

MY FIRST MASTERS SWIM MEET by Ray Novitske

This article is meant to guide newbie swimmers through the process of swimming in masters competition for the first time. Author Ray Novitske serves on the USMS Communications and Marketing Committees. Several article sections have been slightly altered to be more relevant to AquaFit-hosted swim meets. "Home" (AquaFit-hosted meets at the NC Aquatic Center) provide a fun, relaxed atmosphere in the convenience and comfort of our own pool. A good suggestion for any first-timer considering future masters swim meet competition is to come watch and volunteer at one of our home meets to get a feel for what it's all about.

ENTER

- What do I fill in on the meet entry form?

Fill in the entry form and sign it. Be sure to include your USMS card with the entry. Although we must use your name and information exactly as it appears on your USMS card, we ask that you fill in contact information such as phone number and/or email in case we need to reach you before the meet with a question or to resolve a discrepancy.

- What about seed times?

Seed ("entry") times represent your approximate guess of times for the events you plan to swim. They are used to put you in races ("heats") with swimmers of similar speeds so you don't get stuck swimming with someone a lot faster or a lot slower than you. If you cannot estimate your times, entering "NT" (for "no time") will place you in the first heat which usually has the slower swimmers. Or, simply CIRCLE the event(s) numbers you want to swim and let your coach fill in an entry time for you.

PREPARE

- What do I bring to the meet?

Obviously bring multiple swimming suits, towels, and goggles (plan for equipment failure!). Extra towels are recommended; keep one dry towel in your locker to use after the meet when you get dressed. Bring some warm dry clothes (sweats, socks, deck shoes) to wear on pool deck to stay warm between swimming events. Bring a lock if you use the pool lockers. There is a snack bar upstairs and several vending machines at the Aquatic Center, but you can also bring your own snacks along with a drink or water bottle.

ARRIVE

- What do I do when I get there?

First find the area where our team is sitting and put your swim bag/belongings there. Next, check in at the swimmer registration desk which is usually located at the deep end of our pool to positively confirm your presence and make sure all of your personal swim meet entry data is complete and accurate for the competition. You will receive a meet program with reminders, announcements and procedures, order of events, heats and lane assignments. Use this to determine when you are scheduled to swim your race. (Note: You can also check your entry data about 48 hours prior to event day online via the AquaFit website where data will be posted.)

- When do I warm up?

Enter the pool area, claim your territory on the pool deck, and swim your warm up. Stretching on deck is recommended. All lanes of the competition pool are open to swimmers during the 55 minute warm-up period prior to meet start time. During warm-up you can swim laps, kick & drill, and practice flipturns, but using equipment during warm-up is not permitted. After the competition starts, there will always be extra adjacent lanes available for warm up and cool down before and after your races.

- Can I practice starts?

Not all the time. You must always enter the pool feet-first in a safe controlled manner during warm-up; no jumping in on top of swimmers, and no diving. For 15-20 minutes prior to the end of warm-up period, one or two lanes will be designated for swimmers to practice racing starts. Only during this designated time are you permitted to dive from the starting block.

THE COACH-SWIMMER PARTNERSHIP

- This is an important part of your swim meet participation and goes a long way in making your experience a positive and productive one. Before warming up, and immediately before and after each of your races, SEE YOUR COACH. Ask for warm-up advice, pre-race strategy and reminders, and then get constructive post-race critique from your coach before cooling down. Do NOT solicit advice from other swimmers or coaches from other teams. That will only serve to confuse what should be advice respective to your personal goals, experience, ability level and strengths & weaknesses.

SWIM

- When do I swim?

Each event will have several races or "heats" scheduled. For example, the third heat of an event is the third race for that event. Use the meet program to determine what heat and lane you are assigned to swim in. Your name will not be called for your race. Pay attention to the meet progress (the scoreboard usually displays event and heat numbers), listen to announcements, and show up to the starting blocks 1 or 2 heats before your race is scheduled to go off. Note: Heats are "seeded" strictly by entry time and not by age group or gender. Therefore, heats are usually comprised of both men and women of varying ages.

- What do I do before my race?

[One heat prior to your race, check with the lane timer to make sure you are at the correct lane and heat.] The starting official will give three or more short whistles. This is a signal to the swimmers in the next heat to get ready for the start (deck clothes off, goggles and swim caps on). Another long whistle follows, which means it's time to step up on the starting block (or get into the water). You do NOT have to DIVE in from the starting block – you also have the option to start from the bulkhead edge or from a pushoff IN the water.

- When do I actually begin?

The starting official will give a hand signal and say "take your mark." IMMEDIATELY bend down to assume a motionless racing start position. During a short pause, the starter will glance to be sure everyone is motionless on the starting blocks, and then start the race. The electronic starter will sound and a strobe light will flash, signaling the start. Now get going! A false start will occur if you move or leave early and you will be disqualified. If any one person in a swim race is disqualified for moving or leaving early, the entire heat of swimmers will CONTINUE only AFTER conclusion of that heat will the disqualified swimmer be notified. This is meant to keep the swim meet moving along and not disrupt the focus and swimming efforts of the non-disqualified swimmers.

- What happens when I finish?

Touch the center of the TOUCHPAD (don't GRAB the top) located on the finish wall at the end of the race; then leave the pool quickly. If the bulkhead is too high and difficult to climb out and you need to use the side of the pool to exit, do NOT immediately swim across another swimmer's lane. WAIT in your lane until swimmers in the lanes you need to cross have finished their race and then swim across their lanes to the ladder or side of the pool.

AFTER YOUR RACE

- How is my time determined?

Your time is determined using your touchpad finish (and 1-2 backup stopwatches if your touchpad finish didn't register properly). Be careful not to interrupt backup timers while they are recording times or getting ready for the start of the next race (timers only have 60 seconds between heats!). Ask for your time only AFTER the next heat has begun so you are not distracting timers during the start.

- How do I find out the results?

After all heats for each event are finished, times are sorted by the computer operator (Tricia Cuti) and organized into lists of times by five-year age group and gender. Results will be posted on the wall at the deep end of the pool where you can also pick up your award, if any. Results for the meet will also be posted on our team website a few days after the meet. Now you will have something to compare to at your next meet! Above all, remember to relax, enjoy yourself, and cheer the other swimmers.