

Santa Ana urges Latinos to get in the swim



Karen Tapia-Andersen / Los Angeles Times

Members of the girls' and boys' water polo teams at Santa Ana's Valley High School take practice shots at teammate Jesus Chavez. To promote health and safety, the city's high schools are encouraging competitive swimming and water polo among Latinos, among the sports' most underrepresented groups.

The city's high schools are encouraging competitive swimming and water polo among a group that doesn't traditionally participate in aquatics.

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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With its backyard pools and beach culture, Southern California is known as a competitive swimming incubator where most high schools have aquatic programs, powerhouse clubs abound and Olympic medal winners are reared.

But not in Santa Ana. Though the city is at the core of sun-soaked Orange County, public pools are scarce and Latinos -- who make up 78% of the population -- are drawn more to soccer.



But there are ripples of change.

To promote health and safety, Santa Ana high schools are encouraging competitive swimming and water polo among Latinos, who don't traditionally participate in those sports.

New facilities, including Olympic-size pools at two high schools, will offer places for the sports to take hold.

"Kids are playing soccer every day after school," said Fred Lammers, head aquatics coach at Valley High School. "We'd like to do that with aquatics."

The push is part of a larger effort to promote physical fitness and prevent drowning. Studies show that most Latino children nationwide cannot swim.

The community is also battling the stereotype of swimming as a sport for the white and wealthy. Less than 5% of swim club members who belong to [USA Swimming](#), the sport's governing body, identify themselves as Latino.

At Valley High, where swimmers dived into a \$1.8-million Olympic-size pool in March, the opposite is true: The aquatics program is 95% Latino, a reflection of the city's ethnic majority.

Genesis Luviano, goalie for the varsity water polo team at Valley High, has excelled in a sport that was not an obvious choice.

When she joined the team, she had to explain the basics of the sport to her puzzled family. Friends still poke fun at her for spending so much time in the pool. "Swimming is a sport?" they ask.

"My family has come to embrace swimming," Genesis said. "My mom is always here. She's the team mom."

And her sister, a sixth-grader, is taking lessons. "She's going to be better than me," Genesis said.

The school's gleaming new pool is attracting attention. It replaced a 1960s-era pool less than half its size that had been repaired so many times it was held together by an uneven patchwork of concrete.

Lammers, who has coached at the school for 31 years, said most students are reluctant to join because they don't know how to swim when they enter high school.

When Lammers tries to drum up interest for the water polo team over the school intercom, he usually follows his announcement with: "You don't have to know how to swim; we'll teach you."

"We are not in Irvine, where kids have been swimming since they were 4 or 5," Lammers said.

"We start with blowing bubbles and kickboards."

The YMCA is breaking ground this summer on a \$22-million aquatics center, with a 50-meter pool that will be jointly operated with adjacent Segerstrom High School.

The center will be paid for through private donations and \$8 million from the [Children & Families Commission of Orange County](#), which funds education, health and early childhood development programs through a statewide sales tax on tobacco products.

Segerstrom's athletic director, Frank Alvarado, said that after several years of telling inquiring parents that the school couldn't afford a swimming program -- let alone a pool -- he now boasts that an aquatics program is coming soon.

The center will include two smaller pools -- one for younger swimmers and one for all-purpose use -- and will conduct a program promoting health and fitness to youngsters.

"This will be from birth to 18 years old," said the commission's executive director, Mike Ruane, who added that the group has long been concerned about the prevalence of obesity and lack of neighborhood pools in Santa Ana.

"Here you have a city with over 140,000 young people, and many kids are just not learning how to swim," said John Voget, executive director of the [new YMCA branch](#).

"They go to the beach and they just don't have the training to be safe."

Even though a pool is one of the most expensive athletic facilities to build, swimming itself places few financial burdens on poor families, said Thom Simmons, a spokesman for the [California Interscholastic Federation Southern Section](#), which governs Southern California's high school sports.

"A lot of inner-city aquatics programs are getting going because there is no expense. You put a pair of shorts on and jump into the pool," he said. "It's not like baseball, where you have to buy a glove, a mitt and cleats."

A national study released last month by USA Swimming found that non-Latino whites were nearly twice as likely to know how to swim as Latinos.

And though cultural barriers remain -- parents who don't swim, limited access to pools and few role models -- the study found that Latino children are beginning to reject the stereotype that swimming is for the white and affluent. Asked if swimming was "just for white people," 71% of the Latino children surveyed disagreed.

Lammers, the Valley High coach, said swimming and water polo are catching on, especially as new athletes follow in their older siblings' footsteps.

Carlos Martinez, 17, the only senior boy on the Valley High water polo team, joined after his three older sisters took him to their practices.

At games and meets, Carlos still sees mostly white and Asian faces. "Parents on the other teams tell us they're proud of us because there aren't that many Latinos in water polo," he said.

Carlos hopes that is changing. He has done his part by persuading a friend to join the swim team, even though she didn't know how to swim.

"Watch. By the end of the year you're going to be able to swim 100 laps," he told her.

"She didn't," he said. "She swam 96."

tony.barboza@latimes.com