

Coach has big plans for Sask. water polo program

BY JONATHAN HAMELIN, FOR THE LEADER-POST OCTOBER 17, 2011



Water polo Saskatchewan provincial coach Cyril Dorgigne observes a match between South Sask. teams A and B at the Lawson Aquatic Centre in Regina, Sask. on Saturday Oct. 15, 2011.

Photograph by: Michael Bell, Regina Leader-Post

It's just after noon on a weekday at the Lawson Aquatic Centre. A Saskatchewan water polo team comprised of athletes in high school prepares for a practice. While many of their fellow students chow down on some food before classes resume, the team dives into the water and begins swimming lengths.

"These kids are training more than some national teams in Canada," says 27-year-old assistant coach Evan Andrews of Regina.

The reason for the strict training program is Cyril Dorgigne, the executive director/provincial coach for Water Polo Saskatchewan. The 32-year-old was born in Nice, France, and has been with the club for four years.

"He's definitely been a great asset. We've had good coaches before, but he's been able to provide a vision and goal for this club and the province that has been unprecedented," Andrews says. "He has a wealth of knowledge that he's brought over from his experiences on the national team in France, and he really just has the adaptation pace where he can adapt it to our culture and our specific needs."

Adapting quickly to the culture was important for Dorgigne when it came to turning the program around. Since arriving four years ago in Regina, where he lives with his wife and two-year-old daughter, he had to adjust to more than his surroundings. Dorgigne found water polo in Saskatchewan was underdeveloped and underappreciated compared to France.

Dorgigne knew this from experience. He has a master's degree in training and high performance and previously coached water polo in France and Australia. Prior to that, Dorgigne enjoyed a professional career as water polo athlete in France, winning five national championships. He spent some time in Australia coaching and, while there, met his future-wife, who was from Canada. Dorgigne looked for work in Canada and Saskatchewan was hiring.

"Sports are very social (in France). They are competitive, but the system is very fair. Not everything is private," says Dorgigne, who spent his first three years with Water Polo Saskatchewan solely as the provincial coach before adding the executive director title this year. "Here, all the clubs have to pay for pool time per hour and they don't get any money from they city, the town or the government. (In France)

, they get huge finances from the city and the regions and the pool is given for free to the clubs. Parents are more involved here, but I prefer the public system in France.”

To combat these setbacks, Dorgigne has put in a lot of work. He holds practice sessions across the province, offering his guidance to athletes and educating coaches.

Additionally, Dorgigne created structured leagues for different age groups, allowing teams to play a league game every two weeks or once a month. There were only recreational programs when he joined. Tournaments — mainly one-day events in Saskatchewan — are now held once every three weeks, which is high when compared to the estimated three per year in which athletes used to compete.

Dorgigne still hopes to increase enrolment numbers for Water Polo Saskatchewan to match water polo programs across the country, but he still has a lot to celebrate.

“I think I have a good vision,” Dorgigne says. “I hoped to bring a program that could take the kids who understand water polo and step-by-step bring them all the way to high performance and national teams, while being a leader in the country in their age groups.”

This vision has led to four national appearances by Saskatchewan and 10 athletes receiving national exposure, including 17-year-old Weyburn product Russell Lenferna, who stops to talk about Dorgigne before joining his teammates in the pool.

Under his coach’s guidance, Lenferna had the opportunity to represent Saskatchewan on the junior national Canadian water polo team at the Pan American Games in Puerto Rico over the summer. The team finished fifth and qualified for the world championship.

“Really, I only started developing as a player when Cyril came over,” Lenferna says. “That’s when water polo started for me and I started to take it to the next level, just because of the higher level of coaching he brought to Saskatchewan. He brought his own water polo from France here to Saskatchewan.”

Saskatchewan may never compare to France when it comes to delectable food and fine wine, but at least the water polo programs are becoming similar.

“I know that we have the best program here in the country here for now,” Dorgigne says. “On the girls’ side, we are definitely as good as in France. On the boys’ side, we have very excellent athletes, but we are a bit behind.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Dorgigne heads over to the pool and gives instruction to his athletes. He stands there and focuses intently. Even with the success of his program, he’s always thinking of more ways to bring the organization to the next level.

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