

*I know we are all swimmers, however I found this to be a fantastic article on preparing for college athletics and think that everyone facing this challenge needs additional info. Everything a polo player looking into college athletics faces the same challenges as a swimmer.*

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## ADVICE FOR THE COLLEGE BOUND WATER POLO PLAYER

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### CHOOSING A COLLEGE IS ONE OF THE IMPORTANT DECISIONS THAT A STUDENT-ATHLETE WILL EVER MAKE.

In 35 years as a collegiate assistant and head water polo coach and high school coach, I have counseled hundreds of high school players and their parents about playing water polo at the collegiate level. My experience encompasses recruiting and coaching for every type of college and university, ranging from small private schools to large public institutions. The purpose of this paper is to help high school students and their parents learn about the college recruiting process; and to help guide them in picking a college that is the right fit for them. A college should have the right combination of academics, athletics, and social structure, and provide an atmosphere in which the student/athlete will feel comfortable in. The school you choose should enable you to achieve the goals and successes that you desire. Along the way you are going to have to identify your needs, set priorities, and make decisions based on numerous factors.

### STARTING THE PROCESS.

You should start the process of identifying schools that you are interested in sometime during your sophomore year in high school, junior year at the latest. Some of the factors that you should consider in the college that you are looking for:

1. Type of school- large, small, private, public, military.
2. Location of the school- urban, rural, east, west, distance from home.
3. Academics-Liberal Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, special programs, all-around or general campus.
4. Athletics-Do they have a water polo program, division I, II or III, varsity or club? How do you fit in?
5. New or established program? Experienced coach? Past success of team? Rebuilding?
6. Cost and financial aid available. Athletic scholarships? Academic or need scholarships?

### ASSIGN PRIORITIES

Assign priorities in your identification process. Which of the above factors is most important to you? If you are not sure what you are looking for, identity a variety of different kinds of schools in different locations; but narrow your choice down to a workable number of about eight or ten schools. Later on you might want to narrow down to about four or five schools that you will apply to. Filling out applications for more than that is unnecessary, and very time consuming. It is better to do a good job on fewer applications than do a poor job on too many applications. Starting in your freshman year, work hard to achieve the highest grades and test scores that you can, and at the same time become the best water polo player that you can be. The better your grades are, and the more water polo ability you have, the more choices you will have.

## START THE PROCESS

It is up to you to start the recruiting process by sending a letter or e-mail to the coaches of the schools that you are interested in. You should do this during the winter of your junior year, right after your fall semester grades are in. By that time you will have finished three high school seasons if your sport is played in the Fall semester. By then you should also have accumulated enough information about yourself so that both you and the coaches will have a good idea of where you stand, academically, and in water polo.

## DON'T SIT AT HOME AND WAIT FOR COLLEGE COACHES TO CONTACT YOU!

They may not know who you are, or you may have slipped through the cracks. It is up to you to make yourself known to the schools that you are interested in. Don't let your ego keep you from contacting a school you are interested in. It is up to you to sell yourself to a college, not the other way around.

## NCAA RULES

Remember that there are NCAA rules that coaches have to follow in regards to their communications with you. Officially coaches initiate contact by either letter, e-mail or phone to a high school prospect, until September 1st at the start of his/her junior year in high school. If you contact the coach prior to that time, he can send you back a generic letter and ask you to fill out a questionnaire that you can send back to him. A college coach also cannot call you on the telephone, or have personal off-campus contact with you, until July 1st after you have completed your junior year of high school. So, if you run into a coach at a summer tournament in your sophomore or junior year, he may greet you; but he is not allowed to talk to you. He is not trying to snub you; he is just not allowed to have personal contact with you other than a cordial greeting.

After July 1st there is also a limit of to the number of times a coach can see you off campus, and he can only call you on the telephone once per week. There is no limit to the number of times he can correspond by mail or e-mail. Once a coach gets past the questionnaire stage with a high school athlete, and starts corresponding and calling; that athlete is considered a "recruited athlete" by NCAA rules.

## LETTER TO THE COACH

Include in a letter to a college coach some information about yourself:

1. **GENERAL INFORMATION** such as name, address, phone, e-mail address, year in school, high school, coach's name, etc.

### 2. **HIGH SCHOOL GRADES AND SAT SCORES.**

Some schools accept weighted GPA's and some do not. Weighted means that honors and AP classes are weighted higher than the grade received. i.e., A "B" grade received in an honors course is recorded as an B+ on your transcript.

Honors classes look great on your transcript, but don't take so many that your grades suffer. You should plan on taking SAT tests several times during your junior and senior years. Some schools require only the three standard SAT I tests, critical reading, writing, and mathematics; while others require both the standard tests and three SAT II advanced placement tests. Get a tutor if you test low in standardized tests. It is well worth the investment. The earlier you take the SAT test the better for you. You should improve each time that you take the test, and only the highest scores will be considered by the college.

### 3. **WATER POLO STATISTICS, HONORS AND AWARDS, AND SWIM TIMES**

It is strongly recommended that you go out for your high school swim team in order to improve your swimming ability, and also to give the college some swim

times to look at. It is also a good idea to try out for US Water Polo Cadet, Youth and Junior National teams. This is great way for coaches to see where you stand in relation to other players from around the country; an important consideration, especially in awarding scholarships.

#### **4. LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION.**

Not absolutely necessary, but a letter from your high school coach about your playing ability and your attitude can help. Even more important is to include your high school coach's phone number, so that the college coach can call your coach and talk to him directly. Also include a copy of your game schedule, so that the coach can come and see you play. Remember that if high school and college seasons are at the same time, a college coach might not be able to attend your games. Attending college water polo camps is a good way to be seen and evaluated by coaches. Plus, you can learn something about the coach, the school, the water polo program and the system that they play, at the same time.

#### **5. VIDEO**

A video of one of your games. They can be useful as an introduction. Make sure the quality is good and not something put together by a parent standing on the deck. A voice over that can identify you in the water is also helpful. Water polo is not an easy sport to video, and many times it is difficult to identify the players. I have never been a big fan of player videos. I don't get that much out of them, unless they are well made. I would rather see a player in person, than see a home-made video of him scoring ten goals in a blowout game against a weak opponent.

#### **6. TWO THINGS THAT YOU SHOULD NEVER DO!**

Never send a generic letter or form letter. Take the time to learn the coach's name and include that along with the school's name and something specific about that school, and why you are interested in that program. ABSOLUTELY DO NOT ASK ABOUT ATHLETIC SCHOLARSHIPS in your first letter to the coach. The time to discuss financial aid is during your campus visit, or during a phone contact; well into the recruiting process. Wait for the coach to bring up the topic of financial aid. If that doesn't happen, then you can inquire about the criteria for and the availability of scholarships.

### **THE CAMPUS VISIT**

For boys, the best time to visit college campuses is during spring semester of your junior year, or in January or February following your last water polo season in your senior year. For girls, the best time is prior to November of your senior year or Spring of your junior year. You may visit as often as you like at your own expense. Let the coach know when you would like to visit, and arrange to meet him on campus. He will probably arrange for someone to show you around; so it is a good idea to visit when classes are in session and the students are on campus. You might want to attend a practice or game. Sometimes a full two day campus visit during the collegiate season is not always the best time to visit. The coach may be preoccupied with coaching his own team and might not be able to spend a lot of time with you. If you just want to see a game, then go on your own. Let the coach know that you will be there and are interested in the program and the school. He might invite you to meet him after the game, especially if his team wins the game.

### **WHO PAYS FOR A CAMPUS VISIT**

Some schools will set up a special recruiting day for groups of prospective athletes during the season. This will allow you to visit, see a game, and meet with school administrators and coaches. Make sure that you get the OK from your high school coach to make this

visit. He might not want you to miss a training session, or important game, to visit a college campus right in the middle of your season. Recruited athletes are allowed to make expense paid visits, paid for by the school; but each athlete is limited to visits to only five different schools. If you are lucky enough to be invited for a paid visit, the coach will make all the arrangements. Because of limited finances, not all colleges can do this. If not, pay your own way and visit the schools that you are most interested in. You may visit at your own expense as often as you like, and anytime that you want to.

## ASK QUESTIONS

During your visit is the time to find out whether the school and the water polo program is the right fit for you. Attend classes, attend practice sessions, visit or stay in a dormitory, find out what campus life is like. Don't be afraid to ask questions of the players and the coach about water polo and academic topics. When and how long are team practice sessions, how do you fit in to the team, how many players are playing your position, what are your chances of playing right away, what about red-shirting? You may bring your parents on your campus visit; but I would recommend visiting on your own the first time. It is you that the coach is interested in; and he wants to talk and get to know you, without a lot of parental interference. If you do bring your parents, make sure that they do not dominate the conversation with the coach. There will be plenty of time for the coach to talk to your parents, especially if he decides to visit your home.

## HOME VISITS

If you are a "recruited" athlete, the college coach may want to visit your home and meet your parents, family and your high school coach. If he does visit your home, there are certain restrictions about what you can or cannot do during the visit. The coach will know the rules and let you know what to expect. Let the coach initiate the topic of the home visit. Some colleges do not have the budget to pay for the coach's home visits; so don't expect this to happen very often, unless you are a highly recruited athlete.

## GETTING ACCEPTED-WHAT IS REQUIRED

Every university has different criteria for being accepted. The same holds true for student/ athletes. Almost all college coaches can submit names to their admission office for consideration. Where the difference lies is in the criteria that a school will accept for an athlete to be accepted. At some colleges it is very easy to be accepted, if you are on the coach's list; even if you don't meet the academic requirements for admission. Other schools are much more difficult to be accepted to; and at some schools you have to meet the same stringent academic requirements as a normal student. The best way to find out what your chances are for admission is to ask the coach. He cannot submit the name of every recruit. In some cases the number is very limited.

Some schools have a certain number of slots available to each sport and those are usually reserved for the top athletes that are being recruited. Most colleges look at several key factors like GPA, SAT scores, and athletic ability. Other schools will also look at your GPA in core courses only, strength of your high school curriculum, status of your high school, number of honors and AP classes taken, outside activities besides athletics, and family history at that particular college. These are things that you should find out early in your high school career, so that can make adjustments in the classes that you are taking if you have to.

## **EARLY DECISION**

Early decision at most colleges is reserved for outstanding students who want to find out early in their senior year if they have been admitted. This usually requires a commitment on your part that you will attend that school if you are admitted. In most cases, if you are also an outstanding athlete, the coach would rather have you on his athletic track than on the school's early decision track. You will get the decision at about the same time, and it is usually easier to get in through the athletic track. Talk to the coach about this before you decide to apply for early decision.

## **WHAT ARE COLLEGE COACHES LOOKING FOR?**

All college coaches are looking for talented players. Some coaches recruit for size and speed, some recruit for need at a certain position, some look at the player's intensity and aggressiveness, passion for the game, attitude, coachability, knowledge of the game, and the ability to make things happen. College coaches are looking for players that can contribute to the success of their team. Most coaches look for all of these criteria; with some having more weight than others. Making the All-American or All-League team is important, but is usually not the deciding factor in whether the coach wants you on his team or not.

## **IT'S A DIFFERENT GAME**

Remember that the game is a lot different at the college level. For one thing, the water polo course for men is longer, 30 meters versus 25 yards. For women it is 25 meters. This means that swimming ability and speed become more important. The game is played at a faster pace at the college level than it is in high school. The players that you will compete against for a position on the team were all high school all-stars. If you are looking to receive a scholarship or simply to make the team, know that coaches are looking to recruit "difference makers". Players who can help the team compete at the national level; versus players who are good, but won't help the team get to the next level.

## **BE REALISTIC**

Be realistic about your abilities as a water polo player. Aim for the programs that suit your abilities and for a college that you will feel comfortable with. Success at the high school level does not guarantee success at the college level. There are no guarantees of playing time. You will have to earn your position on the team along with everyone else.

## **FINANCIAL AID**

There are many different ways to obtain financial aid to help pay for your college education. Full ride athletic scholarships consist of tuition, room and board, books, and fees. Division I and II colleges can offer a maximum of 4.5 full scholarships for men's water polo, and 8 full scholarships for women's water polo.

## **PLEASE KNOW THAT THERE ARE NOT THAT MANY SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE IN WATER POLO,**

especially on the men's side. There are probably less than ten colleges in the country that offer the maximum number of scholarships for men. More schools, as many as twenty-five or more on the women's side offer scholarships. Most collegiate teams have to offer more for women because of Title 9 requirements, and the need to balance scholarships between men and women. If 50% of a school's student body is composed of women, then

50% of the athletic scholarships offered must go to women. A university that offers 85 scholarships to football must offer the same number to women's programs. Because of football, many schools offer more women's teams than men's teams.

### **VARSITY AND CLUB, DIVISION I, II, AND III**

Some Division II schools offer athletic scholarships, but Division III schools cannot. In many sports Division II and III schools compete in their own national championship events. However, because of the small number of schools offering varsity water polo in this country, Division I, II and III schools all compete together in the same NCAA Water Polo Championship event. Less than 50 colleges offer varsity water polo for men, while over 65 schools have varsity women's water polo. They are all eligible to participate in NCAA sponsored national championships. To find out which schools offer varsity water polo, check out the USA Water Polo website under collegiate teams.

### **CLUB WATER POLO**

If you don't feel that you have the ability to play NCAA sponsored water polo, then maybe club level water polo is for you. There are well over 100 colleges that offer club water polo. Since there are no eligibility requirements to play club water polo, those teams cannot play in the NCAA championships; but do participate in a national collegiate club championship. Club programs cannot offer scholarships and usually do not have paid or full time coaches; but also do not have the rules restrictions on eligibility etc. that the Varsity programs have. All of the above NCAA rules on recruiting and eligibility do not apply to club programs. Any student on campus can play on a club team.

### **COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

In California, two year Community (Junior) Colleges offer Varsity water polo programs and are a great alternative to four year colleges. Junior colleges are far less expensive than four year colleges, they give you a chance to build up your grades, they give you an opportunity to improve your game, you will receive an AA degree, and all of your courses will transfer to any four year college in the country. Two years of JC water polo will use up two years of your four years of eligibility at a four year college; leaving you with two years of eligibility remaining. A student may transfer to a four year college after one year at a JC; but two years is recommended.

### **EQUIVALENCY SPORT**

Water polo is an equivalency sport; which means that the sport can offer the equivalent value of 4.5 full scholarships for men and 8 full scholarships for women at any one time. A full scholarship consists of tuition, room and board, books and fees. A full "ride" for one person in water polo is very rare. Most schools will offer partial scholarships of less than full value. In that way, more players on the team can receive some financial aid. These partial scholarships range in value from books, to room and board, to partial or full tuition. The total value of all the scholarships on the team added together, however, can not be more than the value of 4.5 full for men and 8 full for women.

Some schools may have committed most of their scholarships to returning players and only have a small amount of scholarship money available for incoming freshmen. In that case, the coach may start a player out with a small scholarship in his freshman year; and then increase that amount each year as more money becomes available when players graduate. To obtain a scholarship to a Division I school, you must be one of the top

players in the country and be able to contribute significantly to the team's success. Contrary to popular opinion, athletic scholarships cannot be promised for four years. They are automatically renewed each year, unless you break rules that cause you to lose the scholarship. They cannot be taken away for lack of ability, or if you are injured and cannot play. Division I Ivy League schools do not offer athletic scholarships in any sport, but do offer academic and need based financial aid that is available to all students. On the other hand, every student at a military school has their education completely paid for, whether they are athletes or not.

## RED-SHIRTING.

Every collegiate athlete has only four years of eligibility; but he has five years in order to complete those four years. The process starts once you enroll in college. An athlete may red-shirt, or sit out one year during his college career. He may practice with the team, but cannot play in games during his red-shirt year. By red-shirting, he may come back and play in his fifth year. He may also receive financial aid during that fifth year, but at the coach's discretion. If the coach does not want to give you financial aid for that 5th year, you have the option to play without the scholarship or not play at all.

Red shirting is usually done in the freshman year; so that a player can gain one year of experience without losing any eligibility. If he is not going to play very much in his first year, he might as well red-shirt; rather than sit on the bench. Some schools will red-shirt upperclassmen, so that other less experienced players on the team can catch up to them; thus producing a team full of experienced players and a better chance for the team to win. If an athlete has enough units to graduate after four years, he may elect not to graduate and play for the first semester of his 5th year; or he may elect to graduate and play during the first year of graduate school at the same college.

Once you play one minute of one game in any year, that year counts as one of your four allotted years. That is, however, unless you happen to get hurt early in the season and cannot play again for the rest of the year. If you have only played in 20 percent of the games in the first part of the season before you get hurt, then you may petition the NCAA to receive an additional year to play. This is called a "medical" red-shirt and is in addition to a one year "athletic" red shirt. If you are hurt after you have played more than 20% of the games during one season, then you will lose that year of eligibility. Extra eligibility or red-shirt years can also be granted for military service or religious missions. If a player receives both a "medical" red-shirt year and an "athletic" red-shirt year, it may take him six years of college to complete his four years of water polo.

## OTHER SCHOLARSHIPS

There are many other ways to obtain financial aid besides athletic scholarships. These other scholarships are available to all students at that college and are usually based on academics. They cannot be based on athletic performance if you are part of a varsity athletic team. If athletics are any part of the criteria for awarding the scholarship, it must count toward the team's equivalent number of scholarships. Some schools offer academic scholarships to outstanding students in order to attract top scholars to the school. In some cases these are worth more than an athletic scholarship that may be offered in water polo. If you are a truly outstanding scholar, you should consider applying for an academic scholarship. An Academic scholarship, or any scholarship that is not based on athletic performance, can be used by an athlete and will not count against the equivalency for his sport.

## **NEED BASED SCHOLARSHIPS**

Many schools, especially the private schools and Ivy League schools, offer financial aid to all students on a need basis. If you are accepted to a school, the amount of aid that you receive is determined by a formula based on your family income and other factors.

Because of the high cost of private colleges, many families can qualify for aid in this way. Some states offer State Scholarships to residents of that particular state. Again a formula is used to figure out the amount that you may receive based on both academics and need. Federally financed students loans are also available from the U.S. government. The advantage of these loans is that the interest rates are low, and you do not start paying back the loan until you graduate from college.

## **LOCAL AND NATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS**

There are also scholarships available for graduating high schools seniors from the community that you live in, or from various national organizations. National Merit scholarships are awarded nationally to students that do well in the National Merit Exam. Check with your high school counselor about National, state and community scholarships,

## **WORK STUDY**

University financial aid to students in need of money usually consists of a package of 60-80% cash, 15-20% student loan, and about 5-10% work study. Work study allows students to get a job on campus, for which the University will pay a salary; up to a certain limit that is specified as part of the financial aid package.

## **COMBINING SCHOLARSHIPS**

Remember, that if any part of a scholarship is based on athletic ability, it will count against the team equivalency at a Division I or II school. Also know that you cannot combine athletic and non-athletic scholarships from the university that you are attending, without the total amount of both scholarships counting against the team equivalency limits of 4.5 and 8 full scholarships. You can receive one or the other, but not both kinds of scholarships at the same time; without both of them counting.

## **LETTER OF INTENT**

A Letter of Intent is offered only to incoming freshmen that will receive an athletic scholarship. Once you sign the letter you are committed to attend that school for one year. If you decide, after signing the letter, that you want to change schools, you may do so. However, the penalty is harsh. You may not receive athletic aid, and also have to sit out and not play for your first year at the new school. Another alternative is for the original school that you signed with to release you from your obligation; thus freeing you to play and receive aid right away at another school. Once you have signed a Letter of Intent it is very rare that a school will release you from that letter.

## **SIGNING DATES-DECISION TIME**

There are specific signing dates for Letters of Intent; an early signing period in February for men and November for women, and then again in April for both sports. The early signing period in November for women makes it even more important to have all of your paperwork done before the start of your senior year. You have a two-week period after the letter is issued to decide which school you want to sign with. After that, another letter may be issued.

Sometimes the decision is difficult to make; but if you have done your homework on the various schools, you should be able to decide within the two-week period. Try not to string schools along for a long period of time. Athletic scholarships are limited and someone else will be waiting for that scholarship if you turn it down. On the other hand, don't let coaches pressure you into signing a letter of intent immediately, especially if you are not sure about your decision. Remember you have two weeks to sign. After that, if you don't sign, the school at their discretion can withdraw the Letter of Intent or issue you another one.

## VALUE OF YOUR EDUCATION

There are a lot of factors to consider in making the decision on which college to attend. Academically, you are going to get a good education at most colleges in the United States. Some colleges are better in some areas than in others; but you are going to get a quality education no matter where you go. Some schools have more prestige than others, but when it comes to getting a job when you graduate; how you interview and how you did in school are more important than which school you attended. If you want to attend medical, law, business or graduate school, how you do in the standardized graduate tests for those particular professions are important in deciding whether you get in or not. Personal interviews and grades are also important factors. Attending a college as an undergraduate does not necessarily give you an advantage in getting in to a graduate school at the same college. Sometimes it even has the opposite effect. Many graduate schools are looking for diversity of applicants from other colleges around the country, not just from their own university.

## MAKING THE DECISION

When you are making a decision, try to take water polo and the coach out of the equation, if you can. If water polo doesn't pan out for you, or if you are injured and cannot play again, pick a school that you will be comfortable at, and one in which you will enjoy the other aspects of college life. The same holds true for picking the school for the coach. What if he decides to take a job at another college after you arrive there? You can always transfer to another school if it doesn't work out for you; but transferring can be messy and difficult. Do your homework, know what you are getting into; pick a school that fits your needs and is a comfortable fit for you. If water polo is one of your main criteria for selecting a college, pick a school that is best suited for your talent and ability; and where you will get a fair chance to play and contribute. Be honest about your capabilities. Not everyone is suited for Division I level water polo.

Sometimes it is very difficult for your parents to do; but try taking money out of the equation. There are a lot of ways to finance your education. Once you have exhausted all of the financial aid possibilities, and you still cannot afford a particular school, then look elsewhere; perhaps a local school or community college that will allow you to live at home and save money.

You have to spend four-five years of your life at a college of your choice. Your future profession will be effected by the college you choose, and the friends and contacts that you make will last a lifetime. **MAKE IT A GOOD CHOICE.**