

# So you say you want to row in college. . .

By George D. Kirschbaum, Jr.

“I want to row in college, coach, and I hope to get a scholarship.” As a coach I have heard this numerous times over the years. Maybe you've heard it as well or said it yourself. Or have you heard this exchange: “What are you looking for in a school?” “Uh, I don't know.” This is not an auspicious way to start your college experience. Before you jump into the big college hunt there are a few things you need to understand about looking at colleges, college rowing, being recruited and scholarships. It isn't as simple as finding a school, talking to a coach, and having them hand you money for four years of collegiate bliss. There are some honest assessments that have to be made before the process can begin. We're talking a heart to heart with yourself first and foremost, with your parents, and then with the coaches you speak with.

The first thing I will say is that you need to look for a school in terms of your education and overall happiness. The college or university that you choose will be your home for your next four years. Four years of growth, challenges, new experiences, new people, and maybe rowing as well. Wherever you may choose you need to know that you will be happy there with out the rowing element. Even in the best of circumstances something like an injury can derail your rowing career and then you need to be in a place where you can still succeed. Know your criteria (location, school size, cost, curriculum, academic support etc). Research schools via the internet (well before you speak with a coach) and visit possible schools early, before the pressure of applications come due. Do you like the campus scenery, the dorms, class sizes, professors, and student atmosphere? Lastly, keep in mind that no matter how certain a person may be on what their major and career will be, there is a good chance you will modify your original goal or change your mind by the end of your four years of school. Be open minded and flexible as you look at potential schools.

Now we can start to add the rowing element. Where do your school choices fit into the collegiate rowing spectrum: Division I, II, III, or club? These divisions represent the categories that a school, or program, is placed into by the NCAA for purpose of competition with other schools. The divisions classify a school or program by size, budgets, availability of scholarships for athletes and much more. Knowing this is going to help you narrow down your choices more and help you better understand what a program can offer you. The next question is will you be successful at the given program? What I mean by this is that all programs in the same division are not the same. They can differ in size, focus, goals, and intensity level. People who are familiar with youth basketball or football know pretty early on where they will be most successful at the collegiate level. In collegiate football there is a difference between DI schools USC, UVA, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Yet they are all DI. The same can be said in rowing where schools like Wisconsin and the University of Tulsa are both DI but are much different programs. You might have a better chance for success within one program than another. This is the time to take a hard look at what you want, are willing to give, and what schools have to offer you. We'll explore the differences between divisions as well as other things to consider as we move along.

Next, being a collegiate athlete involves a large commitment of time, energy, and personal desire the likes of which many high school athletes have not experienced. Even high school rowers are often unprepared for the increased focus of collegiate rowing. There is an adjustment period and then you are into it full steam. Typically collegiate rowers in a NCAA Division I (DI) program can spend four hours a day training which can include water time, land workouts, weights, travel time, etc. This is six days a week from September until May. All this is mixed in with classes, clubs, part time jobs, and other functions. This doesn't include time spent on trips to the training room to deal with injuries. A collegiate schedule for a rower at a DI program might look something like this:

5am-8am: prep, travel time, and water practice  
8am-8:45: breakfast, shower, get ready for classes  
9am-12pm: classes  
12pm-1pm: lunch  
1pm-2pm: class  
2pm-3pm: study  
3:30pm-5:30pm: practice (erg or weights)  
5:30pm-7pm: dinner, shower, other  
7pm-9:30: study and social time  
10pm: bed (if you are lucky)

Again, this is just a sample. Your day can vary depending on your class schedule and the time of year. Mixed into this schedule are several regattas per season, often consuming most of a given weekend depending on

how far you must travel. This is the fun part for sure! Programs often times take a trip during winter vacation to some warmer climate so that everyone can stay fresh after having spent a lot of time on the ergs. Many programs also take trips during spring break as well to escape the ergs and find some early competition. Did I mention the ergs? No matter what program you are part of you will become intimate friends with the erg from November until the end of February (at best- sorry all you northern and eastern schools!). Weights and ergs are the two main staples for winter training along with running, stadium runs, rowing tanks, plyometrics, core strengthening and all manner of other training ideas.

When we talk about a time commitment we are not only talking about rowing, school, and personal time but family time as well. With the demands of the collegiate athlete vacations during the school year are shortened and that means less time at home with family and local friends. You must be prepared to potentially miss birthdays, anniversaries, graduations (potentially even your own, your senior year, because of end of the season regattas), and just simple down time away from the college environment. Most student-athletes manage to work this out but it is another element to consider as you decide whether college athletics of any sort is right for you.

So, you've decided you are ready for the commitment needed to be a collegiate rower. The very next thing you need to do is go to the NCAA (.org) web site and get the information for potential collegiate athletes and start the clearinghouse process. (Look in the "Rules & Eligibility" section of the site) The NCAA is the grand governor of collegiate athletics. Women's rowing programs are all bound by the rules set forth and men's programs are often expected to follow the same rules by their regional governing bodies and the school itself. Your eligibility to compete can be greatly effected by the NCAA so you want to make sure that you understand the rules for prospective athletes and work with your school counselor to complete the clearinghouse process as early as possible during your senior year of high school.

Now you need to decide whether a scholarship is an option or not. Any student can be a "walk-on" which means you come to the team and try out. You are not part of the formal recruiting process and you do not receive any level of scholarship. Most teams are a mixture of walk-ons and recruits (the rowers who have been actively pursued by a prospective program, to row at the school). If you perform very well as a walk-on a coach may offer some amount of scholarship down the line.

But here we are talking about scholarships so we are talking about recruits. Programs at all levels recruit specific athletes, but only DI schools, and to a lesser extent DII schools, can offer scholarships to those students. I will be upfront and tell you that scholarships for men are much fewer and farther between than for women. There are also no scholarships available for athletics at the Ivy League schools or military academies (however they are considered DI squads in all other regards). Does that mean that DIII schools and clubs are lesser programs? By all means no. There are some very competitive programs and athletes at DIII schools and on club teams as well. The programs are often smaller in size but just as high in intensity. What they must add, in many cases, is fund raising to their list of things to do.

Now comes the cold hard fact about scholarships: you must be able to perform to receive one. Or at least have great potential for doing so. You must also continue to perform throughout your collegiate career to maintain your scholarship. For women an athlete must be at a maximum of 7:45 for 2000 meters (sub 8 for lightweights) to even pique a coach's interest at a DI school. Many schools will talk to you happily with that score but won't offer money or show real interest until you are at 7:30 or below. The farther below 7:30 the more interest there will be. For men, merely subtract 1 minute from those scores and you have your figures. Remember that we are talking in terms of being offered scholarships.

Understand that those are not hard and fast rules, but pretty strong guidelines. Different coaches and different programs will be looking for different things. Yet the simple truth is that competition for scholarships is huge. Coaches have a limited number of scholarships to offer and they are looking for the best return on their money. Sound like a business? In some ways it is. Yearly budgets for programs are pretty fixed and even the best-funded programs need to squeeze every cent out to meet their program goals. Coaches want to build solid programs where student-athletes grow as individuals and the team performs at the highest level possible, but they are always bound by the bottom line: success on the water. Furthermore, let there be no mistake: accepting a scholarship is a commitment. It is like accepting a job in the "real world." Someone is putting their trust in you and you are accepting not only that trust to give it your best, but to pursue that best with honesty.

Now, how do you attract interest from a coach? Having those solid scores are important (which means you need to train, which is a lot of commitment, and requires some solid thought on your part. See, we are back to that heart to heart we had earlier). The next most important thing is that coaches see those scores! Coaches are not clairvoyant. You must market yourself so they know you are out there, interested, and serious. How do you do that? These are some important basics:

1. Submit your scores to USRowing when they hold Junior National Team Testing. College coaches look at those.
2. Ask your coach to send your contact information and scores to the coaches of the schools you are interested in.

- If they have your info, they can contact you (starting the summer before your senior year of high school only).
3. If you get mail from a school or coach, always fill it out and send it back! Even if you do not think you are interested in a school to begin with, you may find out too late that it could have been a good match. You want your options to be open, not closed.
  4. Be part of a winning program. Easier said than done, but coaches look to solid programs for recruiting. You can help promote your school by being a leader and making it better.
  5. Have some good video of you rowing (close up, not you as a speck in the middle of a boat way out there during a race) on hand to show or send to coaches.

So now you have a coach's interest and you are talking. The school is what you want and the program seems like a good fit. Now the coach hands you a scholarship and away you go. Not quite. There are different levels to scholarships depending on what the coach thinks your current potential is and what funds they have available. A scholarship can be anything from money for books alone to a full academic ride! A pretty wide range, but any money that you are offered is a blessing. Coaches do not hand out money randomly and any support you get takes a piece of the burden off you and your family. Full scholarships are pretty rare for freshmen. Now, scholarships can increase and (more rarely) decrease over the span of your college career. If you stay with the team and continue to develop and contribute a coach is likely to offer more funding as it is available. Some programs even offer any and all 4<sup>th</sup> year rowers at least a little something in thanks for all their hard work. It depends on the school, and this is something you need to ask coaches about when you interview with them.

Through all this you might be wondering "But what if I am a light weight rower or coxswain?" There are opportunities available for you as well but the variables also increase. Let me try to explain. With coxswains it is really how much a coach values a good coxswain. Some do, some don't. In either case, what you have to be is very good. Your presence needs to make a boat faster. You need to be a good leader, learner, and motivator; positive, and ready to do what it takes to help make your new team faster. The only way a college coach has for evaluating whether to recruit you is audiotapes and the recommendations from coaches. Your resume or record as a coxswain is also something a coach will look at. Furthermore a coach will learn a lot from talking with you so be prepared for giving and receiving a solid interview. Really the same can be said for rowers as well: be prepared!

For lightweights your concern will be whether the schools you are interested in even support lightweight squads. More men's teams support full lightweight squads than do women. At this time the NCAA does not recognize lightweight women's rowing as a separate entity and does not have events for them at the NCAA Championships each spring. That means that a program has to have a special interest in supporting lightweight squads. Princeton, Radcliffe, Wisconsin, and Georgetown Universities all support full women's squads. Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Georgetown, Penn, and Delaware all offer men's squads, among others. (The national championship for all top lightweight crews is held at the IRA regatta at the end of May.) That's not to say that other schools don't provide opportunities for lightweights, it just means you have to ask when talking to coaches.

During our discussion club teams have not come up very much. Club teams are slowly dwindling on the women's side as Title IX has helped more women's teams go varsity providing them money and support. Now a days many men's teams (except at well established programs) are often club squads. Club teams are also ones that are just getting started where rowing has never had an interest before. At clubs everything is very hands on with students organizing, coaching, and participating at the same time. It is a fairly democratic situation and one that demands a special level of dedication to keep a program going strongly. Fund raising is a huge component of the club rowing dynamic. Coed club teams are often still very competitive, and have a high level of camaraderie and fun as primary goals.

One thing that coaches for all programs can do is help a student get into a given school. This is something coaches offer when scholarships are not available, or they want to see how a student may develop first. If a student's GPA, or SAT scores are borderline for a given school, but they have potential as a student-athlete then a coach can put in a good word in the admissions department. This does not mean that coaches can have all the rules bent to get you in! You must have the academic potential to do well at the school. They can, however, help point an admissions person towards a promising student who they feel can offer the school and rowing program a lot if given the chance. Believe me, this is like a scholarship: it is a favor from a coach that you do not want to take lightly.

So, as you can see, there is more to the process than one might have first thought. The viewpoint I have presented is very linear and reality will tell you that as you go through the process some things will change. You will adjust your criteria a bit and you will come to new realizations about what you want from school. So many people are unaware of the decisions needed as part of the college selection process that they get lost in their focus on one thing: their "love of rowing." The word "scholarship" can cloud a person's judgment as well since there is the misunderstanding that money is flowing like water, and that just isn't the case. At any level, collegiate rowing will be a much different experience than what most former high school rowers are used to. Rowing can provide great opportunities in college, and a lot of incredible life experiences as well. You will learn an amazing amount

about yourself and what you are capable of. Couple all the possibilities of the collegiate experience and the collegiate rowing experience together, and you can have an incredible four years. It is just important to be prepared for the realities of collegiate rowing before committing to them with abandon. Maybe the best piece of advice that I can give is don't stress over everything. In the end, things always work out for the best. Make the most of your four years of college and enjoy every moment. I hope rowing is part of it. Good luck!

#### Checklist for the student-athlete

1. Review college selection criteria with family (make a list)
2. Compile personal contact and academic (GPA, SAT scores, class rank) information
3. Compile rowing resume (erg scores, notable placings at regattas, audio/video examples)
4. Compile list of questions you have about college programs that you have for coaches (about the team, expectations if you row, scholarship possibilities- including future increases, etc)
5. Return information request cards from schools and rowing programs
6. Submit USRowing Junior National Team Testing information
7. Review NCAA student-athlete information and complete clearinghouse
8. Have your coach or you yourself send your personal contact, academic, and rowing information to coaches of the schools you are interested in.
9. Visit college choices early!