

ALL IN THE FAMILIES



Story and photos by Ronald Bond, The Observer

Through the years, it's become common for sports teams to use the phrase "family" to describe the often close-knit nature of their team.

This winter, though, the La Grande Tigers swim team has taken that term quite literally.

La Grande has four sets of siblings on the team this season — the Rickers, Jensens, Kruses and Remilys. It's not the first time LHS Head Coach Darren Dutto has had multiple sibling groups on one of his teams during the past 14 years, but it's the most at one time that he can recall.

He's known each of the families for years, however, so the unique blend didn't even cross his mind until it was mentioned to him.

"It's not something I really thought about, because I've known all the kids on the team, siblings included, for a long time," Dutto said. "I've known their families."

As one would expect, each family brings its own dynamic to the team — some have a no-nonsense mentality in the pool, and some are jokers. Some have been in the sport for better than half their lives, and some are in just their first or second year swimming competitively. Some have joined from other sports. Some know only swimming.

The Ricker family is, perhaps, the group that has the deepest involvement in the sport. Currently there are three siblings on the team: senior Caden, junior Romayne and sophomore Laramie. All six children in the family either already have gone through or will at some point go through the program.

"Our parents wanted us to be able to swim," said Romayne, who along with Caden has been swimming for nine years between the LHS program and the La Grande Swim Club. "We did soccer for a while, (but) it got to be too much for my mom. It was easier if we were all (on the same schedule)."

The Jensens have an interesting mix of experience in that Kristal, a junior, has been swimming for "six or seven years" and has swam in John Day, Baker and La Grande. But Grayson, a senior, is in only his second season on the team, joining as a junior after dealing with several injuries in wrestling.

"It was a lot easier on my knee. It wasn't tearing it up like it was in wrestling (but) still pushing me physically," Grayson said.

The Kruses — junior Kennedy and freshman Reagan — were invited to the sport by the Ricker family.

"We were doing soccer with them, and then they got into the swim club and said, 'You should do this,'" Kennedy said.

Kennedy has been swimming ever since, while Reagan took some time off before rejoining this winter.

The Remilys bring maybe the most interesting dynamic to the pool. The two middle brothers in the family — senior Scott and sophomore Adam — have a combined three years of experience on the team, and it's the younger who has more. Adam joined the team as a freshman and is in his second year, while Scott jumped on board for his senior year.

"I just had a lot of people on the team saying I should try it out for my last year," Scott said. "It's something to do over the winter."

The duo has added a different energy — some teammates might call it craziness — to the pool this season.

"They bring that happy-go-lucky, anything-goes attitude to the pool, which is kind of fun," Dutto said. "It's different."

And with these two, anything does go. The brothers said they are often yelling back and forth across the pool during practice each morning, while also bringing some antics into the water to "break up the long sets," as Scott put it.

"We just have little things we do when we're swimming that make it easier," Scott said. "We grab hands and pull each other farther down the lane, or we make jokes across the lanes."

The humorous side isn't lost on their teammates, either.

"They bring the fun," Caden said.

One might think that, even though he's in his first year, Scott would be doing what he could to top his younger brother. While there is that competitive side, he said Adam has helped him a lot in learning the sport this season. In fact, his best time came in a race where the two swam next to each other.

That they swam in the same race was rare in itself.

Pitting siblings against each other in a race is something Dutto has tried to avoid over the years, but he has made an exception this year as he tried to figure out what was the best fit for the Remily brothers.

"I've had them swim the same event a couple times because (at the beginning of the season) it looked like their strengths may be similar," he said. "The nice thing about them is there doesn't appear to be any conflict."

Indeed, there is a good-hearted nature to the sibling rivalry.

"There's competitiveness, but there's also that love/hate relationship," Adam said. "You want to beat him, but at the same time you're super supportive of each other, and it's someone you can always count on."

There isn't even much — if any — trash talk.

"After the race it's not like, 'Aw, man, you got wrecked! I destroyed you!' It's, 'Hey, good job, man,'" Adam said, fist-bumping Scott as he says the words.

The competitive instinct runs deeper in the Jensen family, though there is a fun nature to it.

While still very supportive of each other, Kristal and Grayson often keep track of how the other does in the one event they share — the 50-yard freestyle.

"Last year when (Grayson) was first starting, he would say, 'I'm going to swim that fast! Can't let my little sister beat me!' And now we're closer to the same speed," Kristal said. "Every meet, if I have a bad turn on my 50 he goes faster than me. (If) he slipped off the block, I go faster than him."

She makes sure to slip in one fact, though: "My fastest time is still faster than his fastest time."

For Grayson, the back-and-forth in the 50 between them has become one of the best parts of the sport. He added, though, "My best memories of the first meets were swimming and approaching the other side of the wall, and hearing her voice above everybody else screaming to go faster."

Kristal, laughing, jumps in to explain those first races: "He was just chilling! Like,



The Ricker siblings on this year's teams, Laramie (front being lifted), Romayne (back left) and Caden each have close to a decade of swimming experience.



Reagan (left) and Kennedy Kruse began swimming at the same time as the Rickers. Reagan took some time off before returning to the pool this season for LHS.

'It's no big deal, it's all good.' You know you're supposed to go fast, right?"

Kristal said the two have always been close and, because of the nearness of their ages, have shared many experiences. After competing in different sports in high school, though, swimming together has allowed them — and their parents — to watch the other compete more often.

"We're both going to the same place, so both of our parents can come watch," she said. "Before, we were doing different sports: wrestling bus goes east, we go west, two different towns five hours apart. Dad goes here, Mom goes there. The next time Mom goes here, Dad goes there."

"Now both (are) at the same place cheering us on at the same (time)," Grayson adds.

Kristal continues: "I don't think I ever watched Grayson wrestle in high school because of swim meets."

The siblings, who said they've been nicknamed the Wonder Twins, have just two meets remaining together — districts this weekend and, assuming both make it, state in Beaverton next weekend. And while both will be contending for state berths and placings, Grayson said a highlight is going to be watching his sister perform, maybe for the final time depending on what lies ahead for him after graduation.

"She's just a phenomenal swimmer," he said of Kristal. See **Siblings** / Page 8A



Kristal Jensen (top) has been swimming for about seven years, but her older brother, Grayson, has been in the pool for just the last two years.



Adam (left) and Scott Remily have a combined three years of swimming experience at LHS.