

There are always questions pertaining to college swimming and what to expect so I put together this email to help a little. It is a long email so please read when you have time.

So, your child wants to swim in college and you are not quite sure what to do, how to help them, or what you should be prepared for when the time comes? No problem, this is quite common and something I am more than happy to help with. Some of you may feel more comfortable as you may have gone through this process yourself or had another child go through this process. However, there is no doubt that some of you may not have had any experience with this and may feel unprepared and overwhelmed with the thought of going through it with your child. Allow me to share with you some thoughts on the matter and shed some light, especially when it comes to scholarships, so you may begin to have a better appreciation for the process and thus may be better prepared if and when the time comes.

First off, I think it is important to carefully manage one's expectation of a college scholarship. This is a common goal I have often heard from swimmers over the years and also something mentioned by parents of swimmers I have coached. Please understand that college scholarships are not as readily available as one may think. This is not to say that scholarships are not available, it's just that swimmers who carry around the expectation of a college scholarship are often overburdened by pressure and anxiety, and sometimes fall short of achieving their potential at the time. Just as an example, it is estimated that less than 1% of all USA swimmers go on to receive a full athletic scholarship. Partial scholarships are much more common, but again, please understand that there is far less scholarship money in swimming than in more revenue producing sports like football and basketball. More specifically, a fully funded women's division 1 swim program has 14 scholarships while a fully funded men's program has 9.9. This is the total number allotted for the entire team. The bottom line is please try not to look at your time with NLAC as an investment in a future college scholarship.

Instead, try to appreciate swimming for the many benefits it offers that may not be measurable. Swimming is a great sport because it teaches you the important lessons you will need throughout life such as goal setting, hard work, perseverance and time management, to name a few. If you can challenge yourself both physically and mentally throughout your swimming career it will make you a better student, a better (fill in your occupation here), a better parent, etc. Overall it will make you a better person. No amount of college scholarship money can surpass that.

Ok, with that said, let's get back to discussing college scholarships. Athletic scholarships can only be given at the Division 1 level and some Division 2 schools. There are other exceptions too. For instance, Ivy League schools do not give out athletic scholarships, so that full ride to Princeton will have to be academic based!

There are many Division I schools that would not even qualify a single swimmer for Division III NCAA's, let alone place as a team in the top 10. But some of these schools do offer college scholarships. For the sake of this discussion, let's go over what it typically takes to

earn a college scholarship using the different USA Swimming Time Standards.

Typically, a swimmer must be at the Sectional level to possibly earn scholarship money. Sectional Time Standards can be found [here](#). This might be good enough to get some (and a very little some) scholarship money at some Division I or Division II schools. Please note that schools in the so-called “power conferences” would not fall on this list. In fact, to even be on the team, without scholarship money, at a school in the ACC, SEC, Big Ten, Pac-10, Big 12, and most Big East schools you have to at least be a Junior National qualifier. The higher the team finishes at NCAA’s and in their conference championship meet, the faster you have to be just to be a member of the team.

The next step is being a Sectional finalist or NCSA Jr. National Qualifier. NCSA Jr. National Time Standards can be found [here](#). This will get you some more scholarship money, but possibly not much more. For instance, one who has an NCSA Jr. National time could earn a little scholarship money at a mid-level Division 1 schools but may not be fast enough to even make the team at higher level Division 1 programs. Perennial top 15 finishers at NCAA’s are typically recruiting swimmers that are much faster than simply having NCSA Junior National time standards (a darn good time standard within itself).

Next in line is being a Speedo Jr. National Qualifier (summer Juniors). These time standards can be found [here](#). Many schools will recruit these swimmers; probably about 95% of all teams in the country would want these swimmers on their team. You may still not be fast enough to swim on a top 5 or top 10 NCAA team. The more competitive the team is nationally, the faster you have to be to earn scholarship money. Current top 25 Division 1 swimming rankings can be found [here](#).

Next in line is a Speedo Jr. National Finalist/Senior National Qualifier. Long Course US National Championship Time Standards can be found [here](#) (although the short course national meet qualifying times are a little slower). These swimmers are going to be recruited at almost any school in the country. A few things, however, could potentially prevent a swimmer from being recruited at a school even at this level. Mainly, if the school already has a few swimmers on their team that swim your events that are currently faster than you and/or they just have other priorities in terms of events to fill. Nevertheless, many swimmers in this category can find a significant amount of scholarship money to some school out there.

Lastly, we have Olympic Trials Time Standards. These times can be found [here](#) (please note a swimmer can only qualify in long course). These are the swimmers who are recruited in every direction. Starting July 1st prior to their Senior Year of high school, the earliest a college coach can contact a recruit, their phone is ringing off of the hook with coaches from around the country trying to get them to commit to a recruiting trip in the fall. Most swimmers will be offered nice scholarship packages, all depending on the school, the needs of the team, and how much money they have available for that recruiting class. Still, more swimmers in this category will not receive full athletic scholarships than do, especially on the men’s side. It is just the economics of the sport at this level. However, there is no doubt that at this level, you

will be heavily recruited. For instance, my youngest brother Christian was an Olympic Trials qualifier his Junior year of high school. On July 1st going into his Senior year, he got a call from 11 different college coaches.

An Olympic Trial qualifier is not going to have to work nearly as hard in the recruiting process as a Sectional qualifier. This has a lot to do with the funding and staffing of a major Division I swimming program, some of which have up to six coaches working at recruiting athletes. Some Division I schools do not even have one full time coach on staff, just a part-time head coach and maybe an assistant coach getting paid hourly. The latter certainly does not have a "recruiting coordinator" on staff.

What would be helpful is if you go to a specific team's website (that you are interested in) and look at the swimmers who finish third for that team in your events. Compare your times from that same point in the season (if the meet you are looking at was in November, compare with your November times, not your best times) with that third swimmer.

Try to figure out what it will take to make top 16 and top 8 in those championship meets. Many, many schools focus on their conference championship meet as the most important meet of the year. If you can prove that you are going to step right in and score points for the team as a freshman, you are value to that program.

With that being said, I think it is important to understand that if you are a high school freshman, sophomore, or even Junior, where you fit in now may not necessarily be where you fit in when it comes time for the recruiting process to take shape. I have seen some miraculous progress from swimmers in just one year. The harder more dedicated an individual is and the harder they work, the faster their times will be and the more likely they are to be recruited. In general, swimmers will want to have an idea of where they fit in at the college level during the summer after their Junior year. Prior to that, they have free reigns to work toward the level they wish.

Now, all of the above information was intended to be informative and not discouraging. The reality of it is, at least at the division 1 level and even many division 2 schools, there is just so much money they have to give and there is just so many kids a team can carry given the funding they have for the program. As a result, competing for many division 1 or 2 schools is not as easy as we sometimes think. However, if you remember anything from this email, I want you to remember my next statement. **I have always and will always believe that if an individual has the will to compete at the collegiate level, and is willing to put in the hard work and time commitment necessary in doing this, there is ALWAYS a school out there for you.** You do not have to be the most accomplished swimmer in the world; you just need to have the drive and determination. With these tools, the key then is to find a place you will fit in. For some, this could be at the Division 3 level. **THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WRONG WITH THIS!** I have coached numerous swimmers who have gone on to compete at the Division 3 level and had FANTASTIC experiences. Mostly, it all depends on what each individual makes of it.

When the time comes, I am more than happy to help each individual swimmer and parents in any way I can, in finding the right college program for them, if that is what they desire.

To finish this long, long email, I want to share with you a little of my own experience with college swimming. As a young swimmer I was always one of the best, nationally ranked even in numerous events at one point. I always had high aspirations that I would one day go to a big time college program, make the NCAA championships, and compete in several Olympic trials. These were my dreams. However, at some point along the way I fell off this path and it was never for lack of effort. By the time I got to my Junior year of high school I was no longer swimming at the level I once was and this bothered me. At the end of this year I had not progressed yet I was still fast enough to be recruited by numerous division 1 schools, however, they were not on the level I always envisioned myself competing at.

After another year of the same problems (my senior year), I decided to take a year off and not attend college that next year. Instead I would take part time college courses, work, and continue to train hard in the pool. I told people I needed to do a better job of choosing a college program where I would fit in best but deep down in my heart I knew the real reason was that I wanted to get back to the level I knew I should be at and earn that scholarship to a big time program. That year, I did not do a single best time. I was still being recruited by a few schools but nothing like always expected. The school I eventually chose, St. Bonaventure University, a small Division 1 school in Western New York, was recruiting me hard and the coach even came out to see me swim that December. I can honestly say that the meet he came out to watch me was the worst meet of my life. I was absolutely horrible at that meet. Apparently, the coach went back and told his team that he didn't think he could recruit me anymore because I swam so bad. The rest of the year wasn't much better.

Eventually, I decided to go there anyway. They were willing to give me a spot and I was willing to work hard and prove myself. I went there in 1998 as a walk-on freshman. To make a long story shorter, I quickly made an impression with my work ethic but my times did not follow suit right away. My freshman year, I did not make the conference championship team and instead swam exhibition. My sophomore year I swam better and made the conference championship team. Following that year, my coach rewarded me with some scholarship money. My Junior year I swam better again and made the All-Conference Team. My coach rewarded me with even more scholarship money. By my Senior year I was team captain, an All-Conference swimmer again, and a conference champion. I had been awarded with scholarship money on two separate occasions and along with academic money I already had, I was not paying much to go to school my senior year.

I share this because it is important to know that everyone's path to college swimming, if that is what they want, will be different. In addition, at times I still look back believing I could have accomplished more than I did. However, ultimately I have NO REGRETS. I always tried to put everything I had into making myself better. Giving up was never an option for me. Knowing this makes me feel so much better than any time or achievement could ever make

me feel. Also, I look back on my college experience with nothing but fond memories. The friends that I made for a lifetime, the experiences I had, and the lessons I learned as a college swimmer were PRICELESS. No amount of scholarship money could ever compete with that.

GO NLAC!

Ryan Sprang

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