

NCAA and College Swimming Guidelines

To educate high school swimmers (and their families) on the exact process to get recruited for NCAA swimming programs. This includes understanding times they must hit, the rules they must follow, how to communicate with college coaches, and what to expect from each collegiate level (Division I, II, III, and club).

Step 1: NCAA Recruitment Rules for 2026

Contact period for D1 and D2:

Division I: College coaches can now initiate recruiting contact with swimmers (calls, emails, texts, DM, and off-campus contact) starting June 15th after sophomore year. This is the key date when two-way recruiting conversations can begin.

Division II: Coaches follow a more flexible calendar and can generally contact prospects once they are in high school; check each year's Division II recruiting calendar for specific dates.

Official visits:

Athletes are now allowed unlimited official visits, but only one per school at the Division I level.

Division I official visits may begin August 1 before junior year of high school.

Division II official visits typically can begin after June 15 before junior year; confirm with each school.

Verbal commitments:

Non-binding but can happen anytime. National Letter of Intent (NLI) signing still begins November of senior year.

NCAA Eligibility Center:

Register and complete amateurism forms early if you are targeting Division I or II.

2026 NCAA Division I Championship Structure Changes:

Qualification model: The old A and B standard system has been replaced with a "Win-and-In" model. A swimmer who wins their conference championship event and achieves a national qualifying time in that event earns an automatic invitation to the NCAA Championships. Winning your conference event matters more than ever.

B-finals eliminated: Consolation finals (B-finals) have been removed. Swimmers placing 9th–16th will have their final positions determined by morning preliminary times only – they will not swim an evening final.

Relay qualification: Schools with at least one individually invited swimmer may enter relays for which they hold a qualifying standard. Schools with no individual invitees can still compete in a relay if they hold an A-cut in that relay event.

Technology: Officials may now use underwater cameras to review potential violations, and video review is permitted to confirm or overturn false start disqualifications. Athletes competing at championship level should be aware that officiating technology has expanded significantly.

Step 2: Know the Performance Benchmarks

These are the average times of the top 24 fastest collegiate swimmers in 2025 short course yards (SCY) for both male and female swimmers. Recruits should aim to be within 3–5% of these times to be considered competitive for D1. These numbers are approximate 2025 benchmarks; actual qualifying and scoring times will shift slightly each year, so always compare to the most recent NCAA championship results.

Male 2025 SCY Top 24 Averages

Event – Average Time

50 Free – 19.40
100 Free – 42.70
200 Free – 1:34.20
500 Free – 4:17.50
1000 Free – 9:00.10
1650 Free – 14:58.00
100 Back – 46.30
200 Back – 1:41.50
100 Breast – 52.90
200 Breast – 1:54.90
100 Fly – 45.90
200 Fly – 1:42.50
200 IM – 1:43.90
400 IM – 3:44.50

Female 2025 SCY Top 24 Averages

Event – Average Time

50 Free – 22.10
100 Free – 48.40
200 Free – 1:44.80
500 Free – 4:39.80
1000 Free – 9:42.00
1650 Free – 16:04.00
100 Back – 51.30

200 Back – 1:51.10
100 Breast – 59.70
200 Breast – 2:08.10
100 Fly – 51.50
200 Fly – 1:54.30
200 IM – 1:55.90
400 IM – 4:06.70

The Top 16 Times for both NCAA Division II and NCAA Division III swimmers (Men & Women) for the 2025 short course yards (SCY) season represent the cutoff for scoring at NCAA Championships (i.e., placing in the top 16 in finals). As with D1, these are approximate and may move slightly from year to year.

Notes for Coaches & Swimmers:

To be safe: Recruits aiming to score at D2 or D3 NAAs should aim to be 0.5–1.5 seconds faster than these thresholds to secure a top-8 finish.

NCAA Division II – Top 16 Average Times (2025 SCY)

Men

50 Free – 20.10
100 Free – 44.10
200 Free – 1:37.30
500 Free – 4:25.00
1000 Free – 9:15.00
1650 Free – 15:25.00
100 Back – 48.90
200 Back – 1:47.60
100 Breast – 54.90
200 Breast – 2:00.50
100 Fly – 47.90
200 Fly – 1:47.80
200 IM – 1:48.80
400 IM – 3:55.00

Women

50 Free – 23.30
100 Free – 50.30
200 Free – 1:49.90
500 Free – 4:57.00
1000 Free – 10:12.00
1650 Free – 17:10.00
100 Back – 55.50
200 Back – 2:00.00
100 Breast – 1:02.90

200 Breast – 2:16.00
100 Fly – 55.00
200 Fly – 2:01.00
200 IM – 2:02.80
400 IM – 4:26.50

NCAA Division III – Top 16 Average Times (2025 SCY)

Men

50 Free – 20.40
100 Free – 44.90
200 Free – 1:39.30
500 Free – 4:30.00
1000 Free – 9:28.00
1650 Free – 15:50.00
100 Back – 49.40
200 Back – 1:48.80
100 Breast – 56.10
200 Breast – 2:02.90
100 Fly – 48.40
200 Fly – 1:49.90
200 IM – 1:50.70
400 IM – 3:58.80

Women

50 Free – 23.60
100 Free – 51.20
200 Free – 1:51.60
500 Free – 5:01.00
1000 Free – 10:20.00
1650 Free – 17:22.00
100 Back – 56.20
200 Back – 2:01.90
100 Breast – 1:03.70
200 Breast – 2:17.90
100 Fly – 55.60
200 Fly – 2:02.40
200 IM – 2:04.00
400 IM – 4:28.90

Notes on 2026 Championship Event Changes:

1650 Free moved to Day 1: Starting with the 2026 championships, the 1650-yard freestyle is contested on the first day of competition. Distance swimmers should factor this into their event planning and recovery scheduling when evaluating programs and championship preparation.

50-yard stroke events: 50-yard backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly are now officially sanctioned for all NCAA championship meets, aligning with USA Swimming and World Aquatics. These events are expected to become part of the championship program in 2027, in line with their inclusion in the 2028 Olympic program. Benchmark times for these events are not yet established at the NCAA level – watch for them to be added as 2026–27 championship data becomes available. Sprint and stroke swimmers currently in high school should note that by the time they reach college, the event landscape at championships may include these additional 50s.

Step 3: Research School Options by Division

Division I Roster & Scholarship Framework (House Settlement)

For Division I schools operating under the House v. NCAA antitrust settlement, swimming & diving rosters are capped at around 30 rostered athletes per team beginning in the 2025–26 cycle.

Under this roster-based model, traditional equivalency caps (like 9.9 scholarships for men and 14 for women) are being replaced; any rostered athlete may receive athletic aid depending on the school's budget.

Schools that do not fully operate under the settlement retain more traditional roster flexibility but cannot rely on the old financial-aid caps in the same way; athletic departments decide how much aid to fund.

Important Clarification

There is no official SEC-only roster exception published that sets different numeric caps (such as 22 for men) specifically for SEC swimming.

Scholarships

Division I (House framework schools):

Teams operate under roster limits (around 30 swimmers) rather than old equivalency scholarship caps. Within that roster, coaches can distribute athletic scholarships to any number of athletes, in any fraction, subject to the school's budget.

Division II:

Swimming remains an equivalency sport with approximately 8.1 scholarships for men and 8.1 for women, which coaches divide across the roster as partial scholarships.

Coaches still balance team needs vs. budget and use a mix of full, partial, and walk-on offers. Title IX continues to influence how men's and women's funding is allocated.

NCAA Division I

Scholarships: Men – 9.9 / Women – 14 (historic equivalency caps; many programs are now transitioning to roster-based limits under the House settlement, but these numbers are still a useful reference point for the “value” of a fully funded program).

Team Size: Around 25–30 athletes.

Commitment: Highest level of competition, often year-round training.

Expectations: Olympic Trial cuts, NCAA Top-24 times, national-level times; multi-event depth preferred. For championship qualification, the 2026 model requires winning your conference event and achieving a national qualifying time (“Win-and-In”) – the old A/B standard system has been replaced.

Examples: Stanford, Texas, Florida, NC State.

NCAA Division II

Scholarships: Men – 8.1 / Women – 8.1 (equivalency).

Team Size: Around 20–25 athletes.

Commitment: Still rigorous; often fewer meets than D1.

Expectations: Strong regional or state-level swimmers; top D2 can overlap mid-major D1 times.

Examples: Drury, Queens (NC), Colorado Mesa.

NCAA Division III

Scholarships: No athletic scholarships (aid is academic and/or need-based only).

Team Size: 20–35 athletes.

Focus: Academic + athletic balance.

Great for: High-GPA students who still want competitive swimming and strong campus communities.

Examples: Kenyon, Emory, Williams.

Club & NAIA Programs

Club (College Club Swimming / CCS):

No official NCAA status, but can be very competitive (e.g., Michigan, UVA).

NAIA:

Similar to D2 in competitiveness; athletic scholarships available, with no NCAA recruiting calendar restrictions.

Team Size: Varies, often 15–25.

Great for: Swimmers looking for more flexibility in training commitment and academic focus.

Step 4: Build a Recruitment Timeline (Junior & Senior Year Focus)

Freshman–Sophomore Years:

Track best times, aim for Sectionals/Juniors.

Keep GPA strong; take solid college-prep classes.

Summer before Junior Year:

Start contacting coaches (email + recruiting questionnaires).

Get highlight videos together (underwater + above water).

After June 15 following sophomore year, Division I coaches can begin two-way contact with you.

Junior Year:

Attend college meets and campus visits (unofficial and, when invited, official).

Plan Division I official visits beginning August 1 before junior year; Division II official visits may begin after June 15 before junior year (confirm with each program).

Train for peak times at Winter Champs & Spring Nationals.

Senior Year:

Finalize NLI decision (Nov–April).

Apply to schools (October–January).

Notify coaches of academic acceptance and keep them updated on performance improvements.

Step 5: Maximize Exposure and Communication

Email Strategy:

Subject: “[Your Name] – Class of 20XX – [Event] – [Best Time]”.

Include: GPA, intended major, swim resume, best times, key meet results, and video links.

Use Social Media:

Keep Instagram/TikTok clean & athlete-focused.

Tag team pages & post training highlights, race clips, and achievements.

Compete at Major Meets:

Sectionals, Futures, Juniors, NCSA, ISCA, Winter Nationals.

Recruiting Platforms:

NCSA, Swimcloud, CollegeSwimming.com (Swimcloud) to track rankings, team times, and historical results.

Step 6: Key Tools & Resources

Swimcloud: Track recruit rankings and team times.

USA Swimming Scholastic All-American List.

College Team Websites: Check rosters, time standards, and coach bios.

NCAA Eligibility Center: Register early for compliance if pursuing D1 or D2.

NEW STEP: Understanding NIL in NCAA Swimming (Name, Image, Likeness)

What Is NIL?

NIL allows student-athletes to earn money through:

Social media sponsorships

Swim camps and clinics

Autograph signings

Brand ambassador deals

YouTube, TikTok monetization

Sponsored appearances and endorsements

Applies to all NCAA divisions, including D3.

NIL income is separate from scholarships - you can earn both.

How NIL Impacts Swimmers

Unlike football or basketball, swimming doesn't often draw huge media coverage.

However, swimmers with strong social media followings, Olympic Trials cuts, or unique personalities are very marketable.

Example: NCAA champions and national-team swimmers have landed brand deals with Speedo, Arena, TYR, and supplement companies.

NIL Deal Types for Swimmers

Social Media Sponsorships – Instagram posts for swimwear or recovery brands – Most common for swimmers with larger followings.

Swim Clinics – Hosting local swim lessons or summer clinics – Allowed if marketed using the athlete's name/brand.

Apparel Endorsements – Arena, Speedo, TYR, Jolyn, etc. – Often post-graduate historically, but college-legal now under NIL rules.

YouTube/TikTok Revenue – Monetized technique tips, vlogs – Must report income per school policy.

NFTs, Cameos, Autographs – Personalized videos or memorabilia – Less common, but legal.

Compliance Tips

You must report NIL activity to your school's compliance office.

NIL contracts must not include pay-for-play or recruiting inducements (i.e., can't be promised as a condition of committing).

Many schools offer NIL guidance programs - ask the coach early on about theirs.

Some states have NIL laws that may impose stricter or looser rules; always check local regulations.

NIL Tools & Resources

INFLCR and Opendorse: Platforms used by many schools to manage NIL deals and disclosures.

Swimfluencer: A niche platform helping swimmers grow digital presence.

Your Personal Website or Linktree: Great for showcasing your swim resume, media, and business inquiries.

NIL in the Recruiting Process: Best Practices

Don't lead with NIL in initial conversations - it's about performance and character first.

Once serious interest is shown, ask:

“Does your school support NIL through a platform or education?”

“Have any of your swimmers had successful NIL deals?”

Showcase your digital presence and branding maturity subtly (e.g., link in email signature or on your swim resume).

NIL Pro Tip:

Even swimmers with fewer than 5,000 followers can earn deals if they are:

Consistent, professional, and positive online.
Posting high-quality swim content or advice.
Active in their community (great for local sponsorships!).

NCAA Eligibility Rules – Proposed Changes (Not Yet Final)

The NCAA Division I Cabinet is reviewing a significant proposal to restructure how eligibility works. These changes are not yet finalized – always confirm current status with college coaches and the NCAA Eligibility Center – but the direction is clear and families should factor it into their planning now.

The proposal: Five full years of eligibility, starting from the athlete’s 19th birthday or high school graduation – whichever comes first. Under current rules, athletes have a five-year clock to complete four seasons of competition, with the option to extend through redshirts or waiver requests.

Redshirts and waivers largely eliminated: Exceptions would only be permitted in a narrow set of circumstances – maternity leave, military service, or religious missions. The NCAA received approximately 1,450 waiver requests for extended eligibility in one recent year; the new rules would close that path for almost all athletes.

Timeline: Implementation could come as early as fall 2026 and would be phased in gradually, with protection intended for athletes already competing under the current rules. The exact timeline remains unclear.

What this means for swimmers and families: Gap years between high school and college, medical redshirts, and repeated transfer portal use as eligibility management strategies may all become significantly harder or impossible if this passes. Any family considering a gap year, a prep school year, or a potential transfer should ask college coaches directly about how their program is preparing for these changes before making decisions.

Final Reminder:

Recruitment isn’t just about the fastest swimmer - it’s about the most prepared one. It’s about how you communicate, how you perform at key moments, and how much you want it. Whether you’re aiming for a D1 podium finish or a D3 team captainship, your hard work, academics, and character open doors. NIL can be the cherry on top - but your swimming and self-discipline are the foundation.