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Tips for High School Juniors

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By November, most college coaches and recruiters have closed the books on the incoming class for next season. High school seniors have completed their visits, selected their dream programs and can now turn their thoughts to the rest of the year.

For high school juniors, it's just the beginning.

After two years of high school and junior rowing, now is the time for athletes who want to continue their careers in college to get serious. But the recruiting game can be somewhat of a mystery. The questions of how to select the right school, how to get noticed and how to survive the most critical of high school years can be daunting, or worse.

After coaching high school and junior rowing for almost 10 years, the best advice I can give is, don't wait for the coaches to come looking for you. Pick the schools and programs you are interested in and market yourself.

Decide, as best you can, what you want to study, what kind of program you want to row in and then start making a list.

Get your name and face out there. Send e-mails with your résumé to coaches and recruiters. Participate in national team testing, submit your erg scores, go to identification camps and target on and off-the-water events where colleges send recruiters to watch.

Some coaches don't use online recruiting sites. Others do. Sign up and get a profile going. Then, get online and start doing some research. Read the NCAA rules governing recruiting and understand what a coach can and cannot do. For instance, a coach cannot call or return a call to a recruit until July of the athlete's senior year. A coach can answer e-mails and text messages, and they can talk to you, if you call and they answer.

A coach can talk to you on the grounds of the university in a non-official visit status and many schools now set up "Junior Days," so they can get prospects on campus and talk with them. But they cannot talk to a recruit off the campus grounds, and especially not at a competition.

These are all aspects of the recruiting process that are critical to understanding how to survive what can be an extremely high-pressure year.

To help get this process started, I've turned to Veronika Platzer, women's rowing head coach at the University of Massachusetts – Lowell, and one of the top college recruiters in the country when she was an

assistant at both the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan.

Platzer provides a solid, inside look at what a coach looks for. Most of what she addresses is aimed at the top-level prospects and programs, but there are levels of rowing that fit many profiles of student athletes – from recreational club programs, right up through Division I and Division II teams.

She touches on good information for athletes trying to find the right school at the right level and how to reach the coaches at those programs. One critical piece of advice I offer before getting to Platzer is, once you have selected a program and visited the school and decided it's where you want to row, ask yourself this question: If I wake up one day and I can no longer row, or want to row, will I be happy at this school?

And now, Platzer.

USRowing: What is the most critical component of the recruiting process?

Platzer: The name of the game in recruiting for college rowing is matching up. The "best program" is the one that meets most or all of your needs as a student athlete. In a similar vein, college coaches are not just looking for the best rowers, but rather prospects that fit academically and athletically.

You have to include numerous factors, some of which are not so obvious. For example, is parental support or family support something that is really important to you? Look at the racing schedule. If you go to a school where the program is primarily in New England and you're from California and family support is really important to you, it might not be an ideal fit.

Find out what the philosophy of the program is, what its approach is. For example, if you're a coxswain, do novice coxswains get to compete at the varsity level? What are the requirements for coxswains? Do they train with the team? What happens during winter training?

As a rower, do novices row strictly on the novice squad? Find out what the general tendencies of that program are, and then work backwards. Look at its championship racing season roster. How many of those kids were freshmen? How many of them were upper classman?

USRowing: Would you advise an athlete to make a list?

Platzer: Yes. Start with a list that includes “long shots” and “sure bets.” By the end of your junior year, you need to whittle that down to five programs that you are very, very serious about, and then eventually trim that down to two or three.

USRowing: What are coaches looking for?

Platzer: Most of recruiting starts with a formula that is objective, but also limited – height, weight and erg score. These are certainly important because they are a fairly objective measure that gives a coach a sense of what your profile looks like. But they hardly tell the entire story.

Very few programs want an absolute score. What they want is a relative erg score, meaning relative rate of progress. For example, a rower seeking a scholarship will post an erg score of 7:40, which is a bit off from the scholarship standard. However, if the athlete says, “Well, I’ve been rowing for a year, and three months ago I did a 2k and I did an 8:15, and then the second time I did a 7:55, and now this time I pulled a 7:40.” That shows a dramatically different picture.

Conversely, if coaches get a scholarship prospect that has been rowing for four years and she pulled a 7:35, you kind of have to look at that too and ask the question, is that all there is? Really good coaches are always looking for rate of improvement and asking the same question to all prospects – can you get better? Can you do more?

USRowing: So what kind of erg score does an athlete need?

Platzer: Again, each program sets its own standards for recruiting and scholarship opportunities. From my experience at Virginia and Michigan, the full scholarship standard was similar to the U.S. Junior National Team selection criteria, which is 7:20 or faster. However, we also looked at skill level (how well they row, via video or scouting at regattas), profile of the program, competitive athletic background and small boat experience.

USRowing: If you can’t pull that score, are you closed off?

Platzer: Not necessarily. Think of the erg score as the free throw in pick-up basketball. In pick-up basketball, teams are commonly selected by the first five that make the free throw. If your ideal program places an emphasis on ergometer scores, get on the erg and pull hard!

One hard fact about the ergometer is that it is truly unbiased information. The machines are standardized and fairly accessible, they require a modest skill set and they expose factors that are often disguised or glossed over, such as fitness levels, raw power, drive and determination to improve and/or meet the standards.

The “red flag” for coaches is when prospects have “excuses” for inadequate erg scores – “I’m not good on the erg, but I’m great on the water,” or “We don’t erg that much.”

The ergo standard set by schools is also useful for prospects. They offer a glimpse of the standards required to make the team and if those standards feel too high or impossible, it may well be that that particular program is not a good match.

USRowing: How does an athlete get noticed?

Platzer: First and most importantly, eliminate the middleman – parents, scouting services, etc. Coaches want to hear from you directly, as you are the prospect. Keep the process simple and uncluttered. Most programs’ websites have recruiting forms that will guide you in the information that they are seeking. Fill that out, and it will give you a really good indicator of what those coaches are looking for. Follow up with an e-mail and let them know what you would like from them. Seek an opportunity to visit the program. This should be done in your junior year.

USRowing: Should an athlete e-mail a coach directly?

Platzer: Yes, but do your homework first. Learn about the program, the staff, and why you are interested in that particular program. It’s all about making a connection.

Additionally, be clear in what you are seeking from [a coach] in the recruiting process. If you are seeking an official visit, state that. But also state why that is important in your decision-making process. Conversely, understand what they are seeking from

you and provide that in a timely fashion.

Send them updates. Let them know what races you are competing in and what the results are. And be persistent. Don't get discouraged if you don't get an immediate answer or reply. Coaches are busy. If you don't get an answer right away and that's the school you want to go to, keep calling.

USRowing: Should an athlete visit a school before being asked?

Platzer: Absolutely and truthfully, that is a critical key to being recruited, as it demonstrates a mutual commitment from both parties. An unofficial visit is an excellent and clear message to the coach that you are serious about their program and the institution. More and more programs now are going to unofficial visits for junior prospects and it is very successful.

It's on [the athlete's] own dime, obviously, but it's a really good way for you to add or eliminate programs from your list. You have to visit the institution and, if possible, you have to sit in on classes – on freshman classes as well as upper level classes. Go to the student union. Talk to students, not just student athletes. Ask them what their major is and what made them to decide to come to the school.

USRowing: What about official visits? The NCAA allows for five.

Platzer: One of the biggest mistakes I see high school seniors make is they take all five official visits. There are two major problems with that. Number one, it's exhausting and it's time consuming. And number two, it really interferes with your high school senior year. You're going to miss a lot of classes, and you're going to miss a lot of days of practices.

Official visits should not be used as an initial introduction, but rather the final step in the decision making process. Again, do an unofficial [visit] your junior year to gather information, and an official [visit] only if you are truly prepared to make a final decision.

USRowing: When should the athlete make a decision?

Platzer: Essentially, when you have processed all the information and in keeping with the timetable that the prospective coach has provided. Upfront communica-

tion is the key. Before the official visit, be clear on your decision-making process, as well as that of the coach.

The greatest challenge is that some coaches do require a fairly immediate decision (post official visit), as there are more candidates than scholarships. Trust the fact that no coach is trying to play a game or force a premature decision, but all coaches are keen to wrap up recruiting and focus on the current squad and racing season.

USRowing: How does an athlete know if a coach is right for them?

Platzer: Gut feel. How do you feel when you talk to the coach or when you have completed a visit? Trust your instincts, but also do your homework and learn as much as you can about that coach and their staff.

USRowing: What if the athlete doesn't get a scholarship at the school they want to attend?

Platzer: Try out as a walk-on. All programs have open tryouts. But don't even think about showing up out of shape. If you want to be recruited, you have to be prepared to meet the standards and expectations and eliminate excuses and compromises.