

Recruiting: A Coaches' Perspective

An interview with the Head Coach of American University

Excerpts from a USA Swimming interview with Mark Davin, the Head Men's and Women's Swimming and Diving Coach at American University in Washington, DC. Davin was recently named Colonial Athletic Association "Men's Coach of the Year," his second consecutive honor.

What is the best advice you would give to a high school swimmer hoping to compete in college?

The best advice I can give is for the high school swimmer to search for and find the University that is the best total fit.

I think that some swimmers and parents might be looking for a simple answer, and the truth is that there is not going to be a simple answer because there are a lot of different schools and each university has its own unique advantages, athletically and academically. Along with academics and athletics, I think that students should also consider the geographic location of the university, the financial costs involved and certainly if they fit into the philosophy of a program. Finding the correct university for each individual high school student requires some work and I think that the earlier and more complete the search is that the student makes, the better the decision will be.

Part of each swimmer's search should involve discussion with that swimmer's club coach / high school coach. A coach that has worked with an athlete for a number of years is certainly going to be able to assist in pointing their athlete to a number of schools where that athlete would be able to be a success athletically. The other areas of consideration: academic areas of focus that the student is looking towards, costs, geographic location of the university; those are certainly topics that others, like guidance counselors and certainly parents, can assist the student with in narrowing the number of schools to look at.

A good way to start is by getting a copy of the Swimming in College Directory from the American Swimming Coaches Association. It contains a solid amount of basic information on each university in America that offers swimming as a collegiate sport.

It seems as most high school students look to a Division I university when they begin their search and certainly within Division I there is great diversity. Even within a specific conference within Division I, like the Big East and the ACC, for example, there is a wide range. There is also Division II, III, Junior College, etc. So it really depends what the student athlete is looking for.

People are drawn to our university because they want to be affiliated with what all that our university offers within the city of Washington.

There are other people who want to be in very different parts of the country. Again, there are a number of things to consider: the swimming program and the athletic program as a whole, what is available academically, where it is located within the country, and cost considerations. There are just so many potential variables.

How does an NCAA coach know when a recruit is a good fit for his program and university?

I think that is one of the things that you hopefully learn through the recruiting process. Most coaches send a general information form / questionnaire to recruits and most high schoolers will reply. We use that to open the door to start making phone calls and writing more personal letters to decide if that student will fit within our University athletically and academically and for the high school student to learn more about us. I think some of "deciding on the fit" has to do with talking to other people too. I know other coaches, and myself, will talk to club coaches at some length, along with people in their family and high school. People do home visits or talk to their families on the phone to make sure that there is a real understanding between the coach and the prospective student-athlete.

How does a swimmer know when a certain coach or program is an excellent fit?

Hopefully one of the things they get with the process is not just spending a lot of time with the coach but also to take visits to the university. We have people that come and visit us as sophomores and juniors. They will come and visit the school, often without even talking to the coaching staff. They try to develop a feel for the university. Then they come on the formal visit to really spend time with the team. I think that it is extremely important that the high school student feels like they will fit in. And the same with the team; the team has to feel like that prospective student-athlete is going to fit in and they will all be able to work together. Every program is not for every person.

What should recruits be most aware of during recruit trips?

A lot. You want to see how the coach acts and how the assistants act with the students and athletes. In a lot of places it is not the head coach that works as the main coach with a specific student athlete; they are in a group and the head coach runs one training group and/or works with certain people more often. The athlete should be aware of this; will he or she be coached by just the head coach or under one of the assistants? If so, what are those assistant coaches like and how do they interact with the entire staff?

How do all of the athletes fit together? Are there team goals? Is there team purpose? Every team is different, but the high school student should feel that they fit in with the team's mission and feel that they will be an integral component.

There are a lot of things to look at. Are there social activities I will enjoy? Am I going to be able to have a complete collegiate experience? What is going to be available to me academically? I think high school students should go to college visits armed with many questions. Even if they ask the same question to many different people on the team and to many different coaches on the staff. They need to interview the program, so to speak, from the coaching staff, the assistants, and the swimmers; anyone involved with program and anyone they meet academically.

What would you tell a student choosing between a Division I, II, and III school?

I think it depends on the athlete's goals. From an athletic level, the competition in Division I is higher than in Division II and III. A high school student that is looking to compete at that higher level should begin by looking at schools in Division I. Also, there is a wide variety in Division II and even with Division III conferences as I mentioned before.

However, there are some very fast Division II and III schools out there. Looking at the results from NCAA Division II and III championships, you can see that a number of these swimmers would be very competitive in some Division I conferences. Some of those people in Division II and III could be getting assistance (grant-in-aid) at certain Division I schools. So, it really depends on what the student's individual goals are. Division II and III schools are typically a little smaller and offer a different environment with a different collegiate experience than a lot of the larger Division I universities. Again, each school has individual strengths and weaknesses so the high school student needs to really look at what a prospective school needs to offer. So I think that choosing between a Division I, II and III school is another part of the selection.

What do you as a coach look for in a recruit?

I really look for somebody that is going to fit in. I have a list of things for us, but again different programs are different. I would want someone that has a lot of desire and wants to make a run with it.

So to me it doesn't matter so much if they are already speedy when they get here. We have some people that aren't so fast when they get here, but we have talked at some length before they join us about where they are and where they need to be. I look for those people to really want to make a run at getting there. I think that is a factor in what separates the more elite athletes: at some point in a swimmer's career they really need to make a conscience decision that they want to be great and that they really want to do this sport, as opposed to "all my friends do it" or "I've been doing it so long that I don't know how to stop."

These aren't legit reasons, to me, to be involved with the sport at the collegiate level. Recreational swimming is tremendous and the sport itself is absolutely fantastic. But to be a competitive in Division I as a collegiate athlete requires a commitment to oneself

that he or she really wants to do this. And I feel the same about the national and world class swimmers that are with us, that personal commitment to excellence is the key.

I also think that it is very important that swimmers want to be in an environment that is very open in terms of supporting each other. That doesn't mean that everyone has to be best friends, although I do expect some of that. But I expect on a daily and weekly basis that people are supportive of each other in training. When someone does something great in training, I expect other people on the team to acknowledge that. When someone does something great in competition, I expect other people on the team to acknowledge that. It is not possible for the coaches to do enough of that by themselves.

Our university is rather taxing academically. So I look for people that are going to be able to be successful here academically. I look for people that are going to fit in academically here, fit in athletically, who will bring things to the table that will help the team as a whole (not always necessarily athletically), and that they will really fit in. Every college coach wants his or her athletes to be successful. You want people to come in and swim well, do well athletically, and have a lot of fun, be a lot of fun, and be happy alumni. It shouldn't be less than that.