



MEMBERS OF EUGENE CITY WATER POLO
RUN DRILLS AT SHELDON POOL

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Kaden Lipkin, 17, reaches across the foldout table and bro-handshakes his teammate Michael Russell, 18, in the middle of expressing nothing but appreciation for being a part of the water polo club. “I love you guys,” Lipkin says, perfectly summing up the energy at Echo Hollow Pool, which hosts Eugene City Water Polo — a grassroots club geared towards the 18-and-under crowd that wants to kick some ass and be a part of a team.

Both boys have been playing for around four years now, and each displays a passionate energy about what they’ve learned and how they’ve grown as a result of playing this quirky, complex and sometimes confusing sport.

Water polo is a combination of basketball, hockey and soccer that takes place in — you guessed it — water. Most of the kids playing for Eugene catch on quick and love the challenge, according to coach Cray Rogers. Rogers, 27, has been coaching for six years now, and he oversees the 18-and-under boys’ team along with co-coaching the 16-and-under and 14-and-under boys as well as the sole girls’ teams.

“I think with us, we have a really family kind of atmosphere — a nice little tight-knit group,” Rogers says, adding that he’s seen all sorts of kids from a handful of backgrounds (not all of them athletic) join the club and form a strong bond over the commitment, devotion and team skills the sport demands.

Eugene City Water Polo was a dying grassroots club about six years ago when Lisa Vertulfo, Rogers and a few other coaches decided to join the club and bring it back to life. Vertulfo says her role in the nonprofit is as a “glorified team mom,” and she’s seen the number of kids rise from 18 during the club’s first year to more than 60 this current season, which lasts from now until the final week in July.

The club practices at the pools at Echo Hollow, Amazon and Sheldon during different times of the year. And when the pools are closed, the teams find creative ways to practice. Dry-land conditioning, Rogers says, is a way to keep up with the teams’ cardio workouts when the pools aren’t available.

The club’s enthusiasm to work with what they’ve got has kept the boys’ high school teams in good enough standing to travel to Orange County, California, for the Junior Olympics — the JOs for short. According to Vertulfo, about 600 teams come from all over the country to compete.

Vertulfo says there was a lot of disorganization holding the club back at first, though over the past six years the commitment of the coaches and the kids has strengthened the organization. One of the biggest changes is the increased numbers of the girls’ team, which Vertulfo says is now big enough for the club to need another pool.

Although space is a challenge due to the teams’ growing enrollment, the club makes do by combining girls and boys practices throughout the season. Vertulfo says that going co-ed is actually a plus because it teaches the kids to work together. “They really learn how to work with members of the opposite sex,” she says. “It’s not just always this dating thing.”

As for the girls on the team, most seem to agree that having a space to be aggressive is one of the biggest draws. Hayley Mercer, 15, has been playing water polo since her freshman year. “Since I was little I’ve always kind of liked pounding on boys a little bit,” she says, giggling. “Boys say, ‘No, you can’t do it because you’re a girl,’” she adds.

Since she started playing, Mercer says it’s felt like she’s coming out of her shell; she has more confidence not only in the sport but in interacting with other people as well. “It doesn’t matter what size or anything about you, it’s just open for anybody,” she says.

Mercer’s coach, Jesse Fiorina, 19, agrees that size doesn’t matter in a community like this, and that being overly aggressive as a chick is a bonus. “There’s social stigmas against that,” Fiorina says, “but there’s no problem with having buff shoulders and beating up all of the guys and whatnot.” — *Kelsey Anne Rankin*