

## The Recruiting Game

At 6-foot-4 and with a 68-inch wingspan, Hannah Meyer had her pick of colleges despite her gangly physique. Having sprouted from her relatively modest 5-foot-10 frame as a freshman to her current stature her senior year, Meyer received letters and calls from some of the top programs in the country.

Funny enough, the scholarships – some full rides – were to play volleyball, even though Meyer had never even spiked or served in a competitive prep or club match.

Unlike her sister, Amanda, a freshman outside hitter for Rutgers, Hannah wasn't interested in playing collegiate volleyball. She was a swimmer full of as much untapped potential as unanswered questions – which led to an interesting and often confusing recruiting experience.

“She grew so fast and so tall that the rest of her body – her musculature, in particular – had a difficult time catching up,” said Hannah's mother, Betzi. “As soon as volleyball programs found out about her height and wingspan, they were ready to drop a scholarship on her sight unseen.

“But she wanted to swim in college, and after looking around and visiting some schools, she found the right fit for her athletically, socially and academically. She chose a program and coach that will develop the talent we all know she has.”

Before committing to Seton Hall during the early signing period last year, Meyer heard from programs at all levels – Divisions I through III. She took a few unofficial visits to some of the country's power programs, including defending national champion Auburn. Within weeks of her visit, some weren't able to come through with scholarship money, while others dropped contact with her altogether.

It didn't matter, however, as Hannah and Seton Hall proved to be the perfect fit for each other.

“The obvious interest was in her potential,” said Ron Farina, head coach at Seton Hall. “I am a very big proponent of body type, and I feel Hannah's potential as both a sprinter and breaststroker is unlimited. Because she'll be close to her sister, Seton Hall is a good fit for her personally as well as academically, and she'll be a terrific addition to the team.”

While the Meyers' recruiting experience is not completely unique or surprising, it raises some questions about the practices of college recruiting. How and when are high school swimmers recruited? What are the best methods for getting noticed if you're not an upper-level swimmer or if you're a late bloomer? And most importantly, what are the essential factors a recruit should look for in a school or program?

## A 'Heated' Competition

Every year, 382 schools search the landscape for the next Natalie Coughlin or Brendan Hansen to elevate their program to new heights at NCAAs.

Schools at the Division I and II levels offer full or partial scholarships to lure the best athletes they can find to join their programs. While Division III schools offer no athletic scholarships, many compensate with academic packages.

"It's pretty rare once a kid has decided to go Division I to convince him or her to choose your Division II or III school," said Nathan Owen, head coach at Minnesota State – Mankato, a Division II school. "Division I schools also generally have bigger recruiting budgets and are able to bring athletes to campus for visits. I try to counter that by always answering kids' emails and really searching for those kids who have a lot of potential but get ignored."

The level of competition for potential recruits is intense, sometimes cutthroat, and often pushes the envelope.

"I hate recruiting, but I like coaching and building athletes," said Ron Allen, head coach of the men's and women's teams at the University of South Dakota, a Division II school. "It's so competitive and difficult finding talent and keeping swimmers eligible to compete, but I just try to find the kids who are realistic and want to go to a national meet and not sit on the bench like they probably would at a larger school. That's not always an easy sell."

College coaches really start monitoring the best swimmers their sophomore year of high school, but there are those exceptions who show promise and talent much earlier. Direct recruitment doesn't actually start until swimmers become juniors, although some coaches who've built relationships with club coaches will make requests and ask about certain swimmers.

Chris Davis, head coach at SwimAtlanta, often develops some of the most talented high school students in the country and is still surprised by the overall recruitment process.

"I am amazed at how many of our kids receive scholarship offers sight unseen and with the coach failing to contact me to ask about the upside or downside of the swimmer," Davis said. "Most of the time, I have to initiate the call for the second-level kids, but everyone knows about the top-level athletes."

One of those top-level athletes, Kaitlin Sandeno, won a bronze medal at the 2000 Olympics the summer before her senior year and was one of the most heavily recruited swimmers in the country. She narrowed her choices to the University of Southern California, Georgia and Arizona, and relied on her club coaches for their guidance before choosing Mark Schubert and the Trojans.

“My club coaches, Vic and Renee Riggs, were just very supportive throughout the process,” said Sandeno, a gold medalist at this summer’s Games in Athens. “I got a good feel for all the colleges on my visits, and they all had a lot to offer, but I just knew USC was right for me.”

### **Use Your Resources**

In the past, recruiting for college coaches involved making the rounds to meets and scouting the top athletes in person, along with making a few contacts with club or high school coaches. Today, with the Internet, recruiting has been simplified to surfing web sites with online swimmer biographies and posted times, as well as the traditional in-person scouting.

The internet can also be a useful tool for swimmers, particularly those who haven’t achieved National cuts but show potential to shine on an NCAA stage. Once overlooked by college coaches, these swimmers can now use online recruiting services, where they log in their biography, times and academic qualities.

Still, no one person or group can make as big an impact on the recruitment of an athlete swimming under the college radar than a club coach who’s been working with these swimmers day-in and day-out.

Sean Hutchison, who coaches KING Aquatics in the Seattle area, interacts with college coaches from across the country, particularly when he discovers a swimmer making progress but getting little recruiting attention.

“I have six senior guys this year, and I think all of them are late bloomers and aren’t getting noticed, even though they’re fast,” Hutchison said. “I really try to get coaches who are interested in developing athletes interested in our program, and I try to be as honest as possible with them about my athletes and where I think they’ll eventually be (time-wise).

“If they take a risk on a KING swimmer once, and it pans out, they’ll know it’s okay to do it again. So I try to build good relationships with the coaches.”

The club coaches’ insight into the athletes they coach goes a long way in influencing recruiting decisions on the part of the college coach as well.

“The club coaches usually have a very good insight about an athlete’s potential – swimming and personally,” said Eddie Reese, who has won multiple NCAA championships as coach at the University of Texas. “We recruit on our ability to predict the swimmers’ future, and not many of us are very good at predicting the future, so we rely on the recommendations of the club coaches, as well as our own gut instinct.”

### **Academics over Athletics**

When choosing a college swimming program, numerous factors come into consideration – none bigger than choosing athletics that complement academics. Unless an athlete has designs on the NFL, NBA or Major League Baseball, competitive college athletics take a backseat to earning a degree, especially in an Olympic sport like swimming.

“Swimmers aren’t often going to have a professional career (in the sport) after they’re finished with college unless they are the best in the world, so picking a school for its academics is crucial,” said Mary DeScenza, a top recruit who chose the University of Georgia for its veterinary program as well as its swimming program.

“If a swimmer chooses a school just for the swimming, coach or facilities, or even for the scholarship, they can end up being very disappointed. But if they choose the school because it has the academic major or program they want to study, they will more likely be satisfied with their decision, even if they can no longer swim or the coach leaves for another program.”

When his daughter, Malarie, started looking at schools last fall, Ted Schmidt let her do most of the legwork herself, but stressed the importance of choosing a school first and foremost for its academics.

“Of course, finances come into the picture, and you’re more likely to look closely at a program offering a full scholarship, but picking a school because of academics and majors available is priority,” said Schmidt, who also went through the recruiting game with his son, Thomas, two years ago. Malarie swims for Illinois’ Academy Bullets Swim Club.

“In addition to academics, it was also important for Malarie to fit into the program and know that she could contribute rather than just be another swimmer on the team. She fit in very well with everyone at Miami (Ohio) University and also realized she could quickly make an impact upon the team’s success.”

Stanford University, one of the premiere academic institutions in the country with one of the top swimming programs, uses academics as a stringent recruiting tool.

“Because we consider recruits to be part of our ‘family,’ the process is more of an adoptive process than a business,” said assistant men’s swimming coach Ted Knapp. “Once they are enrolled, everything is done within the university system to make sure they have a productive experience and are prepared for their personal or professional goals after graduation. Education is the most important piece of recruiting for us.”

Whether a swimmer is one of the nation’s best, or is someone flying under the radar, whether he chooses a Division I, II or III program, or gets an athletic or a partial academic scholarship, the process of deciding where to go to college should be fun as well as educational.

“It can be a nerve-racking experience, but that’s because this is a decision that will in many ways affect the rest of a swimmer’s life,” said Bill Schalz, head coach of the Academy Bullets. “But it should also be memorable for them, and they should always know that they aren’t alone in the decision-making process.”

### **Recruiting Tips:**

Emmie Dengler, a senior freestyler on the 20-time NCAA champion Kenyon College women’s team, has some words of wisdom for swimmers regarding the recruiting process:

- 1) Don’t wait for schools to contact you. There are always people who may be a good fit at a school who get overlooked simply because there are so many swimmers out there. So if you’re interested in a school, e-mail the coach. This helps them notice you.
- 2) Which level is the best fit for you? Decide if you would be a good fit for Division I, II or III. Or, if you’re like me and could have gone both directions, apply to a few of both. I knew that I didn’t want my last meet of the year to be a conference meet, which would have been the case in Division I, so after applying, I decided that Division III was a better fit for me.
- 3) Academics are very important. Don’t let coaches evade the subject when asked how academics fit into or around the swimming program. It made me wonder what they were hiding.
- 4) When you contact coaches, send them a resume documenting your times, athletic achievements (All-American, etc.), academic info (SAT score, grades, GPA, awards) and other extracurricular activities.
- 5) When considering a school, don’t just look at the swimming program. Make sure the school has something you’re interested in studying because you need something to fall back on, like a job, when swimming is over.
- 6) If invited, take overnight recruiting visits. It’s the best way to find out what the team is really like. I really liked a couple of the schools I applied to, but when I took my overnight visits, I realized I didn’t mesh with the personality of the team.
- 7) Recruiting services aren’t for everyone. I’ve always been kind of skeptical about recruiting services. I didn’t use one, so I don’t really know how useful they are. It seems to me that with a little leg work, you can do the same thing a service does and save loads of money.