Love and Eli Liechty. Harvard’s ability to handle the double-post attack with defenders George Caras, Nico Tierney and Cristian Pang forced Newport Harbor to beat (goalie Nolan) Krutonog from the outside. For the second consecutive season, that proved too difficult. . . . Harvard’s defense (held) Newport Harbor without a goal until 2:34 left in the first half. By that time, the Wolverines had built a 3-0 lead. . . . The Sailors drew within 5-4 in the fourth

period, but the Harvard defense emerged right on cue. Mot Stothart made a steal on the perimeter coming out of a time out by Newport Harbor and fed Shay Gillearn for the counterattack strike with 3:41 left,” producing the 6-4 final score. Six players scored once for the Wolverines, a testimony to their offensive balance, but “Harvard’s defense was so strong it helped the Wolverines win by two goals despite going 1 for 8 on the power-play. The Sailors went 2 for 6 with the extra attacker.” Like last year Harvard led throughout and, as the Los Angeles Times reminded its readers, “Harvard also held the Sailors to a season-low goal total in the CIF final for the second straight year.” For the tournament as a whole, there was not a single one-goal game (the third place game doesn’t count!), the first instance of this since 2004. Harvard had now won four championships in the past seven years, capping a decade in which only three teams won titles, the fewest of any decade since the 1950s.

This year’s Final Four advanced to the Division I SoCal Championships, played Fri.-Sat., Nov. 22-23, with the finals held at Segerstrom High School in Santa Ana. As in 2018, the Division 1 teams were joined by the top two finishers in Division 2 as well as the top two from CIF-SDS Open Division. All four Division 1 teams advanced, so the semi-finals saw an exact repeat of the CIF-SS semis – Harvard over Huntington Beach, 10-9, and Newport Harbor over Loyola, 12-9. The final match, at least, was a tight game. The Register reported, “Nicholas Tierney scored on a penalty shot with 1:57 left in the first sudden death period to lift the Wolverines to an 11-10 victory against the Sailors.” Still, not much intensity was attached to the contest, as the Register wrote, “Tierney’s match-high fourth goal came after a Newport Harbor player was excluded at center on offense and assessed a penalty shot for not exiting the pool in a timely matter. Newport Harbor coach Ross Sinclair objected with the call but the Sailors didn’t appear overly upset.... ‘It’s fun to get the guys together and play one last little hurrah,’ Sinclair said.” It is possible, like the old Masters Tournament, that the regional tourney’s novelty may be wearing off. Two CIF-SS division champions declined to participate in SoCal – Division 3 champ Santa Barbara turned down an invitation to the Division II regional, citing onerous time and travel commitments; and Division 6 champ Crespi turned down a Division III invitation. Crespi is 58 miles from Segerstrom, no easy commute, but their decision seems to have been mainly that a section title is a more than satisfying way to end the season. Teams exercising declines may be one more reason for CIF to finally find a way to organize a true State Championship.

CIF-SS’ still-new “competitive equity” format also produced some oddities this year – further proof that no solution is entirely perfect. For instance, take the dispersion of teams in the Mission League. Harvard and Loyola, of course, had gone into Division 1, but third place Notre Dame (SO) went into Division 3 (losing in the quarter-finals); fourth place St. Francis went into Division 5 (losing in the semi-finals); and fifth place Crespi went into Division 6 – and they won! A fifth place team winning a section title is a record of some sort, and little wonder that Crespi decided it best to stop right there. Something similar also happened in the Trinity League. After JSerra finished fourth behind the three Division 1-qualifying league teams, the Lions were assigned

to Division 4 – and emerged with a championship of their own. In years past, Crespi would not have made the playoffs at all and JSerra would have been lucky to draw a Wild Card spot.

After Huntington Beach's defeat in the CIF-SS Division 1 semi-finals, a team member, Cooper Haddad, was quoted in the Daily Pilot expressing pride in their season and their play against Harvard. He said, "Even though it's my senior year and I would have loved to go out with a ring, I love it, because I think it really sets us up for next year." Next year – little did we all know.

2020

The Girls Water Polo season of 2019-20 ended just in the nick of time. The final games of their seven CIF-SS divisions were played on Sat., Feb. 22, and that was followed by the SoCal Championships, held Fri-Sat., Feb. 28-29, 2020. If the season had gone one weekend longer, the SoCal regional tourney might not have been played. On Wed., March 11, the NBA suspended their season. The next day, Major League Baseball halted Spring Training and the NHL suspended their games. Maybe – just maybe – the Girls could have played SoCal on Fri.-Sat., March 6-7, but definitely no later than that.

The COVID-19 pandemic had arrived in the United States. Statewide lock-downs were ordered the night of Thurs., March 19, and with the pandemic continuing throughout the year, the 2020 Boys and 2020-21 Girls Water Polo seasons barely took place. It was the most complete curtailing of a season since World War II. In the pandemic of 1919, with Water Polo in its infancy and so few schools fielding teams, it was possible to still conduct a championship match. Now, the success of the sport put it on such a scale that trying to organize division playoffs was impossible.

No one thought the season was going to start on time, which would have been the last weekend of August. Still, on Fri., Aug. 7, CIF-SS updated a Fall Sports schedule calling for Boys Water Polo to begin play on Mon., Dec. 21. The regular season would extend to Sat., Feb. 20, 2021 – 62 days, a full season. Playoff final matches would take place Sat., March 6. The Girls Water Polo season would proceed nearly as it always had, delayed only three weeks – except, of course, the Boys would be running their season concurrently. The Girls finals would take place Sat., March 13, then the SoCal Championships for both Boys and Girls would be held Fri.-Sat., March 19-20. After that, the calendar would be turned over to Spring sports. The idea of the SoCal tournament was the first thing to fall by the wayside. On Tues., Dec. 1, Rob Wigod, CIF-SS commissioner of athletics, announced, "All CIF State and/or CIF Regional Championships for Fall Sports have been cancelled." Then, on Wed., Dec. 16, Wigod summarized California Department of Public Health guidelines released two days earlier. The upshot: "No athletic competition permitted in California until Mon., Jan. 25, 2021." At this point, it was only a matter of time before the playoffs were canceled, and that decision was announced on Tues., Jan. 19, "for football and the rest of the fall sports" (Register). The CIF-LACS announced the cancellation of football and Water

Polo playoffs on the same day. The Register story added, “The regular season for fall sports is scheduled to begin statewide Jan. 25, but will likely be delayed again in the Southern and L.A. sections because of the Southern California stay-at-home order.” The remaining hope was to simply get in as many regular season games as possible by March 20, if any could be played at all. In fact, the first game was not played until nearly five weeks after the (re)scheduled start of the season – Sat., Feb. 27.

There was only one game played that first day of the season – actually two. Foothill’s Girls team traveled to Mira Costa and played the season’s very first Water Polo game, with the Knights recording a 14-2 win over the Mustangs. They had made the trip with the Boys, who played their game later that afternoon. The Boys contest was a truly great first match for such an unusual season, featuring two programs steeped in history – Foothill, the winner of two CIF-SS Division 1 titles and Mira Costa, a runner-up twice. In 2019, Foothill had won the Division 2 title, while Mira Costa had finished in that division’s semi-finals. According to the Register, “Foothill defeated Mia Costa 11-8 behind five goals by junior Noah Rowe and 13 saves by Stanford-bound Liam Harrison.” The reader may recall that I pointed out Harrison in 2017 – now a senior, he had been the Knights’ starting goalie since he was a freshman. The Register went on to explain in interesting detail what it was like to take part in “the first matches to be played in Southern California since the state revised its guidelines to allow competition for high-contact, outdoor high school sports. As required by the state guidelines, both schools completed coronavirus testing in order to play. Foothill boys and girls teams completed saliva testing on Thursday while Mira Costa finished its testing on Wednesday and Thursday, coaches said. The matches also featured other precautions. The teams didn’t switch sides at half-time as customary and traded socially-distanced cheers after the match instead of shaking hands. Spectators also weren’t allowed into the pool complex and team benches were sanitized afterward. Water polo was cleared by the state to begin practice on Fri., Feb. 26, meaning both teams played with just one day of regular practice.” I wrote an email to Foothill’s coach, Jim Brumm, the day after the game, congratulating him that the season was at last underway. He wrote back, “Thank you, it was a fun day. The girls and boys were very happy to be playing again.”

So the season was being played – but how to assess the competitive landscape in such a year as this? One recourse is to look at the four leagues that contributed the Elite Eight of the 2019 Division 1 playoffs. In this era of “competitive equity,” there is no guarantee that those four leagues would have produced those eight entrants in 2020, but this approach will have to do. (Orange Lutheran underwent a coaching change following the 2019 season and seems the likeliest to have been bounced from the playoffs this year.) The four leagues had vastly different experiences in conducting any kind of circuit play to produce a league champ – and that had everything to do with geography. The five-team Marmonte League, with its defending champ Oaks Christian, was a collection of both public and private schools located in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. The (ever changing) regulations governing the different types of institutions and jurisdictions evidently made it especially difficult to organize a schedule. According to Oaks Christian’s website, they played only one league game.

The six-team Mission League fared a little better. It had the advantage of all members being private schools, but was disadvantaged by all of them being in Los Angeles County, with its tighter restrictions than surrounding areas. The best way to illustrate the Mission League's season is to look at the entire record of Harvard, the defending league and CIF-SS champ:

A.	Fri.,	Feb. 26	Harvard and Palos Verdes (H) – No score: Scrimmage.	
B.	Tues.,	Mar. 2	Harvard (H) and Loyola – No score: Scrimmage.	
1.	Wed.,	Mar. 3	Harvard (H) 18	Crespi 8 *
2.	Thurs.,	Mar. 4	Harvard (H) 13	Oaks Christian 7
3.	Mon.,	Mar. 8	Newport Harbor (H) 9	Harvard 6
4.	Tues.,	Mar. 9	Harvard (H) 10	Loyola 8 *
5.	Sat.,	Mar. 13	Harvard (H) 16	Orange Lutheran 11
6.	Tues.,	Mar. 16	Harvard (H) 23	St. Francis 8 *
7.	Thurs.,	Mar. 18	Harvard (H) 10	Mira Costa 6
8.	Fri.,	Mar. 19	Harvard (H) 10	Loyola 9 *
9.	Sat.,	Mar. 20	Harvard 15	Palos Verdes (H) 9

The asterisks indicate league games, so Harvard played four league games (4-0) against three opponents. The Wolverines managed to squeak by Loyola twice, which was certainly the highlight of their season. However, they did not play Notre Dame (SO) and Alemany, also of the Mission League. The Wolverines would have undoubtedly beaten both of them, but the circuit was not completed and no league champ could be crowned. The nine games (8-1) that Harvard played was actually the highest total in the entire CIF-SS. In addition to Loyola, Harvard beat 2019 Elite Eight entrants Oaks Christian and Orange Lutheran. But, the Wolverines lost to Newport Harbor, their final game opponent of the previous two seasons. Seven different Sailors scored on their way to the 9-6 victory.

The six-team Trinity and four-team Surf leagues were both centered in Orange County, where regulations were less restrictive. As a result, both circuits played complete seasons – and the participating teams actually had a championship to strive for in this 22-day season. In 2019, the Trinity League landed Orange Lutheran, Santa Margarita and Mater Dei in the playoffs – not to mention JSerra winning the Division 4 title. This season's Trinity League play unfolded as follows:

Thurs., Mar. 4:	Santa Margarita (H)30	St. John Bosco 0
	Mater Dei 14	JSerra (H) 7
	Orange Lutheran 18	Servite (H) 3
Tues., Mar. 9:	Santa Margarita (H)20	JSerra 3
	Mater Dei (H) 14	Orange Lutheran 7
	Servite (H) 13	St. John Bosco 6
Thurs., Mar. 11:	Santa Margarita (H) 12	Orange Lutheran 9
	Mater Dei20	Servite (H) 3
	JSerra (H)25	St. John Bosco 3
Tues., Mar. 16:	Santa Margarita 10	Mater Dei (H) 9
	JSerra (H)23	Servite 4
	Orange Lutheran22	St. John Bosco (H) 3
Thurs., Mar. 18:	Santa Margarita (H)20	Servite 3
	Mater Dei (H) 18	St. John Bosco 4
	JSerra (H) 13	Orange Lutheran 5
Final Standings:	(1) Santa Margarita, 5-0	(2) Mater Dei, 4-1
	(3) JSerra, 3-2	(4) Orange Lutheran, 2-3
	(5) Servite, 1-4	(6) St. John Bosco, 0-5

The league's decisive game – and perhaps the best game of the season – occurred on March 16 when Santa Margarita visited Mater Dei. It was quite an afternoon. First, reports the Register, “(Santa Margarita’s) Girls rallied to beat the host Monarchs 8-7 in double sudden death overtime.” Then the Boys took to the pool, and their game went into sudden death also, tied 9-9. The period opened with Mater Dei winning the sprint, leading the Monarchs to immediately call time out to set up a play. However, Mater Dei’s shot “blasted off the crossbar and slightly off goalie Zach Cwertnia’s head before floating to the side of the cage.” Santa Margarita took possession, and “Senior Ben Kirshon scored the winner 40 seconds into sudden death overtime, taking a cross pass from senior Marko Maramica on a counterattack and firing a near-side shot in off the top of the cross bar.” The Eagles had won, 10-9, touching off “a playoff-like celebration by Santa Margarita.” The win was well worth celebrating – the Eagles had not won the league title since 2000, when they beat out Servite in what was then known as the Serra League, a Division II circuit. Kirshon finished with a match-high five goals, and the Register quoted him saying, “Our school hasn’t won this league in over 20 years so just to get the win in our senior season was really awesome.” The Register also quoted Santa Margarita coach Justin Johnson – “It’s a big feat for these kids. Such a great senior group. It’s a bummer (the season) is only six games but at least it’s six games.” The Eagles finished the year undefeated, also collecting a 10-8 win while visiting Foothill on March 2, in addition to their five league triumphs.

Also going 6-0 for the season was Huntington Beach, which played only Surf League games. The Oilers perhaps have the most to regret when they look back on 2020 and consider what might have been. Our coverage of the 2019 season concluded by quoting a senior saying that the Oilers were set-up for a great year ahead. And, indeed, the Register reported, “Some of the chatter going into the coronavirus-shortened water polo season pegged the Huntington Beach High boys as the best squad in Orange County.” At least they had a league title to play for, as follows:

Wed.,	Mar. 3:	Huntington Beach (H) ..15	Laguna Beach 8
Thurs.,	Mar. 4:	Newport Harbor (H)14	Corona del Mar 5
Sat.,	Mar. 6:	Newport Harbor (H)15	Laguna Beach 9
Wed.,	Mar. 10:	Huntington Beach17	Newport Harbor (H) 11
		Laguna Beach15	Corona del Mar (H) 8
Fri.,	Mar. 12:	Huntington Beach (H) ..18	Corona del Mar 6
Sat.,	Mar. 13:	Huntington Beach (H) ..14	Laguna Beach 4
Wed.,	Mar. 17:	Newport Harbor13	Laguna Beach (H) 8
		Huntington Beach13	Corona del Mar (H) 6
Thurs.,	Mar. 18:	Laguna Beach9	Corona del Mar (H) 6
Fri.,	Mar. 19:	Huntington Beach12	Newport Harbor (H) 11
Sat.,	Mar. 20:	Newport Harbor18	Corona del Mar (H) 7
Final Standings:		(1) Huntington Beach, 6-0	(2) Newport Harbor, 4-2
		(3) Laguna Beach, 2-4	(4) Corona del Mar, 0-6 (their March 10 game was held at Los Alamitos)

The decisive game was Huntington Beach’s second win over Newport Harbor, played March 19. It was only a one-goal contest, much different than the six-goal margin of March 10, but the Oilers had won both matches as the visiting team. Huntington Beach’s Chase Dodd scored three goals in that first big win. According to the Register, “(He) added that his team viewed the match as an opportunity not to be wasted. ‘We’re fortunate we actually get the season,’ the senior said. ‘For the past year, we never knew we were going to have a season. If it’s just a short, six games, we really want to make the most out of it.’” Huntington Beach proceeded to win its first league title since 2016, when they bested Newport Harbor in the Sunset League. The Surf League’s title was decided on March 19, and the Trinity League’s champ was officially known following play on March 18. It’s a shame that a “final” could not have been arranged – quickly – for March 20 between Huntington Beach and Santa Margarita. We then could have had an unofficial “Orange County Champion” (such are the dreams of

armchair schedulers like me). As it was, the last Surf League match was also the very last game of the CIF-SS 2020 season. It wasn't even a close game – but at least it was a “Battle of the Bay.” Newport Harbor and Corona del Mar started their game at 8 p.m. – the finale to Girls JV and Varsity, and Boys Frosh-Soph and JV games that had started on the hour from 4 p.m.

March 20 was the last day of winter and the first day of spring. So, this was not the “Fall 2020” season at all but rather “Winter 2021.” In fact, this was the latest ending date for a season in 88 years – on March 27, 1933, the Coast and Bay League champions met to decide the CIF-SS title. Even before the Water Polo season ended, swimming meets were already being held. On March 16, Huntington Beach's swimming team won a non-league dual-meet against Fountain Valley, 106-63. The 2020 Men's NCAA Water Polo season managed to get in a final match – on Sun., March 21, UCLA beat USC, 7-6, at Uytensu Aquatics Center on the campus of USC. CIF-SS Boys Water Polo, in contrast, simply petered out. Both the Register and Daily Pilot did not report on the Surf League matches of March 19-20. It was Friday and Saturday night and there were football games to cover (again, at this time year!). Other than the two league championships in Orange County, this was a unique season in that it wasn't building towards anything. On the last day, I made the attempt to go watch Harvard's visit to Palos Verdes, a Division 2 semi-finalist in 2019. The game was originally scheduled for 12 p.m., but the afternoon before it was changed to 9 a.m. Taking a guess at the conflicting times on Harvard's website, I headed out – not realizing how hard Palos Verdes was to find. The high school is 14.5 miles off the 405 freeway, via mainly narrow two-lane residential streets. I didn't get there until 11 a.m. – just as the final buzzer sounded for the JV game that followed the Varsity's. The point of this story is that schedule changes didn't matter. The only people interested were the parents of the players, and their kids could give them the scoop. The season almost has a ghostly quality in that the CIF-SS Schedule & Results tool does not include the scores of many games. MaxPreps is the same – “Missing Scores” are everywhere. But, as the Daily Pilot quoted Newport Harbor's Coach Ross Sinclair, “We're just trying to get back in shape, to be honest....It's not a normal season....We're just excited to play.”

CIF-SDS, unlike CIF-SS and CIF-LACS, managed to come up with a solution. On the same day that the two other Southern California sections were announcing the cancelation of playoffs, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported, “With no hope of playing sports during the final months of 2020, CIF(-SDS) condensed the original three-season system – fall, winter, spring – into Season 1 and Season 2 stretching from January to June 15. Swim and dive, usual spring sports, were originally put in Season 2. Because of pool conflicts with water polo – assigned to the orange tier but in Season 1 – their seasons were flipped since swim and dive can start in the purple tier and water polo can't, buying time to play water polo in the spring.” Thus, Water Polo teams in CIF-SDS began competition on Sat., April 24, with a regular season extending through Sat., June 5. This 43-day season is two-thirds the length of a regular year, but twice as long as the 2020 CIF-SS season. Best of all, playoffs followed, culminating in final matches played Sat., June 19. That just so happens to be the last full day of spring – and three days later than when the pandemic-delayed 1919 season ended. CIF-SDS is to be congratulated

on its agility, though it benefits from being much smaller. The “flipping” of sports and seasons is probably something not doable for the humongous CIF-SS.

With the season played under such unusual circumstances, I wanted to see a game myself. In fact, I hadn't attended one since 2007, when my son Matt was a senior goalie at Aliso Niguel. Naturally, I looked into the schedule of my alma mater, Newport Harbor (Class of 1975). The Sailors played a very purposeful eight-game (6-2) season – their six league contests, including two against Huntington Beach, who joined them in the 2019 Final Four; and then a pair of very logical non-league games against Harvard and Loyola, the other two most-recent Final Four entrants. Newport Harbor hosted Loyola at 11 a.m. on March 13 – the caper to a tough week as they had faced Harvard and Huntington Beach the previous Monday and Wednesday, respectively. It was actually the first time I had been to the pool since it had been renovated in 2003, and it looked terrific. The showers and locker rooms were roomier and nicer than in my day, and most of the seating was now on the east side. I believe I was the second person to ever swim in the pool. In the spring of 1972 – 49 years prior! – Coach Bill Barnett was in the pool in his wet suit (the water was not yet heated), stringing lane lines together to create the playing area boundaries. I was there screwing in eye-bolts. I dropped one into the pool and slinked in to retrieve it – that's how I became the second person in the pool. In fact, one of my first paying jobs was when the cement shell had first been poured. I had the responsibility over a weekend of watering down the shell every two hours during daylight so it wouldn't crack. On this warm, sunny late winter Saturday, I sat there with my mask on (no entry without one), and took careful notes. Among the things I wrote – “What a great place to grow-up and play!” My note-taking caught the attention of two fathers of Loyola players, so I got to talking with them. Loyola had a large turnout of fans and I congratulated them on coming all this way to see the game (the campuses are 46.3 miles apart). One of the fathers said, “We haven't been anywhere in months!”

The game itself was generally under Newport Harbor's control throughout. Loyola tied the score, 1-1, at the 4:03 mark of the first quarter, but then trailed the rest of the way. The Sailors put in a goal with :03 remaining to end the period up, 4-1. Loyola had its best quarter in the second, to go into half-time trailing only 5-4. During intermission, I noticed a baseball game underway at the diamond located just over the south wall. More evidence of the collision of seasons. After the game, I went to In-n-Out for lunch near my home in Laguna Niguel. The place was being invaded by the Foothill baseball team, which had just finished a game at Aliso Niguel. Newport Harbor put this game away with five goals in the third period to finish the frame up, 10-6. The Sailors would extend their lead to 13-6 in the fourth, before Loyola scored the last goal with :27 remaining, for a final score of 13-7.

After the match, I had a chance to say hello to Loyola's Coach Erik Healy, with whom I had previously traded emails. I haven't met Coach Ross Sinclair yet. But, as I left the pool area, I recalled something he had said in a different context following the 2018 Elite Eight Tournament. “It's beautiful water polo,” Sinclair told the Register. Yes, indeed, it's beautiful Water Polo.

Appendix I

Early Implementers: Southern California League Members, 1912-1951

<p>1912</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Long Beach Poly * (Steven Long) 2. Los Angeles 3. Redondo 	<p>1913</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Long Beach Poly * (R.D. Elliot) 2. Los Angeles 3. Los Angeles Poly
<p>1914</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Long Beach Poly 3. Los Angeles 4. Los Angeles Poly * (Allan Campbell) 5. Manual Arts 	<p>1915</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Los Angeles 3. Los Angeles Poly * (Allan Campbell) 4. Manual Arts 5. Redondo
<p>1916</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood 3. Long Beach Poly * (R.D. Elliott) 4. Los Angeles Poly 5. Manual Arts 6. Redondo 	<p>1917</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Long Beach Poly * (Tom Schilling) 3. Los Angeles 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Redondo
<p>1918</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Huntington Park 3. Long Beach Poly * (Tom Schilling) 4. Los Angeles 5. Los Angeles Poly 6. Manual Arts 7. Redondo 	<p>1919</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Huntington Park 3. Long Beach Poly * (Tom Schilling) 4. Los Angeles Poly 5. Manual Arts
<p>1920</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Lincoln 3. Long Beach Poly * (Tom Schilling) 4. Los Angeles 5. Los Angeles Poly 6. Pasadena 7. Redondo 	<p>1921</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chaffey 2. Hollywood 3. Huntington Park 4. Lincoln 5. Long Beach Poly * (Tom Schilling) 6. Los Angeles Poly 7. Manual Arts 8. Pasadena

<p>1922</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Long Beach Poly * (Roy Miller) 3. Los Angeles 4. Pasadena 5. Redondo 6. Venice 	<p>1923</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Huntington Park 3. Inglewood 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Los Angeles * (Fred Cady) 6. Pasadena 7. Redondo
<p>1924</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Huntington Park 3. Inglewood 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Los Angeles 6. Pasadena 7. Venice * (C.S. Overin) 	<p>1925</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Huntington Park 3. Long Beach Poly 4. Los Angeles 5. Pasadena * (Harold Novis) 6. Venice
<p>1926</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood * (Clyde Swendsen) 2. Huntington Park 3. Long Beach Poly 4. Los Angeles * (Fred Cady) 5. Pasadena 6. Venice * (Charles Walters) 	
<p>1927 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood 2. Long Beach Poly * ** (Wallace Detrick) 3. Los Angeles 4. Pasadena 	<p>1927 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton 2. Huntington Park 3. Inglewood 4. Venice *
<p>1928 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hollywood * ** (Clyde Swendsen) 2. Long Beach Poly 3. Los Angeles 4. Pasadena 	<p>1928 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. El Segundo 2. Fullerton 3. Huntington Park 4. Inglewood 5. Venice *
<p>1929 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alhambra 2. El Segundo 3. Fullerton 4. Hollywood 5. Long Beach Poly * ** (Wallace Detrick) 6. Los Angeles 	<p>1929 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood * 3. Redondo 4. Venice

<p>1930 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alhambra 2. El Segundo 3. Fullerton 4. Hollywood 5. Long Beach Poly * 6. Los Angeles 	<p>1930 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood 3. Redondo 4. Venice * ** (Alva Noggle)
<p>1931 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. El Segundo 2. Fullerton * ** (Al Dowden) 3. Hollywood 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Los Angeles 	<p>1931 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood 3. Redondo 4. San Pedro 5. Venice *
<p>1932 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. El Segundo 2. Fullerton * ** (Al Dowden) 3. Long Beach Poly 4. Los Angeles 5. Venice 	<p>1932 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park * 2. Inglewood 3. Long Beach Wilson 4. Redondo
<p>1933 (Coast League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton * ** (Jimmy Smith) 2. Long Beach Poly 3. Los Angeles 	<p>1933 (Bay League)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood 3. Long Beach Wilson *
<p>1934</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton * (Jimmy Smith) 2. Inglewood 3. Long Beach Poly 4. Long Beach Wilson 5. Los Angeles 6. Muir 7. Pasadena 	<p>1935</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton * (Jimmy Smith) 2. Inglewood 3. Long Beach Poly 4. Long Beach Wilson 5. Los Angeles 6. Pasadena
<p>1936</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chaffey 2. Fullerton * (Jimmy Smith) 3. Inglewood 4. Los Angeles 5. Muir 6. Whittier 	<p>1937</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compton 2. Fullerton 3. Huntington Beach 4. Huntington Park 5. Inglewood 6. Los Angeles * (F. Elmer Crumly) 7. Muir 8. Whittier

<p>1938</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton 2. Huntington Beach 3. Huntington Park 4. Inglewood * (Ivan Carey) 5. Los Angeles * (F. Elmer Crumly) 6. Muir 7. Whittier 	
<p>1939 (Eastern Circuit)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton * ** (Jimmy Smith) 2. Huntington Beach 3. Whittier 	<p>1939 (Western Circuit)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huntington Park 2. Inglewood 3. Leuzinger 4. Los Angeles *
<p>1940 (So. Cal. Invitational Participants)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton * (Jimmy Smith) 2. Huntington Beach 3. Huntington Park 4. Inglewood 5. Los Angeles 6. Whittier 	<p>1941 (So. Cal. Invitational Participants)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compton 2. Fullerton 3. Huntington Beach 4. Inglewood 5. Los Angeles 6. Whittier * (Heber Holloway)
<p>1942 (So. Cal. Invitational Participants)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fullerton 2. Huntington Beach 3. Inglewood 4. Los Angeles 5. Whittier * (Heber Holloway) 	<p>1943-1946 (No League Competition)</p>
<p>1947 (Spring/1946-47 School Year)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anaheim 2. Compton 3. El Segundo 4. Fullerton 5. Inglewood 6. Whittier * (Heber Holloway) 	<p>1947 (Fall/1947-48 School Year)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Downey 2. El Segundo * (Urho Saari) 3. Fullerton 4. Inglewood 5. Leuzinger 6. Whittier

1948 1. Downey 2. El Segundo * (Urho Saari) 3. Fullerton 4. Inglewood 5. Leuzinger 6. Whittier	1949 1. Compton 2. Downey 3. El Segundo * (Urho Saari) 4. Fullerton 5. Inglewood 6. Leuzinger 7. Redlands 8. Whittier
1950 1. Chaffey 2. Downey 3. El Segundo * (Urho Saari) 4. Fullerton 5. Inglewood 6. Leuzinger 7. Whittier	
1951 (Southern California League) 1. El Segundo 2. Fullerton 3. Huntington Beach 4. Inglewood 5. Whittier * ** (Heber Holloway)	1951 (Coast League) 1. Compton 2. Downey * 3. Long Beach Jordan 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Long Beach Wilson

* Denotes league or division champion.

** Denotes overall league champion in multi-division seasons.

() The name of the championship team's coach appears in parentheses.

Appendix II

Snap Shots From An Era: CIF-SS Water Polo League Composition in 1952 and 1960

1952

<p>Southern California League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anaheim 2. El Segundo 3. Fullerton 4. Huntington Beach 5. Inglewood 6. Whittier * *** 	<p>Coast League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compton 2. Downey * 3. Long Beach Jordan 4. Long Beach Poly 5. Long Beach Wilson
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1960

<p>Sunset League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anaheim 2. Fullerton * 3. Garden Grove 4. Huntington Beach 5. La Habra 6. Newport Harbor 7. Santa Ana 8. Western 	<p>Moore League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compton 2. Downey * 3. Lakewood 4. Long Beach Jordan 5. Long Beach Millikan 6. Long Beach Poly ** 7. Long Beach Wilson 8. Lynwood
<p>Bay League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hawthorne 2. Inglewood * 3. Leuzinger 4. Morningside 	<p>San Gabriel Valley League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. California * 2. El Rancho 3. Montebello 4. Santa Fe
<p>Valley League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bell Gardens 2. Buena Park 3. La Puente 4. Pasadena 5. Pioneer 6. Sierra 7. Upland * 	<p>Pioneer League</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Beverly Hills 2. El Segundo * *** 3. Hoover (Glendale) 4. Oxnard 5. Santa Monica

* Denotes league champion.

** Denotes 2nd place or At-Large playoff entrant.

*** Denotes CIF-SS champion.

Note: Fontana, Santa Maria and Whittier ** played in 1960 as independents.

Appendix III

What a Difference a Decade Makes: League Alignments and Playoff Entrants for 1961 and 1971

1961

1. Bay:	Mira Costa, 1st; and Inglewood, 2nd.
2. Moore:	Downey, 1st; Long Beach Millikan, 2nd; Lakewood, 3rd (At-Large).
3. Pioneer:	El Segundo, 1st; Oxnard, 2nd; Hoover (Glendale), 3rd (At-Large).
4. San Gabriel Valley:	Santa Fe, 1st; and California, 2nd.
5. Sunset:	La Habra, 1st; Anaheim, 2nd; Fullerton, 3rd (At-Large).
6. Valley:	Sierra, 1st; and Upland, 2nd.
Independents:	Whittier (At-Large).

1971

1. Channel:	Buena of Ventura.
2. Citrus Belt:	Chaffey.
3. Coast:	Los Altos, 1st; and Downey, 2nd (At-Large).
4. Foothill:	Crescenta Valley.
5. Freeway:	Sunny Hills, 1st; and Fullerton, 2nd (At-Large).
6. Garden Grove:	Garden Grove.
7. Irvine:	Corona del Mar, 1st; and Costa Mesa, 2nd (At-Large).
8. Inland Valleys:	North (Riverside).
9. Montview:	Charter Oak and Nogales, Co-Champions.
10. Moore:	Lakewood, 1st; and Long Beach Millikan, 2nd (At-Large).
11. Northern:	Cabrillo.
12. Ocean:	Santa Monica, Mira Costa and Rolling Hills, Tri-Champions.
13. Orange:	El Dorado, Laguna Beach and Valencia, Tri-Champions.
14. Parochial:	Notre Dame (SO).
15. Pacific:	La Puente, 1st; and Muir, 2nd (At-Large).
16. Rio Hondo:	San Marino.
17. San Antonio:	Upland.
18. Sky:	Palos Verdes.
19. Sunset:	Newport Harbor.
20. Whitmont:	Whittier.
Independents:	El Segundo (At-Large) and Foothill (At-Large).

Appendix IV

Contenders for Greatest: Undefeated Teams

Year	School	Record
1952	Whittier	11 - 0
1953	Whittier	12 - 0
1960	El Segundo	19 - 0
1962	Downey	26 - 0
1966	Corona del Mar	23 - 0
1969	Corona del Mar	23 - 0
1973	Sunny Hills	25 - 0
1975	Newport Harbor	24 - 0
1978	Newport Harbor	27 - 0
1998	Long Beach Wilson	29 - 0
2002	Long Beach Wilson	31 - 0
2011	Mater Dei	31 - 0
2012	Mater Dei	31 - 0
2014	Harvard	29 - 0

Appendix V

League Alignments and Playoff Participants for New Division Inaugural Years

1974

4A	1.	Bay:	Beverly Hills and Mira Costa
	2.	Century:	Corona del Mar
	3.	Channel:	San Marcos
	4.	Citrus Belt:	Chaffey
	5.	Empire:	Foothill and Huntington Beach
	6.	Foothill:	Crescenta Valley
	7.	Freeway:	Sunny Hills
	8.	Marmonte:	Oxnard
	9.	Moore:	Lakewood and Long Beach Wilson
	10.	Pacific:	Muir
	11.	San Gabriel:	Downey
	12.	Sky:	Aviation
	13.	Sunset:	Newport Harbor
3A	1.	Del Rey:	Servite
	2.	Garden Grove:	Los Amigos
	3.	Inland Valleys:	San Bernardino
	4.	Los Padres:	Santa Ynez
	5.	Montview:	Charter Oak
	6.	Northern:	Santa Maria
	7.	Ocean:	El Segundo and Miraleste
	8.	Orange:	El Dorado and Sonora
	9.	Rio Hondo:	San Marino
	10.	San Antonio:	Upland
	11.	Sierra:	Los Altos
	12.	South Coast:	Laguna Beach and University
	13.	Whitmont:	Bell Gardens

1978

- 4A**
1. Bay: El Segundo, Mira Costa and Rolling Hills
 2. Channel: Buena of Ventura, Dos Pueblos and Ventura
 3. Citrus Belt: Chaffey, Redlands and San Geronio
 4. Empire: Katella, Kennedy and Los Alamitos
 5. Freelance: Downey and El Rancho
 6. Freeway: Buena Park, Sunny Hills and Troy
 7. Marmonte: Newbury Park, Simi Valley and Thousand Oaks
 8. Moore: Lakewood, Long Beach Millikan and Long Beach Wilson
 9. Sea View: Costa Mesa, Estancia and University
 10. Sierra: Hacienda Heights Wilson, Los Altos and Rowland
 11. Sunset: Edison, Marina and Newport Harbor

- 3A**
1. Century: Foothill, Santa Ana and Villa Park
 2. Del Rey: Bosco Tech, Crespi and Servite
 3. Foothill: Blair, Glendale and Hoover (Glendale)
 4. Garden Grove: La Quinta, Los Amigos and Pacifica (Garden Grove) *
 5. Ivy: Indio, North (Riverside) and Riverside Poly
 6. Northern: Cabrillo, Lompoc and Santa Maria
 7. Orange: El Dorado, Esperanza and Sonora
 8. Pacific: Arcadia, Crescenta Valley and Muir
 9. Pioneer: Aviation, Harvard and Redondo
 10. South Coast: Dana Hills, Laguna Beach and Mission Viejo
 11. Whitmont: La Serna, Santa Fe and Whittier

* Pacifica (Garden Grove) won the first Wild Card game in the history of the tournament to get into the final 32-team grid. They beat Crespi, 13-12, on Wed., Nov. 15, 1978.

- 2A**
1. Freelance: Saint Monica
 2. Frontier: Calabasas, Nordhoff and Westlake
 3. Los Padres: Atascadero and Santa Ynez *
 4. Montview: Bassett, Charter Oak and Keppel
 5. Rio Hondo: Bell Gardens, La Canada and San Marino
 6. San Antonio: Chino, Claremont and Montclair

* This league sent only two teams for undetermined reasons resulting in an odd 15-team tournament and La Canada was awarded a first round bye.

Appendix VI

On Their Way – League Alignments in 1995 and 1996

Division I (16 Entrants Both Years) 1. Century 2. Mission 3. Moore 4. Sea View (sent fourth team in 1995) 5. South Coast (sent fourth team in 1996)	Division II (18 Entrants Both Years) 1. Empire 2. Freeway 3. Garden Grove 4. Golden West 5. Pacific Coast 6. Sunset
Division III (16 Entrants Both Years)* 1. Anaheim 2. Del Rio 3. Ocean (sent fourth team in 1996) 4. Pacific 5. Rio Hondo	Division IV (16 Entrants in 1995, 14 in 1996) 1. Channel (sent fourth team in 1995) 2. Frontier 3. Los Padres (sent only two teams in 1996) 4. Marmonte 5. Northern
Division V (17 Entrants Both Years) 1. Baseline 2. Desert Valley 3. Ivy 4. Mount Baldy (sent only two teams in 1995) 5. San Andreas 6. Sunbelt (sent only two teams in 1996)	Division VI (19 Entrants in 1995, 18 in 1996)** 1. Miramonte 2. Orange 3. Prep 4. San Gabriel Valley 5. Sierra 6. Valle Vista

* Division III in 1995 also had a “Bay” league. The Bay and Ocean leagues both only sent two teams. In 1996, the Bay league teams were incorporated in the Ocean league, which sent four teams.

** Division VI in 1995 had one Freelance entrant (Whitney High School in Cerritos).

Note 1: All leagues sent three playoff entrants unless otherwise indicated.

Note 2: Division I featured the following schools in the playoffs: Century: Canyon, Foothill and Villa Park; Mission: Crespi, Harvard and Loyola; Moore: Lakewood (1996 only), Long Beach Millikan, Long Beach Poly (1995 only) and Long Beach Wilson; Sea View: Corona del Mar, El Toro, Newport Harbor (1995 only) and Santa Margarita; and South Coast: Capistrano Valley, Mission Viejo, San Clemente and Trabuco Hills (1996 only).



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