

LEAH BREEN AND ERI AKUTAGAWA-SOUTH IRVINE DOLPHINS

July 21, 2015

Coaches' Award Nomination - Leah Breen and Eri Akutagawa

The South Irvine Dolphins have taken pride in the fact that our entire coaching staff is home grown. We've seen first hand the benefits of having coaches that grew up with the team and want to give back what they received as young swimmers. There is no better example of this than the two head coaches we have today.

Eri and Leah have been the South Irvine Dolphins head coach dynamic duo for 5 years! As former co-presidents (3 years) and continued active board member of the team, there is a reason we have continued with Eri and Leah - they do an outstanding job!

The combination of both young ladies' attributes has created a truly amazing experience for the South Irvine Dolphins swimmers for many years. Both bring a level of energy, enthusiasm, and love of swimming to every workout and meet. They also make a point to connect with each and every swimmer early in the season and this allows them to have a more profound impact on each swimmer's progress. As parents, we are amazed how Leah and Eri are able to learn each swimmer's name within the first week.

As an educator who focuses on special needs children as her primary vocation, Eri provides a welcoming, supportive, and fun-loving environment for ALL Dolphins swimmers. This skillset has proven effective in her ability to work with the younger kids who are just getting introduced to the sport of competitive swimming. Eri is also able to channel the educator in her to keep the 10 and under swimmers focused during practice. With a broad range of swimmer skill levels and experience, the SI Dolphins need coaches who can show patience and provide encouragement to all ages of swimmers. Eri keeps the spirit of a summer swim league in full force; having fun and living in the moment while encourage everyone to give 100% effort. Eri swam on the Dolphins for many years before joining the coaching ranks and eventually earning a promotion to head coach.

Leah brings a strong legacy in the Dolphins organization as well. She grew up swimming with the Dolphins, and then progressed into volunteer coach, paid coach, and finally head coach roles. As a competitive swimmer in both high school and college (American University), Leah knows what it takes to succeed, and works with our all-Dolphins coaching staff to achieve the team's goals of promoting a love of swimming, including the goal of competing and learning to give 100% effort while building camaraderie with teammates and the coaching staff. Leah demonstrates on a daily basis two key principles successful leaders:

1. Bring your full attention, positive energy, and focus to whatever you engage in
2. Give back to the community based on your ability to do so.

Leah is not only a co-head coach, but also cheerleader-in-chief. She is regularly the loudest voice cheering on our swimmers, and sets a positive example for the other coaches that encourages them to do the same. There is not a meet that goes by when we hear from several parents of the opposing teams about how impressed they are with the energy and enthusiasm of our head coaches on deck.

That enthusiasm has proven to be infectious with the rest of our coaching staff as well. With a significant staff of high-school aged coaches who grew up with the team, there can often be the challenge of trying to “be cool” and hold back showing positive emotions. Leah and Eri create an atmosphere where it’s OK to be goofy and have fun while working hard, exactly the lessons we want our swimmers to learn.

Beyond her interest in coaching on the Dolphins organization, Leah spends a significant portion of her spare time working with Special Olympics athletes in various settings. This is just the kind of person she is, and she brings the same spirit to her head coach role on the Dolphins.

In addition to their contributions on the pool deck, Eri and Leah are also a pleasure to work with from a board perspective. Working with three different board presidents, they have been very receptive to suggestions and to adopting new approaches to enhance our management of the team. Both women are able to manage a large coaching staff and to create a culture of growth among the coaching staff.

Based on their guidance and leadership, the Dolphins have a strong set of high-school coaches who are long-time Dolphins swimmers and enjoy giving back to the team they grew up with.

Finally, both Eri and Leah just go the extra mile, in all kinds of ways. A prime example is the girls slumber party event they have held every year for the past 5 years. Held at the Breen house and staffed by Eri, Leah, and female coaching staff, this event is a highlight of the girls season. My daughter first attended as a shy, tentative 6-year old, and now looks forward to having fun with her friends while helping with the younger swimmers. This year they had 37 girls attend! To be clear: nobody asked Eri and Leah to put on a slumber party. It’s simply something they choose to do based on their vision of what a summer swim team should be and the team spirit they strive to create. Based on their example, we’ve recently incorporated a similar social event for the boys.

In closing, a recent team event provides an excellent illustration of how Eri and Leah really embody the spirit of going the extra mile and showing a passion for what they do in their efforts as head coaches. This year we sponsored a team “swim clinic” with Olympian and world-record holder Aaron Peirsol. Aaron provided a very motivating speech about realizing the reason he swims “just because it’s what he loves to do”. Looking at our team, we are proud to see that Eri and Leah have created just that kind of environment for our swimmers; one where swimmers can learn to love swimming at their own pace in a supportive, positive, and fun environment. They do this because it’s truly what they love to do. As Leah and Eri move on to other phases of their lives, we feel strongly that their successful tenure as head coaches and the culture they have created on the team is a prime example of what the ISL is seeking to create and sustain within the summer swim program, and we would appreciate the recognition of their “labor of love” as a shining star within the ISL.

Erik Blum & Ernie Kwan

Dolphins co-Presidents 2012-2014

July 21, 2015

Dear Awards Committee,

The South Irvine Dolphins enthusiastically nominate Coach Eri Akutagawa and Coach Leah Breen for the Todd K. Larson Coaches Award. It is without question that this dynamic duo epitomizes the definition of the word coach and the essence of what this award represents.

Prior to highlighting the numerous reasons why they are deserving of this award, we would like to explain our unique submission letter. As you will see, there are 3 other letters that accompany ours:

- 1) Ginny Mumm – Past President of Dolphins & David Meyer – Past Board Member
- 2) Erik Blum and Ernie Kwan – Past Presidents of Dolphins
- 3) Susan Charles – Parent on the Dolphins team since 2010

It is not often that head coaches outlast a Presidents term (which is typically 2 years on our team). These two coaches have outlasted THREE Presidencies! This dedication and commitment to a team is truly above and beyond a typical coach. Oftentimes head coaches are lured away by other teams offering more money (and both of them have been asked numerous times!). However, their loyalty and commitment to Dolphins has been unwavering (whew!). In fact, knowing that Eri and Leah are coaching our team is what enables our parents to feel comfortable volunteering for the President position (it's the only reason we said yes!). As Presidents, we never need to worry about our coaching staff – Eri & Leah have got it covered.

As you will see from the past President letters, Coach Eri and Coach Leah are exceptional. In fact, they are so exceptional, that when a parent heard we were nominating them for this award, she begged to represent the parent perspective and be part of the nomination packet. And, as you will see from Susan Charles' letter, she represents our parent perspective perfectly. Our parents adore Eri and Leah and it's what keeps our families coming back year after year.

Before turning to their coaching abilities, it is important to provide some background on both Coach Eri and Coach Leah.

Coach Eri began swimming with NOVA at a young age but switched to AZOT when she was 7 years old. In fact, she swam with AZOT's until she was 18. She was a latecomer to the Dolphin family, joining us at 13 years of age, but that is where she fell in love with the team. In fact, she continued to swim with the Dolphins throughout her high school career. Eri went to University High school and, of course, swam all four years. She furthered her education at Cal State Fullerton where she received her teaching certificate and is now a Special Resource teacher at Corona Del Mar High School. Her passion working with special needs kids has helped tremendously on the pool deck. We have a few kids on our team that have special needs (e.g., autism) and require extra assistance. Needless to say, Eri is wonderful with them. In fact, one of our Dolphin parents contacted Eri before the season because her son was conflicted about swimming. Eri went out of her way to meet with the young man and lent support and advice. She is an extremely giving person, she connects and inspires kids on a daily bases. She truly cares about the kids!

Coach Leah has grown up with the Dolphins – beginning her swimming career with us at the age of 7. Needless to say, her skill as a swimmer is exceptional. She swam for 4 years at American University (a Division 1 school) and holds the American University record for 50m freestyle. In fact, even her university recognized how special she is and awarded her the Most Valuable Player during her senior year. Coach Leah's dedication to swimming is also exemplified in her service to the Special Olympics. She has served as a coach for their swimming team as well as a counselor for Camp Care (and away camp in Lake Tahoe for those with special needs). As you can imagine, based on Leah's amazing ability in the water and her warm, supportive, and kind personality, she is highly sought after for swim lessons year round. She brings a spirit and love for Dolphins that cannot be duplicated and each child genuinely feels how much she cares about them.

It is clear, both Eri and Leah are exceptional. And, as you can imagine, they bring these exceptional qualities to our team. While they are organized, responsible, and have superb swimming technique, this is not what makes them stand out. In fact, that's what a coach is supposed to do. It is what they do beyond the expectations of the coach role that make them stand out. For example, when you attend a Dolphin swim meet, you won't be surprised to see Coach Eri or Coach Leah dancing on deck with the kids. They both know how to bust a move! In fact, their energy is so contagious, even the parents join in. There's nothing like seeing a sea of bright orange dancing on the deck – their spirit and love for team is all encompassing. It is this love and passion for making people happy that go above and beyond the coach role. They cheer enthusiastically when a child has improved their time (their jumping up and down is hard to miss!) and they are ready with a hug and support when a child is feeling low. As they both have grown up on this team, they know what it means to be a Dolphin and they infuse that energy into each and every child.

Coach Eri and Coach Leah also host a Dolphin girls sleepover (hosted at the Breen household). This is not required nor asked of them – however – they do it because the girls love it. Our daughters have regularly attended this sleepover and, to be honest, I think it's one of the best bonding events I've ever seen. There are dance competitions, make-overs, movies, and tons of fun. I know of no other team or coach (or parent!!) who has even attempted such an event. How Eri and Leah (and our other female coaching staff) survive over 50 girls at once is beyond me. It is the creation of these special events that truly bring the Dolphin spirit together.

As you will read in the other letters, Coach Eri and Coach Leah go above and beyond in everything they do and I will not continue to repeat those praises (although many are worth repeating!). And, hopefully you will see, that this is not just a letter supporting one person but rather a culture. Both Eri and Leah have grown up on this team. They have been swimmers, volunteers, assistant coaches, and now lead our team. In fact, several of the youth they coached are now serving as assistant coaches on the team! This is what true leadership is about. They know how to inspire young swimmers and develop them into strong teammates. Both Eri and Leah provide not only leadership but also a team spirit that cannot be broken.

My daughter began this league when she was 5 years old. As she moves into 6th grade, she's already talking about volunteering on the team and...maybe one day...being a coach. And, most impressively, my daughter is not the only one to feel this way. Each year we have an enormous amount of our youth interested in serving on the team. In fact, our team has 16 coaches– all of whom are managed and supervised by Eri and Leah. From swimmer to coach is the path of a typical Dolphin. It is this homegrown culture and loyalty to team that can only be credited to our coaching staff – Eri and Leah.

While we know there are many qualified coaches within the Irvine Swim League (ISL is very fortunate), we hope the spirit with which we have portrayed our coaches highlights why they are so deserving of this award. As Leah is heading off to George Washington School of Medicine in August, this is her last opportunity to be recognized for her coaching contributions (she's hanging up her swim cap for a medical one). We believe both of our coaches should be recognized – not just one. They are a dynamic duo and epitomize the very spirit of coaching. In fact, they are more than coaches to us, they are family and we hope you can feel the love we have for them and will recognize them with this most deserving award.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Cauffman & Kim Putnam

Co-Presidents of the South Irvine Dolphins

July 24, 2013

Dear Members of the Irvine Swim League Board of Directors,

We are writing to support the nomination by the Board of the South Irvine Dolphins of its two head coaches, Eri Akutagawa and Leah Breen, for the Irvine Swim League's Coach of the Year award.

We believe they deserve joint recognition for their extraordinary contributions to managing our team for many years, building a culture of cooperation, service, and achievement. Their work, individually and together, embodies the diversity and spirit of both the Dolphins and the ISL.

Coach Eri and Coach Leah grew up with the Dolphins. Coach Leah became a Dolphin when she was seven years old, Coach Eri joined in high school. They each worked their way through the ranks of volunteer, assistant coach, and senior assistant. This is the fifth third year that they've served as co-head coaches, and our Board and our team couldn't be happier. Their long tenure and hands-on approach mean that hundreds of young Dolphin swimmers have been touched by their efforts.

Eri and Leah understand the unique role of the Irvine Swim League in promoting the sport of swimming, excellence, participation, and community. Each is unusually adept at adjusting to the needs of each individual swimmer on the team, and can switch from coaxing a shy five-year-old into the water for warm-up to giving an accomplished pre-teen tips on speeding up her flip turn. They also understand that the ISL is a family league, and quickly establish links with each family on the team, communicating effectively with parents as well as swimmers. Both also embrace their responsibilities as role models for younger coaches and swimmers, bringing new swimmers and families into the ISL.

Coach Eri was a high school and club swimmer in Irvine, and a star student at University High who was engaged in a spate of clubs. She graduated from Cal State Fullerton with a very strong academic record, and then gained certification in Elementary Education. She now teaches her own classroom of developmentally disabled students during the year. She takes one week off from Dolphins coaching each year to work at a camp for economically disadvantaged students. By example, she emphasizes the importance of service, but never in a preachy or self-righteous way.

Eri is a buzz of activity in practice and the meets, making immediate connections with virtually every swimmer on the team, bending over to talk to a five year old, standing back to coach a high school swimmer. She switches from hugs to sarcasm quickly, praising and taunting, depending upon who she's talking to. She's adept at reading each swimmer and figuring out exactly what he or she needs at the moment. This is a skill that great coaches and teachers cultivate and Eri demonstrates it consistently.

Coach Leah graduated from American University, where she swam on the team and was a star student. Her background as a swimmer prepared her for many other things. Leah was a stand-out sprinter and consistently made the Dean's List at college, and was named to the Patriot League's All-Academic team. In spite of entering college with only 2 years of club swimming experience, she graduated as the team's MVP. She once held the ISL 50 Freestyle record, and still holds the South Irvine Dolphin record in the same event.

Part of Leah's efforts this summer include coaching a new 15-18 year old swimmer on how to surpass her own record. She will start medical school at George Washington University in August and will—to her horror—have to miss Champs for the first time in more than a decade to receive her white coat.

Like any great doctor and great coach, Leah is a sharp diagnostician. Having watched hundreds of young swimmers master a range of events, Leah is quick to recognize the one seemingly minor correction that will suddenly bring balance and efficiency to a stroke. She's particularly good at helping young swimmers set goals, ranging, of course, from helping a new swimmer swim a lap of breaststroke legally to working with a more accomplished swimmer in pursuit of a team record.

Our head coaching team took us through a difficult transition in 2013, when the team experienced atypically high turnover, mostly a result of the difficulty in finding pool space. Last year, these coaches had a somewhat tougher assignment than any of us expected. As a result, Eri and Leah had to organize their staff for split workouts (unusual for the Dolphins) in a new pool, sharing space with water polo players, Village Park, and the Aquazots. Nearly half of our swimmers (54!) were new to the team, and most were new to the sport; almost all of our Board members were new to their jobs as well. This meant unexpected strains, both in terms of our logistics and our budget. Our head coaches rose to the challenge.

Coaches Eri and Leah embraced the opportunities all of these transitions presented. Almost immediately, they learned all of the swimmers and their families' names and trained their (very large) coaching staff (including 16 paid assistants and volunteers) to manage lanes of novices and accomplished swimmers, supervising the set-up and take-down of Woodbridge Pool at the same time. The assistants, of course, came to us with different strengths: some were accomplished swimmers who worked to learn how to communicate with novices; some were already good with the kids but needed to learn more about the details of the sport. Together, Leah and Eri managed the schedule, the assistant coaches, the program, and the spirit of the Dolphins together.

The Dolphins community they reestablished now continues stronger than ever, with many new families as we increased our roster to 130 swimmers, a new board, and a growing group of volunteer and assistant coaches who have been trained by Eri and Leah—sometimes through direct instruction (how to teach side breathing, how to encourage a frightened youngster to climb up on top of the block, how to talk with parents) and *always* by example. The Dolphin message is constantly transmitted by every member of their staff.

The Meyer family is particularly grateful to both Eri and Leah. Our older daughter was hesitant to get into the water at her first meet, and Eri spent 45 minutes coaxing her into the water for warm-up. After several years, that daughter is now a volunteer coach, coaxing other children—likely less difficult children—into the water. My younger daughter started on the team at 5, and was immediately identified and nurtured as a backstroker by Eri; she now holds two Dolphins age-group records in backstroke. Leah helped my older daughter with her academic program, encouraging her application to the Orange County School for the Arts, and helped both daughters with technique. She's now helping my older daughter learn to coach and teach swimming. From the beginning, I've gotten the clear message that they both care about my children as people, not only as swimmers.

The Mumm family, too, has benefitted from Eri and Leah's many gifts. Our two boys have grown up with the team and are now coaching. Our daughter loves the annual Dolphin Girls sleepover and other special events that Eri and Leah foster. They've all improved as swimmers, and look up to Eri and Leah as role models.

Any visit to a Dolphins practice or meet would find our head coaches busily and enthusiastically involved in every bit of the ISL experience. It's fun to watch Leah lead a troop of 9-year-olds marching around the pool in streamline position; it's exciting to watch Eri run between lanes to cheer on two swimmers in the Individual Medley as they turn to swim the backstroke. Their intelligence and competence is reassuring to parents; their enthusiasm is inspiring to our swimmers.

By recognizing the team of Eri Akutagawa and Leah Breen as Coach of the Year, the ISL will recognize two outstanding individuals, and send a strong message about the qualities we value in our young leaders.

Very Truly Yours,

David Meyer and Ginny Mumm, Past Members of the South Irvine Dolphins Boa

Susan Charles
6 McClintock Ct.
Irvine, CA 92617

July 21, 2015

Dear members of the ISL Coach of the Year awards committee,

Ok. I am not generally an effusive person, yet I cannot think about our South Irvine Dolphin Coaches Leah Breen and Eri Akutagawa without sounding like a giddy groupie. Simply put, they are phenomenal. They are the dream mix of every quality you would want in a coach: high energy, always positive, highly motivating, and with a deep-seated knowledge of swimming. They have so many positive qualities, and it's taken me watching them as co-head coaches for the past five years to decide on what I believe is their most important quality that is so rare: the ability to read each child's emotional state and say the perfect words to make each one feel better about him or herself.

That last sentence sounds fairly nebulous, so let me use my son (now 12) as an example of exactly what I'm talking about. Matthew began swimming with the Dolphins when he was 6 years-old. He had no swimming experience, and the only "stroke" he knew was the dog paddle. As a result, he was constantly last in his group – so much so that he would often reach the side after the other children had already left for their next set. He would become so upset that he frequently would get out of the pool and stomp around, yelling at the top of his lungs about how much he hated swimming and was quitting the team. Sitting outside of the pool area, I

desperately had the urge to lunge over the fence barrier and throttle him. Eri and Leah, however, always calmed him down, soothed him from his frustration, and miraculously managed to talk him back into the pool. Their ability to help him learn to regulate his emotional distress was remarkable.

The next year, after a nine month break from swimming where he had forgotten nearly everything pool-related he had learned, was a renewal of his frustration for swimming. He is stubborn, and if it had not been for the constant hugs and the “Dolphin Dollar” economy that Eri and Leah used, he would never have gotten back in the pool. He came in last in most of his races, but Leah and Eri were quick to point out what he did right, not wrong. Whenever he made a time improvement in his strokes, such as the backstroke (which we affectionately named the back float), the coaches made him feel like an Olympian.

“Okay. Not bad. You’re still moving your head a little, though.” I enjoy listening to Leah and Eri’s advice to him when he swims. As he has improved, the comments illustrate their knowledge of swimming and their ability to recognize what the children need to change in their strokes. More importantly, though, is the change in their style to meet his increased maturity. They no longer use their cajoling, sweet tones and a willingness to be sidetracked with his random stories. Now, they redirect him, treating him like the middle-schooler he has become. They demand more, because they know he is capable of more. And, again remarkably, he responds.

If Eri and Leah had not been constantly drying his tears, constantly encouraging him and helping him replace his anxiety and doubt with curiosity and hope, Matthew would never have continued in swimming. Matthew is not alone; they do this for every child on the team. Seriously. Every Single One. How do they find the patience? My carpool last year, for example, included six children who ranged in age from five to thirteen. The five and six year-olds sometimes complained that they didn’t want to swim. When that happened, I always took them to Eri or Leah. Either of them always managed to convince them to work out with the team.

Coaches Eri and Leah deserve this award for working with the children who need constant encouragement and smiles when they are yelling about how they hate the world. They see through these words of frustration, realizing that these children are scared, angry, frustrated, and doubting their ability. They make them feel safe and heard, and always supported. I truly feel that these two young women have helped me raise my son – being a coach for swimming, but also being a life coach who has shaped how he views himself and how he approaches challenges.

Leah is now leaving for medical school after spending the last twenty summers with the dolphins. I am so happy for her, and so sad for us. ISL has been such a fundamental part of her life, and this award would be a perfect finish for years of unbelievable service. I very much hope that Eri will be a valued and continued presence, but I cannot pretend that it will be the same. This year truly represents an end of an era on this team: our dynamic duo is ending.

In sum, Coaches Eri and Leah are the ideal models of what a coach should be – enthusiastic, always positive, always encouraging, and experts in their field. I cannot recommend them more highly.

Sincerely,



Susan T. Charles
A grateful parent

Hello,

I would like to nominate our coach Leah on the South Irvine Dolphin team for the Coach of the Year award. I am thrilled by the energy and enthusiasm she brought to every practice and meet. She cheered up every swimmer and their parents too. I heard she is going to go to med school east coast after the summer, not sure if she will be able to come back next year...we really hope to see her back again. If not, we will really miss her and wish her all the best.

Swimmer Kelly, Justin and Zhang's family