



Photo by Melissa Houston | Photo Editor

Head Coach Dan Marella stands at Raleigh Runnels Memorial Pool on March 17. Marella said despite being from the Bay Area, Pepperdine is home.

Nina Fife
Sports Editor

The ocean’s tide changes every day, causing rocky waves and strong currents to change the water’s course, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Pepperdine Swim/Dive team experienced their own changing tide when former Head Coach Ellie Monobe left the program midseason.

Instead of letting this unexpected change sweep them out and leave them adrift, the Waves turned their attention and poured their trust into assistant coach Dan Marella, whom Pepperdine Athletics appointed as the interim head coach Nov. 11. After four months at the helm, Director of Athletics Tanner Gardner officially named Marella as the program’s head coach, according to Pepperdine Athletics.

“It means a lot, this place has become home,” Marella said. “I definitely have a sense of relief now, but I will forever be a Wave, and it feels really good to be able to do that for the next few years and represent Pepperdine.”

The Waves couldn’t be happier about the head coach decision, many swimmers said. While they knew the decision would ultimately be in the hands of the Athletics Department, they were still rooting for their guy.

“I cannot speak highly enough about Dan,” junior Layla Busquets said. “He’s really demonstrated his ability to multitask, take on multiple jobs at once and do it with a lot of grace. He is perfect for

the head coaching position, because he’s already taking on more than I think any other coach could, really.”

Director of Athletics Tanner Gardner said naming Marella was a clear choice that would bring the most benefit to Pepperdine’s Swim/Dive program.

“He has the respect of the women on the team, he played a big part in recruiting many of them and so I think he has that relationship with them,” Gardner said. “In a matter of technical expertise, Dan has that, and so the combination of those things made us feel confident that he could do it.”

Busquets said one thing that truly makes Marella stand out for her entire team is his dedication to the program. Not only does Marella care for each member of his program, but his everyday life demonstrates his commitment to the success of the sport.

“He’s a very mild mannered person but also very smart and carries himself very well — he’s very motivational,” Busquets said.

From Student to Teacher

Marella’s calm and collected composure helped ease the sudden change in leadership, multiple swimmers said. Monobe’s departure from the program came as a shock for many swimmers, but the Waves felt confident with a familiar face leading them.

“Dan already knows exactly how everything works, so it was kind of a flawless transition,” Busquets said. “I think it’s definitely been a huge weight on him just to do all of this, but he’s doing such a good job

that we didn’t even notice too much.”

Even though Monobe’s exit brought a mix of emotions to the program, many swimmers said they were grateful for the experience they gained under their former head coach.

“Ellie was and is a huge part of our team,” junior swimmer Maddie Wheeler said. “We are able to do what we love all because of her. We all still have a lot of respect for her.”

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Layla Busquets
Junior

Monobe left Pepperdine after leading the Waves to three conference championships, most recently winning the 2025 Mountain Pacific Sports Federation (MPSF) Championship, according to Pepperdine Athletics. When Saint Mary’s College launched their Men’s and Women’s Swimming program, Monobe accepted the head coach position effective Dec. 1 so she could begin recruiting and building

for their inaugural season in 2026-27.

“She’s really elevated Pepperdine to be a truly competitive Division I program,” Busquets said. “I honestly can’t speak highly enough about the changes that she made.”

Wheeler said these program changes came from Monobe’s meticulous attention to detail and high standards. She expects perfection, which is why she has accumulated so much success throughout her career.

“Ellie is very strong and passionate about what she does,” Wheeler said. “She’s very knowledgeable. She’s been a coach for many strong programs, so it was awesome to have the opportunity to be coached by her.”

Marella joined the Waves in September 2022 and swam under Monobe during his time at UC Santa Barbara, according to Pepperdine Athletics. Marella said his time as a collegiate swimmer influences the type of coach he wants to be himself.

“The big thing for me, and I pull this from my favorite coaches and from my athletic experience, is that I want to create an environment where our girls want to be there,” Marella said. “You can’t get better if you don’t want to be there.”

With Marella spending most of his career close to Monobe, Pepperdine swimmers said the two coaches have a lot of similarities in their coaching style. Specifically, Wheeler said Marella is always pushing his team to be the best swimmers they can be: a standard of excellence Monobe also upheld.

“Dan has a lot of the similar traits as Ellie, which I

think is awesome and has made the transition easier in its process,” Wheeler said.

Even though Marella learned a lot from Monobe, he also wants to be his own coach. There are a lot of positive qualities he said he is carrying into the position, but there are also changes he wants to make.

“When I think of Ellie, I think of what she’s incredibly good at, and there’s a lot of positive things that Ellie did that I want to carry on moving forward,” Marella said. “I am going to keep enforcing the high standards she held, but I want my athletes to not be afraid to fail. You can’t grow without struggle and failure. I want to let them understand failure is a good thing, and it’s part of the process.”

Marella is going to continue searching for ways to elevate his program and the swimmers/divers that are a part of it. While he has his goals set, Marella said he could not have reached this point in his career without Monobe.

“I think a lot of that experience, and I think what our former head coach Ellie allowed me to do, was give me the space to grow,” Marella said. “I used a lot of that experience going into the last four months, and I will use that going forward.”

While Marella and Monobe’s similar styles helped ease the midseason transition, there is a special quality about Marella that makes him stand out among the program. Busquets said his ability to connect individually with each swimmer has elevated their experience both in and out of the water.

“He does a really good job of

fostering relations, and he really expects a lot out of you, but he also really believes in each one of us, which is really special,” Busquets said. “With that being said, I think Ellie also formed a positive culture, but I think Dan can get to know you on another level, which is really cool. He’s just been so great.”

The support from the program and the Athletics Department was not lost on Marella — in fact, he takes it as a compliment. He said he sees advocacy as a testament to the work he’s been putting in since joining the Waves in 2022.

“All the work that I’ve done in terms of building that relationship, building the coach-to-athlete trust relationship, had paid off,” Marella said. “I don’t want to be someone that I’m not, and so I hope to keep those relationships as best as I can. My philosophy is the holistic development of the athlete, and that is the most important thing I can accomplish.”

Many swimmers said Marella’s care for each swimmer makes him a safe space, but he’s also someone with a deep drive to win. When Marella stepped into the interim head coach position, he highlighted three values for the



Photo by Olivia Schneider | Assistant Photo Editor

Pepperdine Women’s Swim/Dive competes at the Blue & Orange Intrasquad Meet on Sept. 27 at Raleigh Runnels Memorial Pool. Marella stepped into the interim head coach position Nov. 11 before officially being hired March 10.

program: legacy, presence and courage.

“All three of those things ultimately helped the team and really helped the culture,” Wheeler said. “He has huge expectations for us as a team, and he also holds us accountable for those. He supports and respects us, which I arguably think is one of the most important things. Because he respects us, we respect him. The last one is having the courage to do difficult things and going into it knowing, ‘This race is going to hurt, but it’s worth it in the end.’”

Focus on the Present

The Waves had a 4-5 record this season and finished 6th in the MPSF Championships, according to Pepperdine Athletics. While their record wasn’t perfect, Wheeler said Marella’s support through this year’s difficulties prove his capabilities as a head coach.

“Dan has done a really good job helping us focus on conference during the coaching change,” Wheeler said. “He called a meeting the day after, and said, ‘I totally understand if you guys have any of these feelings — they’re all valid. But ultimately, we have to keep our eyes on conference, keep the locker room positive and just know that everything is going to be okay. It might seem difficult right now, but we can do this.’”

Aside from his supportive nature as a coach, his extensive knowledge of the sport provides him with another unique quality his swimmers

admire. Wheeler said Marella knows the sport is ever-changing, and he’s always researching ways to improve his program and the swimmers within it.

“He’s so passionate about the sport and coaching,” Wheeler said. “He really educates himself on everything in the sport. He’s awesome, and he knows what he’s doing.”

As the Athletics Department searched for a new head coach, the swimmers were asked about the impact of having a female in the role. When Busquets considered this option, she said her choice was clear: Marella has what a head coach needs.

“Any qualities that you would look for in a female role or lead is something that Dan has,” Busquets said. “We want someone who’s compassionate and willing to listen, and Dan possesses that. Honestly, I don’t think that there’s any reason to pick a female head coach over Dan.”

Marella joined the Pepperdine Swim/Dive program as a volunteer assistant swim and dive coach, according to Pepperdine Athletics. He proved he knows what it takes for his Waves to succeed when he helped lead the program to their 2023 Pacific Collegiate Swim and Dive Conference (PCSC) Championship as well as their 2025 MPSF Championship.

“In terms of the head of the program, I think there’s a lot of good things and people in our program that we want to continue going forward,” Gardner said. “This isn’t a reboot by any means, it’s how do we continue the success that we’ve had already?”

As the 2025-26 season progressed, the swimmers said the choice for who should be their next head coach was closer than some may realize — he was already on the deck with the team.

“We all love Dan,” Wheeler said. “There have been meetings to advocate for him, and we would just love to have Dan

MAKING A SPLASH

Swim/Dive records under Dan Marella

Ansley Halbach, 1650 Free - 17:10.61

Maile Sullivan, 100 Free - 50.88

Jackie Johnson, 1M Dive - 283.80

Aliyah Fan, Elliot Easton, AJ Adams, Ansley Halbach, 800 Free Relay - 7:28.85

Anna Ryan, Kylie Taylor, Aliyah Fan, Maile Sullivan, 200 Free Relay - 1:32.76

Ansley Halbach, 400 IM - 4:26.66

Amanda Wong, Platform Dive - 187.20

Aliyah Fan, Paige Easton, Elliot Easton, Maile Sullivan, 400 Free Relay - 3:25.51

Infographic by Amanda Monahan | Creative Director

as our head coach.”

Now that Marella has officially taken over the head coach role, he said he is already thinking about ways he can help his program. The main goal Marella keeps coming back to is connections — and not just with his swimmers, but with alumni and the local community, as well.

“I really want to tap into those support systems that we already have at Pepperdine, because I feel like we haven’t done a great job,” Marella said. “This is our program, and the rich tapestry of our alumni who are incredibly successful, is what makes this place special. There is excellency here, and it’s on this pool deck between both aquatics programs. I want our girls to go forward and represent Pepperdine with pride.”

As Marella thinks toward the future, his team said they are grateful for where they stand now. For many swimmers, the choice for the official head coach position was clear from the start — there was no other option besides Marella.

“Dan’s always been a part of it, and now it’s just him as the leader instead of Ellie,”

Busquets said. “In my mind, he’s always been the leader with Ellie. I honestly feel like there’s no real hiccups and we’re not falling short of the expectations we set at the beginning of the year. Dan’s continuing to carry out what we talked about.”

