



A few people have asked us if meets are mandatory...The short answer is no. Nothing at ASL is mandatory.

Now, for the long answer!

First year 10-under athletes will be mainly competing in our "In-House" meets in Aiken on Saturday mornings. In and out, no fuss. This is a great, easy, comfortable entry into the competition part of the sport.

Once your athlete is ready, from a training and mental aspect, we'll ask to get them into some other meets in the surrounding area, generally Charleston to Charlotte to Atlanta to Savannah, and anything in between. These meets will provide your athletes with some exposure to other teams we may not see, and racing some other fast swimmers, pushing them beyond what they could imagine just swimming locally, and seeing some other great venues like Georgia Tech to boot!

We try to race one or two meets per month. This keeps athletes sharp, and gives them and the coaches feedback from training, and allows us all to re-set some goals or fine tune any areas that need it.

Regular racing is VERY important to their development. I've had some athletes in the past (and some recently here at ASL) who were experts and hiding a bit in training, but then going to meets and exploding onto the scene. Meets are where the magic happens, and can catapult a kid's love for the sport into the stratosphere.

Some kids will have some nerves about racing, especially every time we 'level up' their meets or they 'age up'. This is entirely normal, and something we deal with at each and every 'level up' moment, all the way through college! But I've looked at the data several times over the years, in different LSCs, but it holds true every time- the 14-16 year olds standing on the podiums at Champs meets, or HS State meets, etc, are the ones that have built up the most experience in racing.

We use the bank account analogy for this. If you start making deposits in your 100y Butterfly account when you are 9, and keep making them... Maybe it's \$0.15 the first time, because you're nervous, but the next time it's \$0.40, and then by the time you're 10, you're depositing \$1.00 every time you race it, putting in fearless efforts every time. So by the time you're 16, and

a sophomore in HS, standing on the blocks at Georgia Tech in the state final...you've got a big old sum of money in the bank to put into the race. If you did it once at 9, three times at 10, and then four to five times a season from 11-15, you've got over \$30 in that account, as compared to someone who avoided it until they were 11, and then only did it once a year until they were 16, and they've got a measly \$5.40 in their account, and stand NO chance of beating you at that state meet**.

** It was me... I was the 16 year old with \$5.40 in my account, for the record. Not at GaTech, but I was on the blocks at Harvard, knees wobbling because I knew I didn't have the background to beat the kids I was competing against. I was truly TERRIBLE at butterfly as a younger swimmer, and my coaches allowed me to beg off of it except for one meet a year, our pentathlon, where I did it begrudgingly.

But then I hit puberty, got some shoulders/strength, and happened to read an article that had a phrase that just made everything click, and all of a sudden it was my second event at the HS State meet. But I couldn't race to my potential, because at 16, I still carried fear in that race. I got over it by the next year, but I still probably could have been quite a bit better in that race had I done it more as a young age grouper, and had a bigger account.

I've asked athletes, as a coach, to swim everything multiple times so that when they are 16, and they find themselves excelling in a new event/stroke, they have some capital in their accounts to build from, and what happened with me doesn't happen to them.

All that is to say- meets are GOOD! Meets are FUN! Meets are where it HAPPENS! And while they are not mandatory, they are crucial in your athlete's ability to progress in the sport, and within the team.

Race Regularly, and help/encourage your athletes to look at things with a broad scope- no times they put up as a 14-Under will stand. They will ALWAYS go faster, as they get older. So adding some time here or there, or doing new, scary events... none of it matters in the sense of 'final analysis'. In 6 months, they'll be an inch taller and much stronger and crush that time. Once they're on the other side of puberty, then it becomes about working super hard, and consistently, and priming their performance for specific competitions. But that comes at the Senior level.

And in 20 years of talking with college coaches about athletes, not a single one has ever asked me how fast a kid was when they were 14, or 12, or 10. So everything before about 16 is just a step forward or a learning opportunity.

Here's a quick, simple way of seeing the program from a competition standpoint. I've attached our development flow chart, which includes all the groups on ASL.

Development Swimming- "get the right tools". The focus here is to developing their strokes, this is a group for our 5-9 year old athletes in their first year or two in the sport. We want to get them to be able to swim a 100 IM legally. They'll learn some basic swim etiquette (lane/team

rules, etc), but essentially they come in their two-three days a week and go through some drills and skills to develop all four strokes, plus some dolphin kicking basics, giving them the tools they need to succeed later on. The goal at meets is to simply learn the flow, the patterns, and be comfortable stepping on the blocks and racing people.

Age Group Swimming- “digging the hole”. This is for our 11-under athletes, where we are furthering the skills/strokes and at meets we are working on getting IMX scores (a USA Swimming program to incentivize well rounded racing, but it’s also how they select their special camps- that will be it’s own post later), racing different events, and finding a pack of friends in their training groups. An accumulation of regular practices and racing, over time, and this hole will get deeper and wider.

Junior Swimming- “pouring the concrete”. This is where our 11-14 year old athletes begin learning some advanced skills, and begin to build an aerobic foundation for their later years. These athletes will be learning to train (tougher sets are introduced, and some specific paces and stroke counts will be required), and at meets they’ll be learning race strategies (this comes naturally to some, and is a learned skill for others), to give them some strategies and confidence to attack races in different ways later on.

Senior Swimming- “building the structure”. Once athletes are 14-over, we begin to focus on performance. If as Juniors they are ‘training to train’, as Seniors, they will be ‘training to compete’. At this point, we want them to be self-motivated, have their own goals, and the skills to see them through. The coaches will be there to support them, guide them, course-correct them if need be, but the structure they build here is entirely up to them.

The deeper and wider the hole, the more concrete poured, the bigger and wilder the structure can be. Our goal is to make sure that when they 14-overs, and start to decide what exactly they want to do with swimming, they can. If they want to build a 110 story skyscraper with fancy turrets and viewing decks, they have the option. If they decide that a nice, cozy 2 story vacation home is what they want to visit when not focusing on their primary passion, they have that option too.

Patience is also important here. You don’t want to build until you’ve finished pouring the concrete. You don’t want to pour until you’ve finished digging a big enough hole. You don’t want to start digging until you’ve gotten the proper tools.

My goal as a coach is to ensure that EVERY athlete has the tools and foundation to make this sport exciting and fun for them in their Senior Swimming career, and help them achieve their goals, whatever they may be, and continue to swim until they are breaking World Records in Masters Swimming at 99.