

What does a College Coach Look For?

Taken from May 6, 2008 Collegeswimming.com Article

Spring is here. The college season is almost over. Coaches are wrapping up their recruiting classes and the whole of the college swimming community gets a bit of a breather.

But still the machine marches on. In fact in the recruiting business there's little time for letup, a fact that was obvious to anyone attending Juniors or Y-Nationals last month. What are they looking for? When do they begin looking? What does it take to get a scholarship?

Most recruits and parents would love to pick the brains of those coaches up in the stands, and in reality most coaches (those without a rapidly-approaching tee time) are happy to help. But face it, going up and asking can be intimidating, especially if you don't know what to ask.

Well, never fear. We've done the legwork for you and today we begin a series – “Twelve Things Every Recruit Wants to Know...But is Afraid to Ask.” You'll hear, from coaches themselves, whether it is better to sign in the Spring or Fall; what to expect on a recruiting visit; why coaches might not renew a scholarship; dealing with negative recruiting and more. In the coming weeks, we will try to untangle web of dreams, unknowns, misperceptions, and worries that make up the recruiting experience.

Today we ask what seems obvious.

Question 1 – What does a coach look for in recruiting?

“Everything,” explains Southern Methodist's Eddie Sinnott, “is important or can be when assessing someone's potential to perform at the NCAA Division I level.”

OK, but seriously, everything? Hawaii's Vic Wales said as much but offers a bit of an outline– “Grades, potential, club team, family, and history.

Of course don't forget the one big thing – speed. College swimming, is by its very nature, competitive and faster swimmers win races. Almost every coach we asked included times as the first, but by no means most important criterion.

How Fast Are You?

Susan Teeter, head coach of the Mid-Major National Dual Meet Champion Princeton Tigers explained, “I personally look for someone who can contribute time wise first on paper, then I look for the quality of the person as a human being to my program.”

But best times aren't the only criterion.

“Certainly times are important especially if performed in major championships under pressure,” explains Gregg Troy, head coach at Florida. “Coaches recommendations are also very key.....after that there are many variables: grades, character, future improvement.”

Joe Plane, the interim head coach at Pacific echoed the role of club and high school coach, “If they say someone is no where near their potential or is a new year round swimmer, that will have an effect on how we view someone.”

When Denver's Brian Schrader talks with coaches, his ears perk up when coaches describe a swimmer as their “the hardest worker”, “a team player”, “most improved”, their best student, or someone they enjoyed coaching.

Even the role of times can vary among schools.

According to one coach, teams “higher up the food chain” can be the most selective, while other programs, those at the bottom of their conference or smaller schools hoping to compete among the elite, might look ignore potential black marks. “You don't want to, but the realities of the job dictate that you have to win. The better the program the more you can pick and choose your risks.”

Recognized as one of the nation's leading universities and swimming programs, Stanford would seem pretty high up that ‘food chain’ and when asked, Stanford's Ted Knapp didn't even mention times – “talent and attitude” is what the Cardinal looks for in their recruits.

Finding the ‘Fit’

Of course when dealing with scholarships, you're talking an investment and a finite amount of scholarship money. Coaches must invest wisely. So not surprisingly, every coach, no matter where they are on the food chain, looks beyond times. Every coach wants fast swimmers, but they also want good students, hard workers, and team players.

“Talent, work ethic and mental toughness,” play into the mind of Kansas' Clark Campbell while UC-San Diego's Scott McGihon explains that “Commitment level, ability to engage in conversation intelligently, and passion for sport as well as academic prowess” are his key factors. Many coaches will watch the body language at meets. Are they smiling? Outgoing? Do they possess a, “killer race instinct, good sportsmanship and character.” If you want to swim at Pitt, you'd better because in addition to talent that's what Chuck Knoles is looking for.

Add to that an, “unselfish team approach.” That’s on Ohio State’s Bill Dorrenkott’s list along with several coaches looking for that elusive “fit.”

“On a trip coaches will look to see if a recruit will mesh with the team and coaching philosophy” explains Brooks Teal of NC State. Count Tennessee’s John Trembley as one coach who asks his swimmers for on about a recruit’s social interaction and “how they would integrate into the team setting.”

“Obviously,” says Indianapolis’ always-direct Gary Kinhead, “a coach will not want someone who they, or the current swimmers on the team, think will not fit in with the team concept.”

What is potential?

Think of a coach as both private investigator and talent scout. If a coach back home says a swimmer is, nowhere near their potential or is a new year round swimmer,” that can be a plus sign according to Plane. Swimmers from a small club without doubles or weight facilities can be seen as having untapped potential.

On the other hand, that same recruit – when faced with the prospect of 20-30 hours of training each week – might be in over their head. “If they come from a great club,” explains another coach, “then usually issues regarding training are not likely to be a problem.”

Of course, there could be other training issues that are a problem. Some clubs, it appears, have a bad reputation for burnout. “We won’t actively recruit from a few clubs,” explained one coach.

That’s where coaches go from P.I. to talent scout.

Growth patterns and “information about their gene pool” are on Trembley’s indicators of potential. Good stroke mechanics count, so too does a swimmer’s training history, injury history, and physical maturity. SMU’s Sinnott even takes in a recruit’s hand and foot size. Dorrenkott looks for swimmers with, “a steep rate of improvement” while a lack of improvement, might cause coaches to ask – in the words of Kinhead – “what the problem was.”

Good Grades

Of course, there’s the issue of academics. Swimmers aren’t just in college to swim – they’re there to get an education. Grades can be a big factor – both good and bad. In the era of the Academic Progress Rate (APR) teams face the prospect of losing scholarships if swimmers are not graduating on time. An ineligible swimmer is a waste of scholarship money. An ineligible walk-on is likely to be a former swimmer.

On the other end of the spectrum, good students are more likely to earn academic scholarships. These frequently don't count against a team's scholarship cap. There are many times more academic than athletic scholarship dollars. In fact, according to the New York Times, the average athletic scholarship amount is less than \$8,800. In swimming, the figure is closer to \$4,800 for men, and \$6,700 for women. Whatever the case, kids who can earn academic scholarships make life easier for a coach trying to build a successful team.

YOU

One final consideration is the role you – the student-athlete takes. Are you being aggressive? Sincere? Or are you just sitting on your butt waiting for coaches to come knocking? Coaches like recruits that are actively engaged (but not pushy) in the recruiting process. “There are too many recruits,” explains Rick Walker from Southern Illinois, “and too little time to waste – either theirs or ours.” Coaches want recruits who are prepared, informed, and straightforward.

Now that you have an idea of what coaches are looking for – the next question is when?

Thanks to Collegeswimming.com for this article