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Is This Undefeated Team the Best Story in College Sports?

Fordham University of the Bronx (24-0!) is making major waves in water polo—a sport typically dominated by sunny California schools

By Jason Gay

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Look, I can't pretend that I know a ton about college water polo. You all read this column. I can't pretend I know a ton about anything.

But when a reader told me to take a peek at the recent NCAA men's water polo rankings, I saw a lot of sunny California schools I expected to see:

UCLA, USC, Stanford, Berkeley (aka the water polo "Big Four," I'm told), the University of the Pacific (sounds nice), Pepperdine (idyllic), UC San Diego (sure) and UC Santa Barbara (of course)...you know, the sort of schools that sound like fabulous places to chuck a ball around a pool.

And then I saw a school I didn't expect to see at all:

Fordham.

As in Fordham University, in the Bronx—the New York City Jesuit school with distinguished academics, famous alumni (Denzel Washington, Vince Lombardi) and plentiful public transit access—but not exactly anyone's idea of a beachside water polo Xanadu.

This past Sunday in Baltimore, I watched Fordham's men's water polo team swamp Johns Hopkins 28-12, improving their record to a perfect 24-0. It was a dominant display, sort of like watching the Globetrotters work over the Generals, but in water. (How's that for some water polo analysis?)

Fordham has been lights out all season long. They've had big wins over proven East Coast rivals like Princeton (a ranked program and an NCAA tournament semi-finalist last year) and Harvard (no idea; apparently a school near MIT and Tufts.). Fordham even tore through a recent swing of

California teams (including Pacific, UC-Santa Barbara, and San Jose State) that got the sport buzzing.

It's to the point that the Rams shot to fifth in the country in the most recent NCAA RPI poll—and they've been as high as No. 2 in the weekly coaches poll.

That's not just milestone territory for Fordham water polo—it's a historic performance for any Fordham team in any sport, ever.

"It's absolutely thrilling," says Fordham's president, Tania Tetlow.

"It's the best thing to happen in water polo in the past 10 to 15 years," says Wesley Kading, a former pro who founded the Los Angeles Athletic Club men's team and co-hosts a podcast called "Water Polo Wednesday." "The rise of teams outside of California creates parity and excitement."

A key factor in Fordham's leap, everyone agrees, is its head coach—Brian Bacharach, a California native, former All-American and national champ at Berkeley who followed his wife (then girlfriend) Michelle to New York last decade when she got into business school at NYU.

Bacharach asked Fordham's head coach at the time, Bill Harris, if he could help out with the program—which he did for five seasons before being named head coach in 2020. (Harris, who still serves as an associate coach, is considered an essential part of the team's success—as is assistant Ilija Duretic, a player and coach at a former NYC power, St. Francis.)

Then there's the Rams roster. *Phew*. Alongside some Californians, Connecticuters and a Brooklynite is an international assembly of talent from water polo hives like Hungary, Italy, Malta, Greece, Spain and France. Multiple languages are spoken in the pool, and competition is fierce. Some of Fordham's most intense games happen at its own practices.

"We're all very competitive," says Lucas Nieto Jasny, who hails from Barcelona. "We fight a lot at practice—we all want to get as much playing time as we can." He quickly adds: "Outside of the pool, we are very good friends, and I think that is part of our success."

Bacharach, the coach, says the Rams' international recruiting is often word-of-mouth—a player comes to Fordham and has a good experience, then tells his friends overseas. When asked about a California school's geographic recruiting advantages—sunshine, the beach—he smiles.

"When you talk to a European kid, it's cooler to be in New York City than it is in California," he says.

Fordham's rise is hardly overnight. The program assembled a number of winning seasons under both Bacharach and Harris. But 24-0 is 24-0. Bacharach admits he has been hearing more from old friends out West.

“They’re all a little like: *What is going on?*” he says. “Everyone wants a simple answer, and it’s so many things, hundreds of things, steps that led to the next step, steps backward, forward, all that stuff. This group has melded together nicely and they really worked for it.”

The Fordham campus has been rallying behind the phenomenon. The Princeton game in late September was a rowdy packed house. The school band even turned up. (If you’ve ever been inside an echo-crazy aquatics center, imagine a band ripping through a few tunes in there.)

“We’ve never had a crowd like that,” says senior Mark Katsev, who hails from Brooklyn. “I had friends come two minutes late—they couldn’t sit down in the stands.”

Now the water polo postseason beckons, with Fordham pursuing a spot in the NCAA tournament and a shot at a national title. Since this version of the tournament began in 1969, no East Coast school has ever won the championship.

Could it happen? These Rams plan to give it everything they have. Senior Luca Silvestri, a business major from Napoli, Italy, tells me that the Fordham team’s “vibes and energy are high, but we’ll be working hard.”

The Italian water polo collegian playing in the Bronx sounds almost...Californian.

“Positive vibes,” Silvestri says. “But the job is not done.”

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