

## **A PARENT'S GUIDE TO NCAA WATER POLO RECRUITMENT**

This helpful hint sheet is designed to help polo parents whose athlete is interested in playing water polo when they go to college. If your athlete is one of the top 4-5 athletes on the team it is possible that they can play at the next level.

### **Areas of Encouragement with Your Athlete**

You are well aware that team sports often result in your athlete coming home to share moments of elation and frustration. As they share their experiences and frustrations it is important to set a tone. As you respond to your athlete it is important to encourage your athlete to be a strong team player. This involves two areas of encouragement.

First, college coaches want athletes who respond to coaching. Promote working cooperatively with the coach. Even if the coach seems stupid or insane, encourage your athlete to try to work with the coach. If your athlete ignores the coach or is argumentative this could come back to haunt them during recruiting. College coaches will talk with the club and high school coaches as they start identifying athletes they may want to recruit. If your athlete is referred to “un-coachable” by the current coach, it is likely that this will impact the college coaches interest.

Second, college coaches, much more than high school coaches, promote team play. When college coaches watch an athlete they have specific positions and roles in mind based on who is graduating in the next year or two. They will watch your athlete to see how they play with others and may want to recruit your athlete for a different position. If your athlete only looks to shoot and doesn't make strong passes they may be viewed as limited in their ability. Signs of good team play include:

- Being aware of teammates positions in the water at all times.
- Forgoing shots to pass to another athlete with a better opportunity.
- Playing strong when they don't have the ball.
- Creating opportunities for teammates to score.

Indicators of poor team play include:

- Being a ball hog (always wanting the ball, ignoring open players)
- Yelling at teammates (screaming for the ball, chastising teammates)

### **Behind the Scenes Promotional Activities**

During the sophomore and junior years you can prepare just in case your athlete decides to play at the next level. These activities will involve becoming more involved in team activities so you can access information and resources that can be helpful in recruitment.

**Stats.** Coaches like statistics on how your athlete plays. They typically pay attention to shots, goals, assists, steals, ejections drawn, ejections, and often turn overs. Try to have these statistics for all years your athlete played varsity. It is also useful to keep track of periods played because our team is so large that people don't play full games. Also try to have your athletes best swim times for freestyle (and possibly backstroke) events.

**Video.** Some people put together videos for the coaches to see. Don't send a video unless asked. Coaches know that you edit out mistakes and anyone can look good in a video. They are of very questionable value in water polo. Try to keep some video if you can but only send it if the coach expresses an interest.

**List options.** You can go onto the NCAA website to identify potential programs. If you go to the water polo page there will be a list of division 1, 2 & 3 programs. Most of the programs have coach's names and web links so you can do a bit of research. Some things to look for include:

1. Does the school have the academic programs that will fit for your athlete?
2. Are there any Midwest athletes on the roster?
3. Will athletes be graduating from the team to create openings for your athlete?
4. With the team openings at the time of your athlete's graduation fit your child's skill set?

When you have a list it is often easier to have fruitful discussions with your athlete about their options.

### **Athlete Actions to Promote Themselves**

**Join a club team.** The club team does two things. First it shows that your athlete is committed to the sport and plays year round. She will be competing with girls who do play year round so you want to keep that even. Club teams also provide another coach for the college recruiters to talk to. This lets them gather information about your athlete behind the scenes. They may even talk to opposing teams coaches so be ready. Finally, a club team lets the girls play in tournaments so they can be exposed.

**Attend Camps.** All big schools have camps and some coaches do become interested in girls who attend their camps because there is a lot of scrimmaging. However, coaches may rule your athlete out of the running based on camp performance. When choosing a camp, try to find out what college coaches are helping out. Often coaches from less prestigious schools assist at camps. Those are the coaches that you may connect with and open some doors.

**Try out for Zone teams.** If your athlete can play on the Zone team it is a good leg up on getting the interest of a college coach. It is very inexpensive to tryout and is always a good learning experience. Often girls don't make the team their first year but persistence is often rewarded. If your athlete makes the Zone team she will get to try out for the National team. This brings very good exposure so don't turn it down.

**Play in tournaments.** College coaches go to the JO's and other major tournaments to watch prospects. Make sure your athlete is on a team playing at these high visibility tournaments. This often requires a club affiliation. If your athlete will be at a tournament have her contact schools that she is interested in so the coach knows who to watch.

## **Identifying Potential Schools**

**Academics.** Pick your school wisely. You can go on line through NCAA and research the schools. First, look at the academic offerings to make sure they fit your athlete's areas of interest and skill. You want a solid academic program that can meet your athlete's career goals. If the academics fit, then it is worth looking at the water polo program. It is very useful to look at their roster. If the roster has no athletes from the Midwest, you may want to put that program lower on your list. However, programs with successful Midwest athletes will be more open to considering your athlete. Next, look at the array of juniors and seniors to see if positions will be opening up.

**Play vs. Sit.** Probably the most important discussion to have with your athlete is about what they want. Some athletes are very comfortable sitting on the bench and playing for less than two minutes per game while others prefer to play as much as possible. If your athlete is comfortable on the bench, some prestigious water polo programs may be possible. If your child wants to play, some of these programs will not suit your athlete's interests. This is a tricky conversation because you move from comparing your athlete locally to nationally. They will be competing for roster spots and playing time with the best athletes in the United States and Canada (also some European Nations). Only athletes on the National Team compete successfully. To a lesser extent athletes on the Zone team are of interest to College coaches especially in the less prestigious programs.

**Reality Check.** After you have explored your athlete's playing preferences and academic needs you will find that there are several viable programs. These programs fall into different ranges of schools. This is where realistic discussions are needed. Basically all of the coaches have a list of maybe 100 athletes that they want to check out. The most prestigious schools will be competing for the best athletes. The following program types are usually considered during recruitment.

- *Highly Ranked Schools:* Schools that are ranked in the top 25 most often recruit athletes from water polo hotbeds such as California, Southern Florida, Hawaii etc. Polo athletes from these areas often start playing during elementary school and are members of year round water polo programs. It is not unusual for these athletes to play 50 games during the summer break. Tournaments are highly competitive and coaching is excellent. It is almost impossible to compete for playing positions in these schools. Many Midwest athletes have gone to ranked schools but very few get a significant amount of playing time. Most are "walk on" status athletes which means there is very little financial aid. One ranked school regularly signs the MVP from Midwest state tournaments. If you follow up their playing time many of them do not go to away tournaments and very seldom play (most often when the team is winning by a large margin). If your athlete is considering one of these schools, it will be important to discuss their playing time expectations.
- *West Coast Schools:* West coast schools have the pick of the crop because the west coast is the hotbed of water polo. They are not often interested in Midwest girls and certainly won't pay for flights etc. for recruiting visits. If your athlete really wants to play out west you will need to make contact and continue contact

with the coach. Some west coast schools will let you pay for your own recruiting visits and will encourage your athlete to enter their school and try out for the team. Plan on getting into the school and trying to walk on if your athlete is not the best water polo athlete in the state. Playing time will be scant and they will have to prove themselves. West coast water polo athletes do not believe that Michigan athletes are at the same level. Your athlete will have to deal with this bias. Even current members of the Olympic team had to deal with the West Coast bias so it is likely that your athlete will need to manage these biases as well.

- *East Coast Schools:* East coast schools are often better possibilities for Midwest athletes. Almost all East coast schools have some Michigan girls on their rosters and are open to our girls. While they are not as highly respected for polo, your athlete is more likely to get financial help and she will get to play. The MAAC (mostly NY) regularly recruits Michigan athletes as do many Pennsylvania Colleges. Most of the schools are private colleges with small classes and great support. It is not unusual for strong Michigan athletes to get significant levels of playing time even as freshmen (unless the team is highly ranked).

### **The Recruitment Game**

Unlike football, hockey, volleyball and basketball, water polo teams often have very small budgets. Many high school coaches are actually paid more than college coaches so don't expect the college coaches to have a great recruitment system. They have to make very difficult decisions about how to spend their money so it is unlikely that they will know about your athlete unless he or she is so good (e.g., on the national team) that every coach in the country has him/her on their radar. Typically, there are 50 – 100 athletes that many coaches know about and are competing for. If your athlete is not on that list, you will need to help your athlete introduce themselves.

**Fact Sheets.** To get on the coaches radar it is helpful to put together a fact sheet with the athlete's academic, athletic and personal achievements. Ideally, this fact sheet should be about one page long. Tables with swim times and polo stats covering 2 or 3 years are a way to keep the fact sheet concise. This is what the professional services that help with recruiting do and it seems to make good sense.

**Letters of Interest.** Have your athlete send out letters of interest and introduction to the college coaches on their list. Attach the fact sheet to the letter so the coach can get a sense of the athlete's skills. Ideally, this contact should be made during early in the junior year so they get on the coach's radar before active recruiting begins.

**Complete Interest Forms.** Often athlete interest forms with some general information is the only response you will get from the initial letter of interest. NCAA rules limit the contact they can have at this time so the information will be general and nothing will be specific to your athlete. Make sure the athlete completes these forms and returns them to the coach. Also, if you are hoping for some scholarship money make sure they check yes in the box asking if they will be applying for financial aid.

**Follow up Letters.** At the end of the junior year polo season help your athlete draft a follow up letter updating the initial letter. This will show the coach significant interest and may help get them on the radar. In this letter let the coach know how the team did in the season and share some perspectives on the season. This doesn't have to be long. The goal is just to make sure that your athlete hasn't fallen off the radar.

**July/Summer Activity.** After July 1 of your athlete's junior year coaches and athletes can be in direct contact with each other. If the fact sheets and letters have done their job, interested coaches will start making contact. Most will inquire about your athlete playing at JO's. This is where face-to-face contact is most likely. If your athlete is not going to JO's they may miss out so consider a summer trip to meet the coaches of their high priority schools. If high priority coaches have not made contact by the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, you may want to help your athlete reach out to the coach to ask about their plans for the next season to see if interest can be sparked. If this doesn't work, you may need to put that program on the back burner because they may have a short list that does not include your athlete. Don't dismay if this is the case, remember several schools will be competing for the top tier athletes at this time and your athlete may not rise to a spot of interest until the top level competition is resolved.

**Planning Recruitment Visits.** Your athlete can attend up to 5 official recruitment visits. These visits are an opportunity to meet the coach, team and get a sense of the school. Your athlete will need to get a sense of fit with the team and school at this time. They will travel alone to the school and stay in the dorms with one of the athletes. They can't work out with the team it is more of a meet and greet. It is rare that the school will pay all of the travel costs. If a school does cover the flight etc., this may be an indicator of strong interest. The visits can start in the fall (early is also a sign of interest) and often go into the winter months.

**Signing Times.** There are two signing times where coaches will push for a commitment. One is in the fall and one in the early spring. They will contact your athlete before these dates (actual dates can be found on the NCAA site) with a package indicating how much academic and athletic aid will be available. You can expect this close to the signing deadline so the coach doesn't get into a lot of negotiations. You may be able to negotiate a little increase but be very careful because coaches move onto the next athlete very quickly if they think your athlete is going to reject their offer.

**Post Signing Time Opportunity.** It is still possible to make a team after the signing dates but this is often an issue of timing. If something falls through with another athlete money may be available so it may be possible to rekindle or generate interest. If your athlete has not committed to their team of interest in May or early June it is worth making contact to see what is possible. Even if there is no money, the coach may be very open to considering your athlete as a walk on. This means they can practice with the team and try to get on the roster without signing a commitment. This is how many athletes make it onto the more prestigious teams.