

# The Impact of International Athletes at the SEC Swimming & Diving Championships

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The phenomenon of recruiting international athletes to improve team performance in collegiate athletics has become common among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) members. The number of international athletes competing in the NCAA grew from 13,403 in 2012 to 24,206 in 2022 which is an 80% increase. The number of Division I participants rose from 8,087 in 2012 to 13,556 in 2022 for a 68% increase. There are a variety of reasons coaches recruit international athletes. International athletes often have experience at higher levels of competition, and coaches also assert that they have more disciplined work habits than domestic athletes. Technology has also made recruiting international athletes less difficult as coaches can interact with athletes via video conferencing and watch competitions remotely. Athletes can also contract recruiting services that assist them in finding scholarship opportunities in the United States. A primary reason international athletes come to the United States is the opportunity to earn a college degree while on athletic scholarship. International athletes have also noted the quality of coaching as well as the quality of facilities as reason to compete in college athletics in the United States. The services (e.g., academic, medical, nutrition, training) provided to collegiate athletes are often much better than what can be obtained in their home country as well. International athletes often have a desire for independence and simply want to live in the United States. The combination of coaches wanting international athletes and international athletes wanting to compete in college athletics has led to the increase in international athletes in collegiate athletics. Tennis in particular has become a sport that prominently features international athletes. International athletes comprised 42% of Division I men's tennis teams and comprised 39% of Division I women's teams in 2022. Swimming and diving has also experienced a steady increase in international athlete participation. Participants in men's swimming and diving across all three NCAA divisions increased from 385 in 2012 to 628 in 2022. The number in Division I specifically increased from 254 in 2012 to 348 in 2022. The same is true for women's swimming and diving. Participants in women's swimming and diving across all three NCAA divisions increased from 417 in 2012 to 755 in 2022. The number in Division I specifically increased from 318 in 2012 to 501 in 2022. There has been research examining the experience of international athletes, motives of international athletes to attending college in the United States, and why coaches recruit international athletes. More recently, the issue of international athletes being able to monetize their Name, Images, and Likeness (NIL) has appeared in the literature. One topic that has not been specially examined is the impact of international athletes on actual competition. There are certainly instances where an international athlete has made an impact in team sports or has excelled in individual sports but limited examination of the overall impact. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the prevalence and impact of international athletes on the Southeastern Conference (SEC) Swimming & Diving Championships. The championships held from 2019 to 2023 were used for the study. The results from championship events were examined to determine the percentage of international athletes competing, and the percentage of points scored by them during each competition. The percentage of women participants ranged from 11.36% in 2021 to 16.29% in 2019. On the men's side, the percentage ranged from 15.91% in 2020 to 25.91% in 2023. The percentages for scoring were higher for both women and men with the highest percentage for both occurring in 2023. The points scored by female international athletes comprised 26.02% of all points scored, and the points scored by male international athletes comprised 36.16% of all points scored in the 2023 championships. A closer examination of scoring by the men's team revealed that South Carolina had the highest percentage of its points scored by international athletes as 60.19% of its points during the five-year period were scored by international athletes. South Carolina had 73.86% of its points scored by international athletes in 2023, and Tennessee had 61.29% of its points scored by

international athletes in 2023. Eight of the 10 men's teams competing had 23% or more of their points scored by international athletes in 2023. Teams on the women's side also had high percentages of points scored by international athletes. LSU saw 52.28% of its points scored during the five-year period scored by international athletes with a high mark of 65.55% in 2023. Seven of the 12 women's teams competing had 25% or more of their points scored in 2023 by international athletes. International athletes are certainly impacting swimming and diving in the Southeastern Conference in terms of participation and success. However, this does come with areas of concern. There are also issues with the academic eligibility of international athletes, and the validity of their academic transcripts. There is also the concern that international athletes are taking away scholarships and competition opportunities for domestic athletes. International collegiate athletes are training in the United States, coached in the United States, and provided other resources by institutions in the United States to aid in their athletic development. Oftentimes, those athletes are competing against United States athletes in international competitions including the Olympics. The United States and the NCAA have developed an educational system offering opportunities to pursue a college degree while also continuing to compete in athletics at an elite level. Coaches are taking advantage of the talent provided by international athletes for competitive success, and international athletes are benefitting from the opportunities afforded to them through collegiate athletics in the United States.