

Competitive Swimming – a guide for parents and swimmers

Introduction

If you are new to competitive swimming, then don't worry – not all of the following applies to you! As a swimmer progresses, then more of the following information is relevant. The most important thing for newcomers to grasp is that it is vital to compete and get times in a variety of events. Hopefully the following will explain why.

Starting out...

West Dorset Swimming Club is a competitive swimming club. We encourage children to compete as we believe it is one of the key ways to make a swimmer faster and better. It's really important that swimmers make an effort to enter competitions for several reasons:

- It gives swimmers an idea of what it's like to compete
- It gives swimmers their times, and therefore is a clear marker of how they are progressing
- It gives swimmers a goal towards which they can work
- It gives swimmers a sense of achievement
- It shows the coaches how the swimmers cope with a competitive environment
- Gaining new improved times are one of the major factors in helping the coaches to decide whether a swimmer is ready to move up to the next squad

To make your experience of swim competitions more enjoyable, we suggest the following:

- you bring plenty of drinks (not fizzy) and healthy snacks for the swimmers and for parents
- swimmers bring a change of costume and a couple of towels plus spare goggles
- swimmers bring a "t-bag" top to slip on to keep warm between races. Alternatively, a football type t-shirt is good as they dry quickly and don't soak up the wet like a cotton t-shirt.

Steps galas

Steps galas will probably be your first taste of competitive swimming.

When are they? At WDSC we hold steps galas at least twice a year – usually in the spring and the autumn.

Who are they for? They're for children aged 6 up to age 15 who train in both the main pool and the little pool. Swimmers are grouped by ability, not age, so your child may be swimming against someone much taller. Don't worry - this is intentional!

If you're unsure what races your child should enter, please speak to his/her teacher or to Janet Hewitt.

Most races in the steps galas are either 25m or 50m.

The results of steps galas are a major indicator to the coaches as to whether a child is ready to move squads, so it's important not to miss the galas if at all possible. Swimmers are most likely to move squads soon after steps galas and it is much more difficult to move them individually at other times.

The next stage

The coaches at WDSC make a big effort to find galas outside of the club that are suitable for swimmers who are just dipping their toes in the competitive water. The club aims to find galas within a 40 mile radius of Dorchester that are low key, relaxed events that will be an enjoyable experience for the swimmers.

These galas often have races 50m, 100m and 200m in length.

Who goes on the team? When the competitions come up, we notify members by email, put a notice up on the board and announce details on poolside. We also try to target the right swimmer with the right event and approach swimmers and their parents directly.

Moving on...

When a swimmer is a little more experienced they may be invited to swim on a school team. At WDSC we have a very good working relationship with most of the schools in the area, with many of our parents acting in a liaison capacity.

Who goes on the team? Janet Hewitt and the school liaison parent will work together with the school to put forward a team. For the schools galas, WDSC believe that whilst we should try and put forward the best team we can, it's also the taking part that's important and we aim to be inclusive.

Junior League

For swimmers aged 9-12 there is Junior League which is very prestigious. A group of clubs in the area have got together to form the League and compete against each other in three rounds to determine the overall winner.

When is it? The three rounds usually take place the third weekend of April, May and June.

Who goes on the team? Team places have to go to the fastest swimmers, so it's great if you're picked. It's a good goal to aim for to get on the team too. There are usually 4 or 5 boys and girls in each age group on the team.

The format is a mix of 25m and 50m individual races and 4 x 25m relay events.

Club Championships

Every year the club holds its own club championships. Starting in 2009 it will be held in November.

Who can enter? Everyone who trains in the main pool.

Why should I enter? I'm never going to get a medal! The person you're competing against is yourself. The important thing is to get a time for a swim. In our club championships swimmers can enter a race they've never done before and get a time for it, so that when the chance comes to compete at another competition in that race, the swimmer will be able to because they have a time.

Perhaps it now becomes clear why entering the steps galas and other competitions and getting those times are important.

Open Meets

Throughout the year many clubs hold their own open meet. Swimmers from other clubs can enter the events they wish to as long as they have the right qualifying times.

Levels 1, 2 and 3

There are three different levels of open meet. The hardest level with the fastest qualifying times is level one. Only the top swimmers in the club will qualify. Level two is easier and all of main squad and many in A squad should qualify. Level three is the easiest and most children in A and B squad will qualify, as will some in the little pool. Some swimmers in Main squad may be too fast for level three.

The WDSC Open Meet held in December is a level three.

Qualifying times and cut-off times

- A qualifying time is a time that is required in order to enter an event
- A cut-off time is a time that is the fastest a swimmer can be in order to enter an event

For example: 13 year old Joe wants to enter the 100m butterfly at Bournemouth Open Meet and his time is 1.16.20.

The qualifying time for the race for 13 year old boys is shown in the entry pack as 1.19.90, so he is fast enough enter. The cut off time for this race is 1.12.30. If Joe's time had been 1.12.20, he would have been too fast and wouldn't be allowed to enter that race.

We advertise the open meets that WDSC are attending officially with our staff supporting the children on poolside on our website – wdwarriors.org.uk. Go to:

1. Calendar of events
2. Click on the open meet to see the entry pack
3. The entry pack will have all the details of the competition
4. Check the timetable of events
5. Check the entry times against your child's times
6. Print off an entry form and fill it in. It is usually recommended that a swimmer enters two races per session to allow for sufficient recovery time. If you're not sure what to enter, please ask Janet or Colin.
7. Write a cheque payable to WDSC and hand in to the registration desk.

The club will get confirmation of successful entries and let you know.

Parents may also enter open meets independently of the club but please check with Janet first.

Dorset County Championships

County Champs are held every year over two or three weekends in February/March. **It is really important that as many of our swimmers as possible enter the WDSC open meet in December and also the WDSC Club Championships as it is an opportunity to get good entry times in time for the County Championships in February /March.**

The County Championships are prestigious and very important to the club. Each club taking part gets points for each swimmer that does well. If we don't have many swimmers entering, the club has less of a chance of shining, so it's crucial that all those who can enter, do so. County Championships have qualifying times. Swimmers are automatically invited to do the events in which they've qualified and are given their invitation personally.

The top three swimmers in each age group get a medal and the next 5 get a ribbon.

BAGCATs

For each swim a child does at Counties, they are awarded BAGCAT points. In order to get a maximum number of points available, a swimmer needs to enter a range of events and points are taken from the best swim done of all of the following:

- 50m sprint – any stroke
- 100m – any stroke
- 200m form stroke – that means not freestyle
- long distance freestyle ie 200m, 400m, 800m or 1500m
- individual medley – any distance

Swimmers who come in the top eight of the BAGCAT points system get noticed and can be selected for future development by Dorset County ASA. It is also a bonus for WDSC, so please bear this in mind when choosing your races for County Champs.

Development Meet

When is it? The Development meet is held annually in early July. It is organised by Dorset County ASA.

Who is it for? The Development meet is for all those swimmers who did not achieve a Regional qualifying time (this is explained later).

How do I enter? Just like for the County champs, you will be sent an invitation to enter all those races for which you have a time and which fits in with the rules of the competition.

The aim of the Development meet is to encourage younger and less experienced swimmers to compete more and to give them more race experience.

Getting to the top...

Regionals/Districts

The next step up from County Championships is Regionals/Districts. The UK is divided up into regions and we compete in the Western County region, comprising Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Devon, Wiltshire and Cornwall.

Who can go? To get to the Regionals a swimmer has to get a qualifying time – see 2009SWpoolbookingsrev.zip on the Swimwest website. These times are tough, so it's really great when a swimmer achieves a qualifying time.

When is it? Youth Regionals (girls age 14+ and boys age 15+) are held at the beginning of May, so qualifying times need to be achieved by the middle of April at the latest. Age Group Regionals (girls age 10-13 and boys age 10-14) are held in June, so qualifying times need to be achieved by approximately the end of April.

Top of the heap

The ultimate goal is to qualify for the National Championships. Only 1% of all competitive swimmers make it to the Nationals and you have to be very fast indeed. Qualifying times get tougher every year and can be found on the British Swimming website.

When is it? Nationals are held in July and the last point at which you can get a qualifying time is at Regionals in June. Qualifying times must also be achieved at a Level 1 or 2 meet.

And finally...

If you have any questions about any of the above or if there's something you don't understand, please don't hesitate to ask – after all, even the veterans of the club were all new to this once!

Please ask either Janet Hewitt or any member of the competition committee – see below:

Colin Cracknell
Ann Foad
Cris Hitchcock
Karen Knott
Jane Rooks
Camilla Thornton
Julie Wellman