

The Way a Season Works

Written By: Lisa Liston of LY Swim Team

Edited By: Collin Fox of H2okie Aquatics

Our short course season begins slowly as kids return to the water after a break, and new swimmers start learning the drills that we use. This time of the season provides returning swimmers an opportunity to focus on the stroke changes they need to make to become more efficient in the water. Changes can be difficult, and this start-up time is particularly important for those swimmers who keep hearing their coach tell them to make the same corrections, practice after practice, week after week. It is hard to break old habits, but the start of a new season is the perfect time to focus on just that, because the training is less intense and it is easier to focus on stroke technique when intervals are slower and speed is less important. New swimmers will also be learning new techniques and it is important to spend time listening and working to perfect skills so that as the season progresses and the training becomes more demanding, you already have the correct mechanics to help you swim more efficiently.

Once we have gotten started and swimmers have learned drills and begun to get in shape, we begin using training cycles to help swimmers maximize their fitness and adapt to particular training stresses. These are the same stresses that affect you when you race – fatigue, endurance, speed, lactic acid tolerance and muscle failure, energy use and conservation. The training cycles for each group vary based on the number of practices offered and the length of practice for each group. Clearly, the more practices you attend, the more effective the training will be for you.

Swim meets throughout the season are similar to tests in school. As coaches, they help us measure the training adaptations that are going on, and they help us know what you need to focus on and what we need to focus on more in practice. At the early season meets, we watch to see that you are using proper breathing patterns, that you pull with your bottom arm off the wall on flip turns, that you breathe on the second stroke off of the wall, that you are using a proper streamline off each wall, that your body position in the water is correct, that your timing is good in breaststroke, that your hips are on the surface in butterfly, that you remember to do an underwater pullout off the wall in breaststroke, that you are not slowing down as you approach your walls, et cetera. We are not concerned about what your time is in a race or how many swimmers you beat in your race, except as it relates to your current level of fitness and where we are in the season.

As the season progresses, we focus more on teaching racing strategies and we will look for these during meets. When we get to mid-season, December, we will actually rest swimmers for a short time as we prepare for our December meets so that we can see how their body is adapting to the training and what kind of gains you are making through both technique and training.

For our older swimmers, the holiday season in December is an important training time. We increase training volume and intensity while the swimmers are out of school. In January and February, the volume slowly decreases, but more attention is focused on racing intensity and preparing your body for maximal racing efforts. Muscles tend to be very fatigued during this time and swimmers get tired and irritable. Senior 2 and 3 swimmers in the top groups should EXPECT to be tired during peak training times; the fatigue and muscle breakdown during this time shows that you are training hard and it is important to continue training through this period if you want good results at your championship meet.

Championship season begins at the end of February. Swimmers taper for these meets in order to allow the body time to rest and recuperate from the difficult training it has experienced over the past several months. During taper time, we will begin to rest and your efforts throughout the season will show up as fast swims at your championship meet.

It is important to understand that without these series of training cycles, a Senior Level swimmer will not be able to reach his or her top level of performance. Proper training in swimming involves repetition and keeping your body broken down for an extended period of time in order to make the necessary training adaptations. Swimmers of different body types, muscle types, and gender will respond differently to the training, but the principles of training are the same for all post-pubescent swimmers. Consistency is the key with training. The more consistent a swimmer is at attending practice and putting forth the appropriate effort level at practice (both mental and physical), the more the swimmer's coach will be able to help that swimmer properly prepare for fast swimming. This is the reason that attendance is so important to successful swim training and this is the reason that we encourage certain levels of practice attendance throughout our program.

After short course season ends, we start the same procedure over again as we transition into the long course season, but we usually condense this process during Long Course season since it is much shorter than short course season (ironically :). Each season will build on the season before it. The training curve is anywhere from 6-9 months ahead of the performance curve, so the work done today is meant to pay off down the road. Because meets at the beginning of a season are during a light training time and occur just as swimmers are getting back in shape, swimmers should not expect to swim their fastest times at the start of the season. During mid-season when swimmers become fatigued from their training, they also may add time to their personal best times. Championship meets are the point of the season to look for best times. If you are dropping time consistently through the season, great, as long as you are doing what is asked of you at practice. If so, you can expect to drop even more time at your championship meets.

It is not useful to compare your best times to your early season or mid-season times. Instead, a more useful comparison is to compare your results to the results of the year before at the same meet. For example, compare this year's November meet to last year's November meet. If your times are getting faster, than you are probably improving and performing better than you were at this same time last year. That said, even this method does not necessarily take into account other external factors, so this is just one of many methods you can use to evaluate your swim results.

As always, we encourage you to talk with your coach if you have any questions about your swimming progress. I hope this helped you learn a little bit about Senior Level swim training.