

Competitive Opportunities: Age Group Swimming

One of the benefits of your USA Swimming membership is the privilege of being able to compete in swim meets across the country. When you're first starting out, though, you will probably participate in competitions a little closer to home.

There are many different kinds of meets you can participate in, but most age groupers will probably be competing in local invitationals. These invitationals are usually held over the weekend and hosted by a nearby club ó maybe even your own.

There are typically anywhere between 150 and 1,000 swimmers competing at these invitationals. That's a lot of people, but there's no reason to be scared. Your coach will be there with you to make sure you survive the experience, and your parents will probably be there to cheer you on.

With so many swimmers competing, some will be very fast, and some will be beginners like you. Don't be nervous. These meets are set up so that you are racing against kids your own age and pretty close to the same ability.

At most meets, you'll have the opportunity to win awards like ribbons or medals. But if you don't win right away, don't give up.

Remember, some of the USA's top swimmers like Michael Phelps and Natalie Coughlin started out swimming at these local invitationals just like you, and they probably didn't win their first races, either. The great thing about swimming is that you're competing against yourself more than against anyone else. As long as you keep improving your swimming skills, you're getting better, and maybe someday it will be you standing on top of the medals podium.

The Big Meets: LSC and Zone Championships

As you get better, you might get good enough to compete at bigger meets with lots of other fast swimmers.

All these bigger meets have time standards or "cuts." That means you will have to swim a certain time in your event before you will be allowed to compete in these meets. The bigger and more important the meet, the faster you will have to swim.

One of the first big meets you might compete in is your Local Swimming Committee (LSC) age group championships. At these meets, you will still be competing against swimmers in your own age group, but they will be the best in your state or geographic area. It's easy to get nervous, but keep in mind, if you weren't fast enough, you wouldn't be able to compete at this level.

Even faster than your LSC age group championships are the Zone Championships. USA Swimming divides the country into four Zones ó Eastern, Western Central and Southern ó and each of these Zones holds at least one Zone Championships each year, usually in the summer.

At the Zone Meet, each state or LSC fields a team of its top age group swimmers to compete against the other states or LSCs within that Zone. For example, in the Central Zone, Indiana Swimming will compete against teams from Michigan, Ohio and Illinois Swimming. Instead of competing for your club, you are representing your state or LSC and might find yourself on a relay with other top swimmers from your LSC. Zone meets are the top age group meets you can compete in around the country.