

# **Phases of Athlete Development in an Age Group Program**

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The Mecklenburg Aquatic Club program has been structured on the premise that there are four basic phases of athlete development in age group swimming. At each level of the program, we continually try to evaluate and adapt to the multitude of factors, both scientific and sociological, that impact the growth and development of young athletes. Experience has taught us that the perfect age group program is a moving target that changes as the population we serve changes and as we learn more and more about the development of young people.

Following is an outline description of the four phases of development and the basic premises that currently guide our thinking at each of these levels.

### **Phase I: Basic Skill Development – Ages 11 & Under**

This phase is the introductory level of competitive swimming. In order to begin in the novice levels of our program, swimmers must be able to swim a minimum of 25 yards freestyle and backstroke.

1. The focus is almost entirely on teaching fundamentals and developing basic motor learning skills, balance and coordination in the water.
2. We believe young athletes should begin swimming on a regular basis no later than age 9 or 10, ideally at age 7 or 8. How far they swim is not as important as the fact that they are in the water on a regular basis developing their feel for the water. We believe it is important that novice competitors swim at least 2 times per week for a minimum of 7-8 months per year.
3. It is vitally important to make swimming fun and enjoyable. We believe the most significant responsibility for novice coaches is teaching young people to love the water and to love the sport.
4. It is critical for novice coaches to emphasize correct fundamentals and to have the willingness to sacrifice speed for efficiency. This concept can sometimes work against a swimmer's short-term success at this age. At this level, we believe there is great merit in competition based on skill development.
5. The majority of yardage in the early years needs to be low intensity and technique-oriented. This is not necessarily as exciting or fun for swimmer or coach, as is swimming fast.
6. We believe that it is essential to teach, develop and promote all four strokes and all events. Age groupers should not be permitted to specialize in practice or in meets.
7. We place a very heavy emphasis on kicking. Coaches are required to make kicking a high percentage of the conditioning work done at the novice levels. Kickboards are the only training aids used at this level.

8. Swimmers are readily encouraged to participate in other activities and sports. We believe physical activity and the experience of other sports increases the number of learned movement patterns and general athletic development of the child. Sports such as gymnastics and soccer have excellent carryover value. The better the athlete, the better the swimmer.
9. At every level, but particularly the novice level, we take a long-term approach to swimmer development. Once swimmers begin in our program, we want to give them the preparation and tools they will need to make swimming a lifetime activity.

### **Phase II: Basic Training Development – Ages 11 to 14**

At the age of 11-14, swimmers move into the second level of our age group program. Swimmers who move into these practice levels are able to swim all four strokes and maintain good technique on low intensity interval work. This phase is a transitional level where the emphasis begins to change from primarily teaching to a relatively equal balance of technique work and physiological development.

1. The focus is still centered on teaching fundamentals and developing a strong foundation in all strokes.
2. The number of practices per week offered at each team level increases to 5-6 and swimmers are encouraged to attend as many practices as possible but no fewer than 4 per week.
3. Low intensity aerobic conditioning is emphasized and athletes begin to do more mileage on a weekly basis. It is important that the fundamental skills developed in Phase I not be compromised as swimmers begin to swim farther in practice.
4. At this level, the training program focuses on preparation for the 200 IM and 200/500 freestyle events. Even if swimmers show promise in specific events, we do very little specialty work. We have developed a program that we call "IM Tuff" to promote interest and participation in the IM and eventually the distance freestyle events.
5. A high priority continues to be placed on kicking all four strokes. Beginning at this level, coaches are encouraged to do 40-50% of their kick training without boards.
6. Beginning with this phase a high priority is also placed on maximizing the number of training weeks per year. Peak performance efforts are put off until the latest point possible in each season. Likewise, the importance of swimming through the year is emphasized. This training philosophy carries through to the higher levels of the program.
7. Swimmers are still encouraged to participate in other activities and sports. However, we are hopeful that participation in other activities allows them to meet the minimum attendance expectations for swimming. In a perfect program, the swim team would provide opportunities for crossover training and exposure to other sports.
8. Stretching and limited calisthenics are incorporated into the overall program during this phase.
9. Although the overall level of training expected of swimmers increases during this phase of the program, coaches are charged with being creative and making the experience fun and enjoyable. Great age group coaches have the special ability to make hard work be fun.

### **Phase III: Progressive Training – Ages 13 to 18**

Most team members move into the senior levels of our program at age 13. The quantity and intensity of the training program increases. For the first time, the program structure calls for more time to be devoted to physiological conditioning than to teaching fundamentals.

1. In this phase, the mileage completed each week begins to be an important consideration. We want to take advantage of the pre-pubescent window of opportunity to more fully develop aerobic capacity.
2. Although low intensity aerobic conditioning is still the highest priority, we have athletes begin to do more anaerobic threshold work. As swimmers swim faster in practice a greater percentage of the time, it is critical that technique is not compromised.
3. At this level, the training program focuses on preparation for the 400 IM and middle distance freestyle events. Even if swimmers show promise in specific events, we do very little specialty work. The IM Tuff program is a prominent focus within these practice groups.
4. We believe that to be as successful in long course swimming as one is in short course swimming requires approximately 10-15% better conditioning. The training program in the practice levels of Phases III and IV is designed to emphasize and promote long course swimming throughout the year.
5. Swimmers are encouraged to attend as many practices each week as possible. AM practices during the school year are introduced at the top level of this phase. All three groups are provided the opportunity to do two-a-day practices during the summer months. Swimmers at these senior levels are encouraged to begin to make a choice between swimming and other activities.
6. Beginning in this phase, careful attention is given to maintaining aerobic fitness levels from one season to the next. Breaks between seasons are limited to avoid significant deterioration of aerobic fitness.
7. Dryland training is introduced at these levels with the emphasis primarily being on the development of core body conditioning and teaching swimmers how to lift weights.

#### **Phase IV: Advanced Training – Ages 14 & Over**

Swimmers with the appropriate dedication, desire, experience, and talent move to the advanced training level of our program at 14-15 years of age. The training program in Phase IV is very demanding with a heavy emphasis on distance-based physiological training.

1. Success over the long-term remains a high priority. Although we could train high school age swimmers in such a way that they could swim faster in the shorter events during their teenage years, we believe it is our responsibility to provide an aerobic-based training foundation that will allow them to achieve ultimate success in their college years.
2. Work within various energy systems becomes an important component of the overall training program. Emphasis is still heavily aerobic, but specificity of training for stroke and distance becomes part of the regimen.
3. While mileage completed is an important consideration, attention to detail and improvement in stroke efficiency and technical precision as key components to success at the elite levels.
4. Swimmers are still encouraged to train and compete in a wide variety of events. We believe there are many instances in this country where 14-17 year-old swimmers begin to specialize too early in their careers.
5. The commitment level required at these levels of the program is very high with swimmers expected to attend 8-9 practices per week during the school year and 9-10 practices per week during the summer.
6. Strength training with free weights and machines is a standard part of the training program.

