

Sticker Shock

By Tom Slear

Part game, part meat market.....college swim coaches cringe when they hear that description, but most nod in resignation. Every year, thousands of high school swimmers across America have their minds set on athletic scholarships. And every year, a much smaller number of swim coaches face the daunting task of spreading around a meager amount of scholarship dollars. The outcome is a cross between a chess match and a beauty contest.

"The hardest thing I had to do when I was coaching was figure out the money for scholarships," says Bob Boettner, executive director of the College Swimming Coaches Association of America. "Parents have no idea how little money there is to give out, and how fast someone really needs to be to get any aid."

The math is simple and convincing. NCAA rules allow a Division I men's swimming program to offer up to 9.9 full scholarships. Most schools fall short of that. According to the NCAA, the average is 6.5. Since a team needs 15 to 18 swimmers and divers (when it comes to scholarships, diving is lumped with swimming) to be credible, scholarship dollars are extended to the breaking point. The average for swimmers who receive any sort of aid is less than a half scholarship. Many get money to cover books only.

"It's sticker shock, and I see it all the time with the swimmers and parents we see," says John Trembley, the men's coach at the University of Tennessee. "What would go to the top high school seniors, those who scored at senior nationals, is not 90 percent or a full scholarship, but 40, 50, or maybe 60 percent. In the 14 years I've been at Tennessee, we've had American record-holders and NCAA champions, some of whom had less than a half scholarship."

The numbers are slightly more encouraging for Division I women. The NCAA allows 14 full scholarships per team. The average is 9.2. Each swimmer who receives aid averages slightly more than a half scholarship.

The situation at many schools below the upper tier, however, resembles that at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where head coach Christine Honig stretches four scholarships over 17 swimmers and two divers.

The men's and women's Division II programs can each offer 8.1 full scholarships, though the average is 2.5, with each swimmer on aid averaging a quarter scholarship.

Bleak statistics, certainly, but there's a caveat. Many swimmers happily compete in college while receiving no athletic scholarship. Nearly 40 percent of Division I and II swimmers, the so called walk-ons, go without athletic aid. Another 7,500 swimmers compete for Division III schools where

rules prohibit aid based on athletic ability. Overall, two out of three swimmers across the three NCAA divisions pay for their education without any financial help from their respective athletic departments. It's not the opportunity to swim in college that's small, just the likelihood of earning an athletic scholarship.

"That's why I say it's better to hit the books, and I say that as a parent of swimmers," says Wayne Burrow, associate director of championships for the NCAA. "You have a much better chance of getting an academic scholarship than an athletic scholarship."

QUID PRO QUO

For the purpose of regulating scholarships, the NCAA divides athletics into two categories. Division I football, men's basketball, women's basketball, tennis, volleyball and gymnastics are head-count sports, which means, in essence, that the athletes get full scholarships or nothing at all. There is no middle ground.

The other Division I sports, and all those in Division II, are equivalency sports. As such, the scholarships can be parceled out as a coach pleases, provided the sum of the parts doesn't exceed the NCAA limit. This promotes the harsh reality of coaches putting prices on the heads of recruits based on potential and utility. The result is often confusion and resentment.

"When you break up and divide scholarships, you have an unfair process from the start," says Jon Howell, who was an assistant coach at Clemson before becoming the head coach of the men's and women's teams at Division III Emory University in Atlanta. "In one class you might have a woman who does a 23.5 in the 50-yard freestyle on a full scholarship, and in the class behind her a sprinter who is just as fast getting only books."

The fact that athletic aid packages are valid for only one year serves to make the process messier. NCAA rules prohibit schools from committing scholarship money to athletes beyond the upcoming academic year. Each spring the slate is wiped clean and coaches make like corporate managers handing out bonuses. The swimmers who exceeded expectations often see the value of their scholarships increase. (Conceivably, poor performances could prompt a decrease, though many schools prohibit the practice unless an athlete breaks a team rule or becomes academically ineligible). It's a professional quid pro quo.

"I talk to the team in terms of this being a job," admits Mark McFarland, the women's coach at New Mexico State. "Whether that's the right way to do it or not, I'm not sure, but that's the way it is. We give them scholarship money, and they have the responsibility of performing."

"We expect something in return for a scholarship and that's what a lot of people don't fully understand," says Tim Flannery, the men's and women's coach at Division II Kutztown (Pa.)

University. "We want effort; we want improvement. But the biggest thing that we want is commitment, and that includes the expectation that they will swim over the summer."

What scholarship money remains after accounts with returning swimmers and divers are settled goes toward enticing high school seniors. Coaches try to keep the amount consistent from year to year so that they will have strength in all four classes, but that's more difficult than it appears. School and athletic department policies often intercede. Public universities, for example, typically require a mix of out-of-state and less expensive in-state athletic scholarships. What a coach has to offer recruits, and which recruits he pursues, depends to a large degree on the residence of the graduating seniors.

There's also the mitigating factor of two signing periods. What recruits "sign" is a National Letter of Intent, which commits them to compete for a particular school or risk losing two years of eligibility. The school, in turn, commits to one year of aid. (Walk-ons do not sign letters of intent).

High school swimming recruits, whether Division I or II, have two periods their senior year during which they can sign. The earlier period is in November, and the advantages to coaches and swimmers of signing then are obvious. The coaches lock in the talent they need and the swimmers lock in a scholarship. To the relief of both, the recruiting process ends.

"I wanted to settle everything early," says Amy Barefield, a sprinter from Montana who signed last fall with the University of Utah. "I loved Salt Lake City, and I could see myself being a part of their team, so I didn't see any reason to wait."

But the disadvantages of an early signing are just as obvious. Coaches risk having no money left when, during the later signing period from April to August, a senior national qualifier calls unexpectedly and asks, "Hey, Coach, do you have a spot for me?" Recruits, fearing a coach might pull an offer, risk making a hasty decision.

"It can get unbelievably complicated," says Trembley, the men's coach at Tennessee. Some years, worried that he doesn't have the money to get the swimmers he needs, Trembley will ask parents of upperclassmen if they would be willing to turn in a portion of their son's scholarship. Surprisingly, some say yes. A few even turn in money without being asked, adding credence to the popular notion that athletic scholarships are valued just as much for the prestige they bestow as for the money they save.

HARDENED

The whole process is often befuddling and disappointing to recruits and their parents. An offer in November might disappear in April. Or comparable swimming schools might offer scholarships

that vary widely.

Or the aid offered is less than hoped.

Unfair, perhaps, but coaches' strategies are strictly bottom line. Their job security depends on it. They must snare the best swimmers available for the least amount of money possible. They are quick to point out that that they aren't the only ones playing hardball.

"You deal with kids and their parents who will fight you tooth and nail and play one school against another," says Boettner. "When I was at Clemson, we dickered and dickered with a girl's parents about how much money we were offering. Finally we said, 'This is all we can give her.' She came, but she didn't train that hard and, in my opinion, didn't earn her scholarship. No wonder coaches get hardened to some extent."

Coaches are also hardened by swimmers with inflated opinions of their worth. At Kutztown State, Flannery runs into this regularly. A high school senior will call thinking, "Division II? How hard can it be?" Worse, he'll assume Flannery won't take the time to check with the high school or club coach on the swimmer's training habits and coachability.

The trick, most coaches say, is not to shoot too high, or too low. Times that won't warrant a return phone call from a top-five, Division I coach might earn a scholarship at a lower-level program.

"Very often in the initial contact with athletes, they hear that we are Division I and they balk – they don't think they are good enough," says Honig, the women's coach at Marist. "There are a lot of levels within Division I, and they can cover a lot of needs."

Determining a proper fit has been made much easier with the advent of the Internet. Web pages for most college swim programs list at least the school records in each event if not the top five times from the year before.

Collegeswimming.com gives up-to-the-minute results for all three divisions, as well as updates on what schools have signed which swimmers.

"Determining a school, at least for swimming, is a lot like determining the best lane to train in," says Bob Bowman, the senior coach at North Baltimore Aquatic Club, which last year had seven swimmers earn an athletic scholarship. "You don't want to be so far ahead of the rest that you aren't challenged, and you don't want to be so far behind that you feel lost."

Middle of the pack, of course, doesn't equate to the highest scholarship, which is Bowman's point. The recruiting process should not be an auction, but a search for the right mix of academics, social life, and swimming.

"An athletic scholarship wasn't as important to me as what kind of degree I would have after four years," says Leigh Campbell, a distance swimmer from North Carolina who turned down scholarship offers last year from two Division I schools to attend Emory. "What was important to me was not the best athletic scholarship, but the best opportunity. There are always ways to work out the money."

SIDEBAR

Helpful web sites on recruiting and athletic scholarships:

1. www.ncaa.org – the "rules and eligibility" link is particularly good. The writing is dense, but all the information on recruiting and scholarships is there, including an A-to-Z explanation of the initial eligibility/clearinghouse procedures.
2. www.collegeswimming.com – complete results for all levels, Division I through III; also, the latest on recruiting, including who has signed where.
3. www.nationalletter.org – all the skinny on signing a national letter of intent.