

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Miller: Eli Lew, Crean Lutheran water polo are champions at heart

By [JEFF MILLER](#)

2016-11-11 13:11:52



Today, we're going to begin at the end, on Senior Night, with the kid's final high school game.

With a loss, one that eliminated Crean Lutheran from playoff contention, officially clinching a losing record for a patched-together team representing a water polo program so young it's still learning to dog paddle.

But that result – a 19-11 stumble against Sage Hill – isn't the outcome that mattered, not when compared to what was happening up in the stands, where this defeat was being viewed most certainly as a victory.

“When I was driving home afterward, I couldn't believe how I felt,” says Clarke Lew, the kid's father. “It was almost indescribable. You saw all that hard work over the years. ... Eli faces a lot of challenges, and he pulled it off.”

It was a little more than three years ago that I first wrote about Eli Lew. That story was about Clarke nominating his son for an award by writing a letter that disclosed Eli's autism.

For 12 years before that, the situation mostly had been a family secret, meant to protect Eli from the stigma often attached to a condition that affects an estimated 3.5 million Americans.

The past three years haven't been easy ones, Eli transferring to Crean after struggling at Orange Lutheran, father and son continuing to clash on their postgame drives home, Eli more than once reacting to setbacks in the water by throwing his swim cap or hurling his backpack or slamming a chair.

Sometimes, he'd shout a word or two wildly inappropriate in a parochial school environment, only to, completely embarrassed, later ask his father if anyone had heard him.

“Just the head chaplain,” Clarke would tell Eli, now smiling at the memory. “Otherwise, I think we're all right.”

But there were no outbursts on Senior Night, when Eli and two of his teammates received recognition in the form of signed pictures, homemade posters and special water polo balls.

There was just a kid playing his hardest to finish a season in which he scored more than 100 goals.

Just a co-captain leading by example, repeatedly telling his teammates “My fault,” even when it wasn't.

Just a senior doing his best before a crowd that included family and friends, former coaches and teammates all personally invited by Eli.

“It was one of those moments, out of a handful of moments in his life, where everything went exactly right,” says Eli's mother, Ann. “And it was orchestrated by Eli. It wasn't us. It was all him. I was so proud.”

There was a time when these parents were told their son might never master the most basic of skills, like talking.

For nearly nine years starting at age 3, Eli spent 40 hours a week working with therapists, beginning with things like sitting still.

Before transferring to Crean, the stress reached a point where Eli realized the only answer was to leave his lifelong friends behind for another school.

“Everything he could do that night, he did and in a great way, a compassionate way,” Clarke says. “It was such a fun thing to watch him and his teammates. All the work he’s gone through, all that effort, it was evident in that hour and a half.”

The scene was made more poignant by the fact it happened with this team, Eli finding himself in a program still searching for itself. Crean Lutheran finished just its third season of water polo and second against varsity competition.

Senior Night marked the school’s lone home game of the year, even though it was played on the road, at University High. Crean doesn’t have a pool.

The team practices at Irvine Ranch Outdoor Educational Center, an otherwise beautiful facility that has a swallow end, something not conducive to this sport.

The Saints often worked out with only one goal since they didn’t have enough players to scrimmage full court. They finished the season with a roster of 10 – six boys and four girls.

“The one thing about the kids on this team is they always play hard,” Coach Craig Brown says. “It’s in their hearts to play hard.”

That’s not the only thing in the hearts of these particular Crean Lutheran Saints.

In personalizing each of the posters they presented to the seniors, they also expressed appreciation through a little sincere silliness.

Eli’s poster featured a reference to the cartoon Scooby-Doo, a nod to the Shaggy vocal impression he often used to lighten practices.

Yeah, these teammates are silly, to be certain. They even gave Eli a Scooby-Doo coloring book.

He’d like to continue playing water polo next year, probably at a local community college. The commitment seems to be there, Eli forgoing soda and candy during the season and waking up every day at 5:30 a.m. to swim laps on his own.

And the results definitely have been there, results that made a losing Senior Night feel like something much different.

“Eli hasn’t always gotten that pat on the back he deserves,” Ann says. “That night, no one was literally patting him on the back, but it’s like he was. You could tell he was soaking it in and he was proud of himself. It was his show.”

An underdog on a team full of underdogs, a team moving forward in more ways than one in a sport where success is just treading water.

**Contact the writer:** [jmiller@scng.com](mailto:jmiller@scng.com)