

On Choosing The Right College Swim Team

By Stan Crump, HAST

Hilltop Aquatics Swim Team is used to sending some of their best swimmers to college. Some go on athletic scholarships; some don't. I thought it might be useful for me to share a few thoughts with you parents about how to go about helping your swimmer choose the college program that fits them best. The object of the recruiting process is to make a great match for both the school and the athlete. After many years of recruiting great athletes from around the world, I have found there about five different factors that swimmers and their parents use to help make their decisions. I will list these factors in no particular order. The order of their importance is up to your swimmer.

Geography. You should ask yourself questions like, "Do I want to stay close to home?" "Do I want to get away from home?" Or, "Do I have to have the sun; can I handle cold?" Even questions like "Will my parents ever get to see me swim?" or "How much is it going to cost to come home on school breaks?" are valid in terms of the quality of your college experience. Many prospective student-athletes do not admit how important geography is to them or their families. In my experience, however, this is a big one.

Swimming Program. Are the programs you are considering nationally ranked? Does that matter to you? Program A might always win their conference championship, but never finish high in the NCAA championships, while Program B might never win a conference championship, but seems to be in the NCAA top ten year after year. Which of these types of programs is right for you should be determined by what you want out of your collegiate swimming career. When talking to former collegiate swimmers who are now graduated, working in the business world or raising families of their own, the thrill of winning a championship (national, conference, or otherwise) with their teammates is something they remember clearly, while other seemingly important things at the time fade with time.

Academics. Does this school have your major? What is the job/grad school placement in your field at the university you are considering? Can I swim while in this major? Believe it or not, some major swimming powers limit the majors you can choose because of the academic commitment they require. This factor seems to be a no-brainer. It should be very important, and it is for many. But you would be surprised how many athletes give little thought to the rest of their lives after swimming.

Fit. There are at least two components to this factor. First, athletic fit, and second, lifestyle and personality fit. Athletic fit questions include some like these: Will I be the best swimmer on the team or the worst? Will I be able to make the travel team? Will I be able to make the lineup for dual meets? Does this team need my events? Do I even care about what events I swim, as long as I am on this team? Does this team have a culture and history of getting better? Will they make me stay there in the summer? Or even, is it *possible* to stay there in the summer?

Lifestyle fit is equally important, in my opinion. Will I have friends? Will my friends/roommates be tolerant of my personal beliefs? How does the team act at team parties and functions? Or even, will I be the designated driver for five years?

Money. Any finally, the fifth factor is, of course, money. How am I going to pay for my college education? Two things to remember here are: very few swimmers receive full rides, especially on the men's side. So how am I going to pay costs that aren't covered by a collegiate grant-in-aid? The other thing to consider when comparing offers is "how much actually comes out of my pocket?" School A might give you 50%, while School B only gives you 35%. Because of the huge tuition differences from college to college, it could be a better deal to take the 35%. So be sure and check.

Now that you have looked at these factors (this list is not inclusive), your job as a parent or a prospective student-athlete is to *rank them from 1 to 5* in order of their importance to you. You should not be hesitant to share this with the coaches of the teams you are considering. For example, if money is the most important factor and you plan to go to the school that offers you the most, you should tell that to the recruiters. Or if staying close to home is important, you should make the best deal you can with the local university of your choice.

A couple of other random things to remember:

1. Generally speaking, the better the team, the less money you will be offered.
2. There is usually more money available on the early signing date than on the later one. Coaches like to spend all their money in November, so they don't have to worry about it in April.
3. It is not unusual to walk-on your first year if your times are marginal. Most coaches are willing to give you a scholarship your second year if you earn it your first.

For information on NCAA rules and eligibility, a good place to start is found at the NCAA Eligibility website. It is located at http://web1.ncaa.org/ECWR2/NCAA_EMS/NCAA.jsp.

Finally, I would be happy to visit with you more about this. Just give me a call or email me.