Challenging Times Offer Unique Opportunities

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Nearly every industry and organization is currently being affected by COVID-19, and collegiate athletics is no different. For high school student-athletes trying to get recruited by college coaches, the perception might be that this pandemic has created serious challenges to getting noticed or adhering to recommended recruiting timelines. While these are certainly valid concerns, I argue, instead, that COVID-19 is providing high school student-athletes with unique opportunities to set themselves apart in the recruitment process while learning about institutions and athletic programs. The key is to use this time of social distancing to the recruit’s advantage:

1. Be proactive and reach out
2. Highlight abilities and interests
3. Develop meaningful relationships with collegiate coaches
4. Be creative in finding new ways to learn about the college and the athletic program
5. Look for unique and engaged programs

Before going into detail about each of these four tips, it is important to provide some information on my background and vantage point. I have been a collegiate swim coach for 16 years, 14 of which have been as a head coach. For the past 10 years, I have been the head men’s and women’s swim coach at Lindsey Wilson College, a small, private, liberal arts college in rural Kentucky. Over the past 10 years, our programs have earned top-10 finishes at NAIA Nationals 12 times. Our women have placed as high as 4th, and this season, our men earned a record-high 3rd place finish. In all, I have coached 5 National Champions.  I have also been an assistant coach and head coach at NCAA DIII institutions and worked briefly (when I was in graduate school) in NCAA DI compliance.

***Be proactive and reach out:***

Nearly all coaches are working from home right now, which means we are all spending a lot of time in front of our computers, most likely on email and social media. For better or worse, we do not have athletes coming to our offices each day; we are not running dryland or weight room workouts; fundraisers (like community swimming lessons) have been cancelled. So, whether you’re a 2020 recruit (yes, it’s late in the game, but some schools still have a few roster spots open…), a 2021 prospect (I’m recruiting these swimmers heavily right now), or a 2022 high school grad, now is the time to be reaching out and getting noticed. Chances are, you’ll actually get more individual attention from coaches right now because we have fewer distractions and recruiting is at the forefront. I suggest targeting a number of coaches at a variety of schools. I always recommend including both in- and out-of-state schools, private and public institutions, and large and small colleges to a swimmer’s initial list of possible university choices. Most important, it’s time to be proactive and start the recruiting process. Don’t wait to be contacted by a coach; it’s perfectly acceptable and sometimes even preferable that you to take the first step by emailing them. The COVID-19 situation has actually accelerated the recruiting process; it has not slowed it down in any way.

***Highlight abilities and interests:***

When you reach out to a program, be ready to sell yourself. Coaches get hundreds of emails from prospective athletes each year. With this in mind, make sure that you take some extra time to make yourself stand out. This doesn’t necessarily mean you have to send a long email, detailing your life story. What it does mean, is that you want to include a few interesting personal details that will help a coach remember you. In my view, a good introductory email is going to give me some basic information on the swimmer’s abilities (best and favorite events with times), academic interests and stats (yes, it’s okay to include GPA and test scores, especially if those are strengths), and a few fun facts or hobbies about the swimmer (this is where you are trying to stand out). End the email by asking a question of the coach, thereby increasing your chances of getting a response and making an impression. This isn’t the time to ask multiple questions, nor is advisable to ask something basic like “do you think I’m a good fit for your team?” Good questions might inquire about a coaching philosophy, practice strategies or routines, or the program’s biggest strength.

***Develop meaningful relationships with collegiate coaches:***

Don’t let the current COVID-19 crisis scare you away from building meaningful relationships with collegiate coaches. In fact, this could actually be a unique opportunity for you to get to know coaches better and begin to see which programs fit your wants and needs the best. Since in-person contact is prohibited, consider creative ways to connect with coaches. Phone calls, Zoom, Skype, and other video conferencing options are all ways to have real conversations with coaches during this time of isolation. These tools certainly aren’t new options for coaches or prospective athletes, but they will likely play a more important role in the recruiting process this year than previously. In the past, campus visits have been vital to determining if a college and program is the right “fit” for you. While hopefully in-person visits will be in the works for everyone by the fall, for now, and for at least the beginning of the summer, technology like teleconferencing and virtual tours will fill that gap. Finally, remember that coaches are people too! We have family and friends and are social distancing as well. Don’t be afraid to ask how we are doing and what we’ve been doing to pass the time at home.

***Be creative in finding new ways to learn about the college and the athletic program:***

Since campus visits and other recruiting visits are not going to be happening for a bit, start looking for college programs that are going the extra mile to make up for this deficiency. Now is the time to pay extra attention to social media posts that hopefully detail the college and program in new ways. In all reality, the COVID-19 disaster is more of a challenge for the recruiter (the coach) than it is for the recruit. Coaches are developing different ways to communicate their program’s and campus’s uniqueness to you. If you’ve enjoyed your contact with a certain college, then start to follow them on social media and seek them out on YouTube. Don’t ust follow the coach and the program. Be creative and follow the college president, the admissions page, and maybe even some professors. While you might not be able to see the campus in person, hopefully you can get an idea for what it’s like by watching videos and the like.

***Look for unique and engaged programs:***

Because many classic recruiting strategies, like campus visits, have been eliminated due to COVID-19, it’s more important than ever that prospective student-athletes look for coaches and programs that are fully engaged, not only in the recruiting process, but also in attempts to show recruits what life on their campus is like. This is also a wonderful time to seek out unique programs. While the three NCAA divisions are normally on every swimmer’s radar, don’t forget about the NAIA. According to the Collegiate Swimming Coaches Association of America, the NAIA is the fastest growing scholarship collegiate swimming division in the country. Since 2016, the NAIA has added 16 new scholarship programs, and in the fall of 2020 there are 7 new programs joining the association. Many high school swimmers either don’t know what the NAIA is or they write it off as a sub-par level of swimming. The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) is actually older than the NCAA, and swimming is the second oldest championship sport for the association. When explaining what the NAIA is, I typically say that in terms of academics and size, most of our schools resemble DIII institutions. In terms of athletics, scholarships, and competitiveness, we are more similar to a DII or small DI school. Currently, most NAIA programs are finishing the recruitment process for their fall 2020 roster and starting to seriously contact 2021 recruits. When exploring your options, it’s important to not pigeonhole yourself and only consider certain divisions. You might be surprised about the competitiveness of DIII schools, or the scholarship amounts available for swimmers in the NAIA. Explore your options