

News For SWIM PARENTS

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All-Weekend Swim Meets

One of the big issues is how precious the family weekend has become and whether the traditional all-weekend swim meet extracts too high a price. So this month our editorial contains ideas on rethinking our approach to competition from Coaches Amy Ayres and Phil Baker of the Seacoast Swimming Association in Dover, New Hampshire.

"There are more organized activities offered to children today than ever before. Our sport is but one choice among many for today's children and their parents. One aspect of swimming that particularly discourages many families is the long drawn out swimming meet. When discussing a little league baseball season with a 10-year old swimmer, he informed us that he had no practices, only games. Obviously this is not a solution for our sport, but when a child and his parents look at both activities, most will choose the least expensive in terms of money and time.

In order to keep our sport viable, we need to be willing to examine our popular meet formats and make adjustments. Split session formats that have been so prevalent, are adequate, so long as they are run efficiently, and kept to a four hour limit. However meets that are run at inadequate facilities can make any meet (split-session, dual, championship) a "nightmare" for swimmers, parents, and coaches.

Inadequate deck and spectator space definitely adds to general frustration with meets. One answer is to restrict small facilities to hosting meets involving a limited number of swimmers (i.e. 100 or fewer per session). For example, run a meet just for 10 and unders.

Concerning the topic of "who needs to compete," we should encourage only those young swimmers whose confidence level is high to enter outside competition. The decision on competition readiness can be reached in discussion between coach and parents. While a developing swimmer should get the experience of swimming all strokes and distances while young, it's counter productive to put them in events for which they haven't yet developed "legal" skills. Practice is the place for perfecting strokes.

One of the best ways to introduce competition to new developing swimmers and their families is the "intra-squad" meet, in which swimmers compete against their training mates in a simulated meet atmosphere. Allowing the young swimmer to reach a good level of stroke competence and competitive confidence will ease their introduction to dual meets with other teams.

Dual meets, where the interest and excitement level can remain high throughout the meet, and the time commitment and expense is limited, along with the potential for stimulating and different formats, are one of the most obvious solutions. Dual meets can be disadvantageous if their formats are too restrictive and if coaches and parents are overly concerned with the team's won-loss record, but with creativity and an enlightened attitude about using the dual meet as a developmental opportunity, they can be a win-win situation for all involved.

Dual meets can be set up within and outside the immediate geographic area to swim new teams and expose the swimmers to new people and places. Event flexibility with different formats, such as pentathlons, sprint meets, distance meets, relay meets, unusual events such as 300 I.M. (75 each stroke or drop a stroke) or I.M. with the strokes swum in any order of the swimmer's choice, etc. can all be great fun. The excitement in a dual meet will be created by the attitude of coaches and parents and the swimmers will catch on.

The recommended frequency of competition for young swimmers is once per month - never more than twice a month. At a young age the emphasis should be on practicing skills, not on competition. Not only swimmers but also their families can "burn out" on the sport if forced to compete every weekend. It's time for all of us in the sport to start saying "No" to the long drawn out "revenue meet" and promote more mini-meets, dual meets, and intra-squad simulated meets."