

## **Ottawa National Diving Club's family-driven mentality a foundation of its pandemic success**

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In times of struggle, a sense of community can provide a foundation of support that makes overcoming adversity a little easier. The tight-knit community at Ottawa National Diving Club did just that, coming together to fuel the club's success during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At Ottawa National there's a symbiotic relationship between its members and staff. The staff give their all to create a welcoming, family-driven environment that the existing members, in turn, promote and instil in new ones. During the pandemic, this community has united to restore a piece of normality through mutual support.

When sport halted last March, the club was participating in Ontario's provincial championships. Like with most activities at the time, the club anticipated a swift return to the pool. When that didn't happen, it was time to adapt.

For several months, Ottawa National relied on its members, a dedicated parent-led board of directors and other sport community partners for continued support as the club turned virtual. It offered daily virtual programs and partnered with the likes of the Ottawa Firefighters and the province of Ontario, among others, to supply the diving community engaging activities.

"It was well received by not only the province, but we had athletes all across Ontario and Canada," said head coach and program director Brennan Villemaire. "We also had athletes from Mexico and Germany in attendance."

Despite Ottawa National's virtual programming drawing significant engagement from members, the months away from the pool began to present financial burdens and mental fatigue. With the help of available government grants and its tight-knit community, the club held on and was positioned well to return to an almost-normal in-person summer program at the pool.

"It was kind of a hallelujah moment," smiled Villemaire, noting he wasn't sure if there was a bigger sigh of relief from the athletes or the staff. "The kids were ecstatic. It was fantastic."

Since the return to play in July, the club's success has continued. Villemaire said the success reflects itself in three ways: financial success, team morale and lack of Covid-19 transmission.

"At the end of the day, we are a business first and foremost," he said, noting the club retained 95 per cent of existing members and even welcomed some new ones. "Our club has been known as a 'second family' by the majority of our members. To parents, that is priceless and our members have been advocates for Ottawa National."

This financial stability allowed the club to rehire all its staff after the initial months of the pandemic – an achievement Villemaire described as the club's biggest success. With dedicated staff onboard, the club was able to ensure every practice left divers feeling safe and welcome, increasing team morale.

Villemaire said Ottawa National received particularly promising feedback from newer families with kids in the beginner Learn to Dive programs. "They don't know who the coaches are and they might not know who we are," he said, noting how important it was in these situations to emphasize the club's sense of community. "Kids are leaving and so excited to come back. That's the kind of confidence you have to send the kids home with."

When a new diver leaves with a positive experience thanks to the staff, it fosters the club's symbiotic relationship with its members. Villmaire said founder Kathleen Murphy can be credited with instilling this sense of community in the club since founding it 13 years ago.

"She has built a family-driven experience over the years," said Villemaire. "Ever since then, the members have really internalized that and try to project that to other members who are joining."

"This is their second home," he said, noting that for many young athletes who've been diving with Ottawa National for as long as they can remember, the pandemic marked their first extended period of time out of the pool. "When you have that baseline, that tight knit community, the mentality is: 'How are we going to get through this? How can we support each other?'"

With financial success and a vibrant morale stemming from this sense of community at the club, Ottawa National's success has been capped off by no cases of Covid-19. When sport returns, the club will once again look to reinforce its effective and rigorous protocols.

“It’s as the saying goes, ‘if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it’,” Villemaire said. “We will ensure that protocols continue to be followed, maintain communications with all facility staff on updates and err on the side of caution to ensure that Covid-19 does not enter Ottawa National or the sport of diving.”

“Whether we are in the pool doing what we love or virtually behind a computer screen, our athletes are always excited to see their teammates and we will keep working towards the day we get to go back to the pool.”