

UNDERSTANDING HIGH SCHOOL ALL-AMERICA AWARDS, AND HOW THE SELECTION PROCESS WORKS: A PRIMER FOR ATHLETES AND PARENTS

The National Interscholastic Coaches Award (NISCA) All-America team recognition is the pinnacle of achievement in high school swimming, diving, and water polo. These are THE finest aquatic athletes in the United States, and it's an incredibly exclusive group; only 100 swimmers in each event, and 56 water polo players made last year's cut, with another 18 water polo players named to the NISCA All-America Honorable Mention team.

I've been fortunate to coach 35 swimmers that were awarded All-America honors in nearly 100 different events. In water polo, we've had three All-Americans, two of them girls from last year's Final Four State team. The SHS Head Water Polo Coach, Ryan Ackerson, was the first, although we've had some very good players that never made the cut.

There are also Academic All-America awards that NISCA does, with athletes having over a 3.5 GPA being eligible to get a certificate that looks an awful lot like the ones we have at the pool office that are based on skill and performance. In a nutshell, just about any high school swimmer with a high GPA, regardless of speed, can apply for the *Academic* All-America awards at niscaonline.org.

For club swimming and club water polo, the respective governing bodies do a similar academic award program. The swimming one is extremely tough, requiring a Junior National time cut, plus having the 3.5 GPA (to apply, swimmers can go to usaswimming.org). USA Water Polo has what they call an Outstanding All-America Award, which is simply having the 3.5 GPA requirement and being registered as a Gold-level member with USAWP. There is no athletic performance requirement for this award, no tournament participation required, and there were over 18,000 players that applied for and received this award in 2021.

Whenever you hear me speak of our "All-American" athletes at Seminole High, I'm referring to the ones based solely on performance, the NISCA All-American award recipients, one hundred event swimmers in 50 states, and just 74 water polo players. The very best of the very best.

So, you might wonder . . . exactly how does the selection process work?

SWIMMING: In swimming, there are qualifying times for each event. These are broken into "Automatic All-America" and "Consideration All-America". NISCA then takes the top 100 times in each event and awards the certificates in July. The coach of the swimmer(s) must complete an application, however, for the swimmer(s) to get this recognition. But this award is simple; if you have one of the top 100 times in the nation, you're in.

Each year, NISCA reviews the previous years' times. Typically, there will be 70 or so swimmers that have the Automatic All-America time standard, and the remaining Honorable Mention times are used until they reach the top 100 times. And, if 120 swimmers somehow all get the Automatic All-America time, then all 120 will receive the award. The time standards change a

bit every year but suffice to say they are incredibly fast; usually just the top one or two swimmers at the State Finals will make an Automatic All-America time.

WATER POLO: This is way more involved. It may change slightly from year to year, but this is how it works:

The U.S. is broken into six zones. There is a published quota system, where most zones get to select one player for each “team”---for example, there is a First Team All-America group of 12-14 players; a Second-Team All-America group, a Third Team, etc.

The California zone gets the lion’s share of All-America spots—56—while Zone 6 (Florida and six other state) gets just SEVEN spots total for All-America. And, if you understand California high school water polo, it’s actually fair. The sheer number of great water polo teams and outstanding players on the west coast is staggering.

So, for Florida and six other southeastern states, there will be just SEVEN players that can be high school All-America Water Polo players. So, the next question is, how are these seven selected?

Coaches must nominate players, completing an online form based on these factors:

1. Team record and final team standing in the District-Region-State- The Florida high school State Championship Team typically gets two players, minimum, on the All-America team. The state runner-up usually gets one or two players on the list as well.
2. Statistics- While stats don’t tell the whole story, they are a consideration. A very big scorer on a very good team (State Final Four, for example) has an outside shot at making All-America, but keep reading . . .
3. Post-Season Awards- Players that were awarded their County or State Player of the Year awards have a better chance than those that were simply the MVP of their team, or All-Conference. The bigger and more prestigious the award, the better the chance the player has of being selected.
4. Speed- Since the selection committee can’t see every player play, they use 100-yard free times as a way of gauging the player’s relative speed.
5. Intangibles- How the player performed in big games (being a heavy scorer in the State title game, a huge number of goalie saves in the State Semifinal, etc.) can tip the scale.

So, with all of that information, here’s what you can count on:

In Florida, the State Champions and the State Runner-Up will likely take anywhere from three to five of the seven total spots available. The two to four remaining All-America spots will be selected from the very best remaining players from the southeastern seven states that make up Zone 2.

Of our three All-American Water Polo players we've had at Seminole, two of them were multiple-time County Players of the Year, and all three were NISCA Swimming All-Americans. So, to be an All-American Water Polo player, you not only need to be a fantastic player, you'd also better be really fast. We're talking State-level swimming fast, not "one-of-the-faster-swimmers-on-your-polo team" fast.

As parents, it's easy to think that if your child plays a decent game against, say, Winter Park or Lake Nona, that he or she has a chance of being an All-American. A parent might think, "Maybe if the coach really lobbies for her, she can get that award!"

It doesn't work that way. The best two players on the team State Champion has a very good shot. The best player on the state runner-up has a solid shot. A Final Four team may have a player that can get in as well, but ONLY IF he/she is an unbelievable player, and is a very fast swimmer (boys, that's a 43-47 in the 100 free; for girls, a 51-53 in the 100). For just about every other player, it's just wishful thinking.

So, let me give you some examples:

Player One- Team is mediocre at best (9-9 record), lost in District Semis; but, a huge scorer, 8 goals per game avg.; All-Conference First Team selection senior year; made it to Regional Swim Meet on two relays.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **NO CHANCE.**

Player Two- Team made it to Regional quarterfinals and lost; second-leading scorer on team, but led team in assists; State qualifier in swimming all four years; All-Conference in water polo all four years; played goalie for half the season and led team in saves.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **NO CHANCE.**

Player Three- Team won the Region, advanced to State Final Four before losing; led team in scoring, steals, and assists; All-Conference in water polo last two years; District qualifier in swimming.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **NO CHANCE.**

Player Four- Team won Region, lost in the State semis; Averaged 6 goals a game during regular season but did not score in the Region or State games; All-Conference in polo; State finalist in swimming.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **A SLIGHT CHANCE, MAYBE 50-50.**

Player Five- Team won Region but lost in State Semifinal; Good scorer (4 per game) and assist leader (6 per game); Player of the Year in Orange County; High school NISCA All-American in swimming. Had a huge game in State Semis, scoring 4 goals in the loss.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **HONORABLE MENTION, OR FIFTH OR SIXTH TEAM.**

Player Six- Team was State Champions; leading scorer on the team; Regional level swimmer, but not a swimming All-American. All-Conference in water polo, but not a county Player of the Year.

All-America Water Polo Selection? **100% SURE THING, LIKELY FIRST OR SECOND TEAM.**

Water Polo players and parents, here's the truth: If your team doesn't make the State Final, your only chance of being a NISCA All-American Water Polo player is to be the Seminole County or Central Florida Player of the Year AND be a NISCA Swimming All-American. Most of the seven total spots in Zone 2 will go to players on the State winners and the State runner-up. The best (and fastest) remaining players in the seven states in Zone 2 will be fighting for THREE OR FOUR TOTAL SPOTS. That's it.

Coaches that nominate players simply fill out the form online and submit it. There's no favoritism, or anything else a coach can do, especially in swimming, where All-America is solely based on times.

For a water polo coach to nominate a player for All-America that is not on a) a state team contender, b) an absolutely dominant player in their region, and c) lights-out fast in swimming speed is an exercise in futility. And the coach that nominates players with no chance earns the deserved reputation of not knowing anything about how All-America works, possibly negatively impacting his/her nominees for the future.

I hope this helps your understanding of how this selection process works. If you ever have any questions, always speak to your / your child's coach!

Tony Ackerson
Seminole High School Swimming and Diving