

Opportunity Aplenty

By Tom Slear

Like so many other college swimming hopefuls, Ryan Feuerstein's first choice was NCAA Division I. During his senior year of high school two years ago, he mailed letters to some 20 coaches of major programs. The response was anemic. Arizona promised a spot on the roster, but ruled out the traveling squad. Georgia expressed mild interest in him as a distance swimmer and discounted his favorite stroke, butterfly. Many coaches took one look at his times – 1:57 in the 200y butterfly and 4:42 in the 500y freestyle – and didn't bother to reply.

It was a harsh reality check that Rick Paine finds all too common. As president and swimming director of the American College Connection, Paine works with 100-500 swimmers each year who are applying to colleges. Nearly all of them are thinking Division I. A significant percentage has its eyes on top-tier schools such as Texas, Auburn and Stanford. It's left to Paine, a former coach at the University of Nebraska, to dispense the discouraging news. From his experience, roughly one in three of his clients have the potential to contribute to a Division I program. Among those, no more than a handful merits the attention of a top-20 swimming school.

The problem, Paine says, is perception. Too many high school swimmers view their competitive futures as Division I or nothing. Anything lower, in their minds, conveys second-class status.

"I run up against (male) 49-plus 100 (yard) freestylers all of the time who would rather go Division I any way they can," he says, "even if that means picking up towels and never traveling. They don't want to look into Division III, where they would have a chance to contribute and get down to 46. They don't realize all of the opportunities out there. It's a matter of choosing from the many schools that would be right for them. Much of my time is spent convincing them of all the options they have."

After repeated rejections, the message finally got through to Feuerstein. He was ready to listen when the swim coach at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), a small private college in Chicago, called. Feuerstein had never heard of IIT, which belongs not to the NCAA, but to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). Despite its 67 years of existence and nearly 300 members, NAIA has all of the name recognition of a lieutenant governor.

"Most people assume it's a division of the NCAA," says Rob Bond, the men's and women's swim coach at IIT.

The more Feuerstein looked into IIT, the more he liked it – the scholarship money, the engineering curriculum and the emerging swim program with an aggressive coach who wanted him instead of the other way around.

“What IIT could offer was the chance to compete right away at the national level because the standards are much lower than the NCAA championships,” says Bond. “Meanwhile, you get all the same swimming opportunities as the NCAA.”

Last year as a freshman, Feuerstein improved his 200y butterfly seven seconds to 1:50.73 and captured the national NAIA title. As he says in a tone laced with understatement, “It’s worked out very well.”

According to the latest data gathered by the NCAA, there are 864 varsity swim teams across all three divisions. The NAIA has another 35. Participation in swimming for both organizations totals 18,277 men and women. A straight division by four would indicate just over 4,600 openings in college swimming each year. However, since freshmen form the largest class on most teams, that number is probably closer to 7,000, if not higher.

USA Swimming figures indicate 11,000 members who are either 17- or 18-years old. Granted, USA Swimming membership doesn’t cover the universe of high school seniors who swim, but there appears to be some statistical merit to Paine’s belief that there’s a college out there for just about anyone who wants to swim.

Refreshing Inclusiveness

NAIA is the lowest competitive level. The standards for its national championship are “roughly equal to USA Swimming sectional cuts,” says Gerry Nelson, a long-time club coach in Florida who took over the men’s and women’s team at Cumberland College in Kentucky four years ago. But NAIA coaches have scholarship money to offer as well as programs that operate on a refreshingly inclusive basis.

Nelson runs a varsity and a junior varsity program, abiding by the school’s philosophy that if someone wants to swim, there will be a spot for him or her to compete. Of Nelson’s 42 swimmers, 17 are on the junior varsity. Several did not swim at any level before they arrived on campus.

The NAIA rules on scholarships are generous, especially when compared to NCAA limits. Each of Nelson’s 26 varsity swimmers is getting, on average, \$4,000 a year in athletic aid. (Total cost – room, board, tuition and fees – for a year at Cumberland College is roughly \$18,000.) Some of the swimmers do considerably better. Duncan Mackie, a senior, says that the combination of his athletic and academic scholarships makes the expense of Cumberland College less than if he had stayed home and commuted to the University of Florida.

“I was probably like a lot of other high school swimmers,” he says. “I placed in the top-12 in the Florida state championships and figured I could get into a Division I program.

That's all you hear about – Division I. I knew that wasn't going to work when friends of mind who were a lot faster weren't getting any looks from Division I schools. If I didn't get a brochure from Cumberland College in the mail, I wouldn't be swimming now."

Over the last three years, Mackie has dropped his 100-yard breaststroke time from 1:06 to 58.90.

"It's hard to believe that I ended up with this after I thought I had no options left for swimming in college," he says. "I often think, 'What if the coach didn't mail that brochure?' I wouldn't be swimming. It was that close."

No Respect

Next up the competitive ladder is NCAA Division III. If NAIA has no name recognition, Division III gets no respect.

"The misconception is that Division III is a recreational league where kids can't reach their potential," says George Kennedy, the head men's and women's coach at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md. "I send out our times and our records (for example, a 15:20.62 in the men's 1,650-yard freestyle), and it lets a lot of kids know that they aren't above Division III."

The size of Division III swimming – 7,713 swimmers – is impressive, nearly as large as Division I, which has 8,819 swimmers. (Division II and the NAIA have 2,071 and 304, respectively). Division III might not get respect, but it gets participation, which is curious in that by rule there are no athletic scholarships. Students get financial help according to academic performance and financial need. The tuba player at a Division III school receives the same scholarship consideration as the quarterback. What's more, the better Division III swimming schools are overwhelmingly private, which is to say expensive. Total cost for a year at Johns Hopkins is \$43,000.

"That is the toughest thing for recruits," says Kennedy. "We can't offer any (athletic) aid. They just have to wait to see the number the school comes up with based on need and see if they can work it out."

Though Division III swimming isn't the best, it's fast, nevertheless.

"It's not lesser swimming," says Tyler Dobelbower, a junior at Wheaton College and one of the top backstrokers in Division III. "It's the same type of dedication and hard work."

The top-tier Division III programs, such as Kenyon, Dennison, Carnegie Mellon, Williams, Amherst and Johns Hopkins, can hold their own against all but a handful of Division I schools. The Division III nationals can't claim the moniker of the Division I championships – the fastest meet in the world, top to bottom, with the exception of the Olympics – but the intensity is as dense.

“The big thrill of the kid performing well is what creates the excitement,” says Jon Lederhouse, the men’s and women’s coach at Wheaton. “At Division I, they are improving to faster times, but at Division III, they are improving just as much, and the excitement for the swimmers is every bit as strong.”

No Identity

Next up the competitive ladder, though just barely, is Division II. If NAIA goes largely unnoticed, and Division III doesn’t get the respect that it should, Division II suffers from a lack of identity. It’s numbers are small – less than 120 varsity teams total for men and women – and its members can’t claim the purity of scholarship-free Division III nor the big-time stature of Division I.

What they can claim is an opportunity to continue to swim with the help of an athletic scholarship at schools that typically come pretty cheap. Todd Samland, the women’s coach at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, has eight scholarships to spread among his 31 swimmers. Samland doesn’t cut anyone. His policy is that if you can handle the practices and the academics, you can swim.

Samland hesitates to offer a number for an average scholarship. Rather, he doles out athletic aid according to a well-defined gradation. Qualifiers for the Division II national championships get tuition and fees. Those able to make a B-cut get half tuition. Those who can score points at the conference championships get enough to cover the cost of a class each semester. The University of Nebraska-Omaha and most other Division II swimming schools are state supported and relatively inexpensive. Total costs for a year run between \$15,000 and \$20,000, less than half their pricey brethren in Division III.

“The perception is that Division II schools will not help as much academically,” says Samland, a 1984 graduate of Nebraska-Omaha. “That’s just not true. You can get as good of an education here as anywhere else. Much of the education depends on the individual anyway. What you get out of it is determined by how much you put into it.”

Have a Blast

Division I, at the top of the competitive pyramid, carries the glamour that is well deserved. But the top level of college swimming is not a monolithic heap of Olympic hopefuls and American record holders. There are more than 300 varsity teams in Division I, enough to include a wide spectrum of swimming talent.

“Kids too often don’t understand the quality of the programs outside the top-15 or top-20,” says Paine. “There are a lot of well-coached programs with full funding (9.9 scholarships for the men’s team, 14.0 scholarships for the women’s teams) that you don’t hear much about. Look at Wyoming, which had an Olympian last year (Scott Usher, who finished seventh in Athens in the 200m breaststroke). Then there are programs that are not well-funded at all, and you have everything in between.”

The trick, whether Division I, II, III or NAIA, is to appreciate the wide range of opportunities for swimming in college and to keep searching until the fit is right.

“If you have flexibility both geographically and with the level, there’s a school where you can contribute,” says Tom Greco of the National Scouting Report, a commercial recruiting organization. “You have to check your ego at the door and look at the schools that are within your athletic ability. Then go and compete and have a blast.”