

Swimming 101

(information from the Parents section of the USA Swimming web site

www.usaswimming.org)

THE BENEFITS OF SWIMMING

WHY SHOULD MY CHILD BE A SWIMMER?

- Swimming is an outstanding activity for people of all ages.
- Swimming promotes fitness and teaches a child to strive for physical achievement. Many super-stars in other sports started out as swimmers and gained strength and coordination that helped them to excel.
- Swimming is an exciting individual and team sport.
- Swimming is a technical and specialized activity involving extensive skill development.
- Swimming is a healthy "lifetime" activity. Participants may be 1 or 101 years old.
- Swimming is relatively injury free in comparison to other youth sports.
- Swimming teaches the life lessons of sport and sportsmanship which include learning to deal with winning and losing, as well as working with officials, teammates and coaches.
- Swimming motivates participants to strive for self improvement and teaches goal orientation.
- Swimming cultivates a positive mental attitude and high self-esteem.
- Swimming can prevent drowning.

DID YOU KNOW?

Drowning is a leading killer of American children.
More than 30% of kids are at risk for obesity-related illnesses.
Swimming is a cure.

KEY QUESTIONS

While winning is nice, while setting a record, getting a best time, or making a qualifying time feels good, we hope that our young athletes learn more than, "It is great to swim fast." No where in human history or theology do we learn that the ability to swim fast holds a very high priority in the grand scheme of the universe. From a practical standpoint, over-emphasis on speed, times and achievements will eventually end in frustration. No matter how fast a young athlete swims, there will probably be another swimmer in the next town, state, or country, swimming faster, if not now, then next month. So as coaches and parents, ask yourselves:

- Did the child learn to swim with more skill this past season so he or she is both stronger and safer in the water?
- Did the child learn to exhibit initiative, wanting to come to the pool and do the practice without having to be constantly pushed or prodded by parents and coaches?
- Did the child learn something about unselfishness, sacrificing his or her personal wants for the good of others or the team?
- Did the child benefit from the competitive experience, learning how to handle winning and losing in our competitive society?
- Did the child learn more patience in overcoming obstacles, setbacks and problems?
- Did the child learn empathy?

In a few years, the medals and ribbons will be laid aside and best times will be a hazy memory. The friendships that will develop and the life skills learned will carry on for a lifetime.

THE FOUR STROKES

The four competitive swimming strokes are freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly. The combination of all four strokes is called individual medley.

In freestyle events, the competitor may swim any stroke. The stroke most commonly used is sometimes called the crawl, which is characterized by the alternate stroking of the arms over the surface of the water surface and an alternating (up-and-down) flutter kick.

Backstroke consists of an alternating motion of the arms with a flutter kick while on the back. On turns, swimmers may rotate to the stomach and perform a flip turn and some part of the swimmer must touch the wall. The swimmer must finish on the back.

The breaststroke requires simultaneous movements of the arms on the same horizontal plane. The hands are pressed out from in front of the breast in a heart shaped pattern and recovered under or on the surface of the water. The kick is a simultaneous somewhat circular motion similar to the action of a frog. On turns and at the finish, the swimmer must touch the wall with both hands simultaneously at, above or below the water surface.

Some consider the butterfly to be the most beautiful of the strokes. It features a simultaneous recovery of the arms over the water combined with an undulating dolphin kick. In the kick, the swimmer must keep both legs together and may not flutter, scissors or use the breaststroke kick. Both hands must touch the wall simultaneously on the turns and the finish.

The individual medley, commonly referred to as the I.M., features all four strokes. In the IM, the swimmer begins with the butterfly, then changes after one-fourth of the race to backstroke, then breaststroke and finally freestyle.



COMPETITION 101

RULES

The technical rules of swimming are designed to provide fair and equitable conditions of competition and to promote uniformity in the sport. Each swimming stroke has specific rules designed to ensure that no swimmer gets an unfair competitive advantage over another swimmer.

COURSE

Competition pools may be short course (25 yards or 25 meters), or long course (50 meters). The international standard (as used in the Olympics) is 50 meters. World records are accomplished in 25 and 50 meter pools. USA Swimming maintains records for 25 yard, 25 meter and 50 meter pools.

COMPETITION

Participants compete in different age groups and meets depending on their achievement level and how old they are on the first day of the meet. Traditionally recognized age groups are 10 and under, 11-12, 13-14, 15-16, 17-18. Many local meets feature 8 and under, single age groups, or senior events. Team practice groups are usually determined by age and/or ability.

OFFICIALS

Officials are present at all competitions to enforce the technical rules of swimming so the competition is fair and equitable. Officials attend clinics, pass a written test and work meets before being certified. All parents are encouraged to get involved with some form of officiating.

SWIM MEET BASICS

(Excerpt from USA Swimming's Sample Club Handbook) - Please be sure to check with your swimmer's coach for specifics that may be different from the examples below.

Swim meets are a great family experience. They're a place where the whole family can spend time together.

Listed below are some very in-depth guidelines geared to help you through your first couple of swim meets. It may seem a little overwhelming, but we tried to be as specific and as detailed as we possibly could. If you have any questions, please ask your coach.

BEFORE THE MEET STARTS

1. Arrive at the pool at least 15 minutes before the scheduled warm-up time begins. This time will be listed in the meet information handed out to all swimmers and also in the team newsletter.
2. Upon arrival, find a place to put your swimmer's blankets, swim bags and/or sleeping bags. The team usually sits in one place together, so look for some familiar faces.
3. Find the check-in place. Usually, parents are not allowed on deck so this may be a responsibility of your swimmer or your swimmer's coach. Make sure your swimmer checks in with his or her coach! Check for special posted instructions in the check-in area.
 - o Usually one will need to circle the swimmer's name or "#" before each swimmer's name, in each event he or she is swimming, that day. If this is not done, the swimmer will not be allowed to swim that event. Check-in is required so that the people running the meet know who is actually at the meet. After check-in, the meet administrators "seed" the swimmers into heats. Heat and lane assignments will be posted, so be sure your swimmer knows where to look!
 - o Sometimes the meet is "pre-seeded" and no check-in is required. You and your swimmer can find heat and lane assignments by purchasing a program.
4. Once "checked in", write or have the swimmers write each event-number on his or her hand in ink. This helps him/her remember what events he/she is swimming and what event number to listen or watch for.
5. Your swimmer now gets his/her cap and goggles and reports to the pool and/or coach for warm-up instructions. It is very important for all swimmers to warm-up with the team. A swimmer's body is just like a car on a cold day- he/she needs to get the engine going and warmed-up before he/she can go all out.
6. After warm-up, your swimmer will go back to the area where his/her team is sitting and wait there until his first event is called. This is a good time to make sure he/she goes to the bathroom if necessary, gets a drink, or just gets settled in.
7. The meet will usually start about 10-15 minutes after warm-ups are over.
8. According to USA Swimming rules (because of insurance purposes), parents are not allowed on deck unless they are serving in an official capacity. Similarly, all questions concerning meet results, an officiating call, or the conduct of a meet, should be referred to a coach. He or she in turn, will pursue the matter through the proper channels.
9. Psyche Sheet or Heat Sheets. A psyche sheet is usually available for sale in the lobby or concession area of the pool. It lists all swimmers in each event in order of "seed time". When the team entry is sent in, each swimmer and his/her previous best time (up to the date that the entry was submitted) in that event is listed. If the swimmer is swimming an event for the first time, he/she will be entered as a "no-time" or "NT". A "no-time" swimmer will most likely swim in one of the first heats of the event. A Heat sheet may be available close to the start of the meet that lists the actual heat and lane a swimmer will be competing in.

MEET STARTS

1. It is important for any swimmer to know what event numbers he/she is swimming (again, why they should have the numbers on their hand). He/she may swim right away after warm-up or they may have to wait awhile.
2. Most meets are computerized. There are generally two ways a swimmer gets to his/her lane:
 - o A swimmer usually reports directly to his/her lane for competition a number of heats before he/she actually swims. Check with your swimmer's coach for specific instructions.
 - o In some novice meets, a swimmer's event number will be called, usually over the loudspeaker, and he/she will be asked to report to the "clerk of course" or "bullpen". Swimmers should report with his/her cap and goggle.

- Generally, girls events are odd-numbered and boys events are even-numbered. Example: "Event #26, 10-Under Boys, 50 freestyle, report to Clerk of Course." The "Clerk of Course" or "bullpen" area is usually where all swimmers checked in before the warm-up.
 - The clerk will usually line up all the swimmers and take them down to the pool in correct order. You can expect at least 4-8 heats of each event.
3. The swimmer swims his or her race.
 4. After each swim:
 - He/she is to ask the timers (people behind the blocks at each lane) his/her time.
 - Depending on the coaches instructions, the swimmer may be asked to do some recovery swimming if a "warm down" pool or lanes are available.
 - The swimmer should then go immediately to his or her coach. The coach will discuss the swim with each swimmer. Some coaches may wish to talk with the swimmer before her recovery swim.
 5. Generally, the coach follows these guidelines when discussing swims:
 - Positive comments or praise
 - Suggestions for improvement
 - Positive comments
 6. Things you, as a parent, can do after each swim:
 - Tell him how great he did! The coaching staff will be sure to discuss stroke technique with him. You need to tell him how proud you are and what a great job he did.
 - Take him back to the team area and relax.
 - This is another good time to check out the bathrooms, get a drink or something light to eat.
 7. The swimmer now waits until his next event is called and starts the procedure again. When a swimmer has completed all of her events she and her parents get to go home. Make sure, however, you, as a parent, check with the coach before leaving to make sure your swimmer is not included on a relay. It is not fair to other swimmers who may have stayed to swim on a relay where your swimmer is expected to be a member and she is not there.
 8. Results are usually posted somewhere in the facility. Awards are often gathered for a team and given to the coach at the end of the meet. The coach will give the awards to the swimmers at a later time.

RULES PRIMER

The technical rules of swimming are designed to provide fair and equitable conditions of competition and to promote uniformity in the sport. Each swimming stroke has specific rules designed to ensure that no swimmer gets an unfair competitive advantage over another swimmer.

Trained officials observe the swimmers during each event to ensure compliance with these technical rules. If a swimmer commits an infraction of the rules that is observed by an official, a disqualification (DQ) will result. This means that the swimmer will not receive an official time and will not be eligible for an award in that event. A disqualification may result from actions such as not getting to the starting blocks on time, false starting, performing strokes in an illegal manner, or unsportsmanlike conduct.

DQs are also a result of technical rules violations. They include but are not limited to:

- **Freestyle:** Walking on the bottom, pulling on the lane rope, not touching the wall on a turn, or not completing the distance.
- **Backstroke:** Pulling or kicking into the wall once a swimmer has turned passed the vertical onto the breast. Turning onto the breast before touching the wall with the hand at the finish of the race.
- **Breaststroke:** An illegal kick such as flutter (freestyle), dolphin (butterfly), or scissors (side stroke); not on the breast; alternating movements of the arms; taking two arm strokes or two leg kicks while the head is under water; touching with only one hand at the turns or finish.
- **Butterfly:** Alternating movements of the arms or legs; pushing the arms forward under instead of over the water surface (underwater recovery); a breaststroke style of kick; touching with only one hand at the turns or finish.

For specific language on any technical rules consult the USA Swimming Rules and Regulations book. Violations of the rules are reported to the Referee. The rules require that every reasonable effort be made to notify the swimmer or his coach of the reason for the disqualification. If your child is disqualified in an event, be supportive rather than critical. For

beginning swimmers, a disqualification should be treated as a learning experience, not as a punishment. A disqualification alerts the swimmer and coach to what portions of the swimmer's stroke need to be corrected. They should be considered in the same light as an incorrect answer in schoolwork—they point out areas that need further practice. Disqualifications are necessary to keep the competition fair and equitable for all competitors. A supportive attitude on the part of the official, coach, and parent can make a positive situation out of the disqualification.

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 – 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 – Eastern, Western Central and Southern – 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

QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK - TRAINING & WORKOUT PART 1

1. Sometimes my child doesn't want to go to practice. He wants to play with his friends. Should I force him to go?

You should not force your child; you want his participation to be his decision. Reinforce the choices and decisions he has made to start his sport. For example, your son chose to go to practice on Tuesday and Thursdays, on other days he has the freedom to do other activities. As a parent, explain your expectation that he fulfill the commitment he made by joining the team. You don't want to force your child into a sport that he does not enjoy, yet you want your child to be involved in a 'lifetime sport', to learn about making and keeping a commitment and to interact with peers. So, what are you to do?

Instead of allowing your child to make a daily decision about going to practice, allow him to decide whether or not he wants to participate for the season. Once the decision is made to participate, he is making a commitment to the team and needs to follow through on it by attending practice on a regular basis. A haphazard schedule is detrimental to the athlete's overall development.

Interestingly, when asked to reflect on the role of their parents in their swimming, athletes from a recent USA Swimming World Championship team talked about being pushed to swim by their parents on a weekly basis but knowing they could quit if they stopped having fun with swimming.

2. My child has a lot of interests and activities so he only attends about half of his practices. What will happen to his competition results?

Children involved in other activities can benefit in the areas of coordination and balance, as well as improved social and intellectual development. Specialized training in one activity does not necessarily need to take place at this stage of development. Will your son's teammate who makes all practices have better results? Probably he will because his teammate is working solely on developing one sport skills. It is up to you to explain to your child that making the choice to participate in other activities can have its consequences. Tell your son that he should not compare his results to that of his teammate, but to focus on the fact that he is benefiting from and enjoying other sports.

3. It looks like my child is having a lot of fun at practice. Shouldn't she be working harder?

Be happy that your child is having fun! According to a recent study conducted by USA Swimming children who experience fun while participating stay in sports longer (Tuffey, Gould, & Medbery, 1998). At this stage of the game, the most important aspect of development is the mastery of skills, which means learning the proper technique. Fundamentals must be established prior to true "training" taking place. And, if she is having fun in the process of learning, she is more likely to continue to the sport.

4. It looks like all they do at practice is drills. Shouldn't they be training more?

Your child needs to develop a solid foundation in mechanics. Drills and drill sets serve the specific purpose of teaching skills and fundamentals. Drills develop motor coordination, motor skills, and balance. In fact, your child's coach may prescribe a particular drill, just for your child, in order to improve an aspect of her technique. In addition, she may actually be experiencing a "training" benefit from drills. Drills require concentration and aerobic energy to do them correctly.

5. My daughter's coach sometimes makes her "sit out" for disciplinary reasons. Isn't that a waste of her time?

The coach has set up expectations of proper behavior. Hopefully, your child is aware of the consequences of testing these boundaries. Obviously the coach is reinforcing what is expected of the children at practice. We encourage you to reinforce the coach's practice expectations by discussing your child's behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Hopefully, this "time out" begins to reinforce self-discipline, accountability and respect for others.

6. My son complains that some of the kids cheat in practice. What should I tell him?

Praise him first for completing the workout the coach offers. Remind him that he is there to improve himself and he can't control what his teammates do. Tell him however, that his best course of action is to continue to do things right and others may actually be influenced by his good example. By committing to do his best at all times, over the long haul he will reap the benefits of his hard work.

