

Swimming is a very demanding but incredibly rewarding sport, and one in which competitions obviously play a key role. As competitive swimmers, one of the great motivations for our children is to put into practice what they have learnt from their coaches and enter a variety of meets during the swimming season.

As Head Coach, it is my job to ensure that each and every swimmer has an extensive set of skills that will enable them to race effectively and, hopefully, very successfully! For this to happen, it is vital that we foster an environment within the club where swimmers want to swim skillfully, rather than just fast.

It is important not to focus on short-term outcomes like winning races and gaining county times (even though these are natural things for competitive swimmers to aspire to!). However, if a swimming club has to choose one aim, surely it is to produce life-long swimmers, who have an appreciation and understanding of what an amazing sport swimming is.

To this end, the ASA brought out the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) guide, which gives clubs and coaches an understanding of how to get the most out of our children for a long and happy swimming career.

It sets out a clear strategy in order not only to develop swimmers at the correct pace but also to sustain it through to adulthood. One of the most important recommendations the LTAD makes is that during the stage of late childhood (corresponding approximately to our 'Skills' to 'Potential 1' squads) the emphasis should be firmly on teaching swimming skills and building technique.

“During the SwimSkills period, the nervous system is almost fully developed and there are rapid improvements in the coordination of movement skills. As a result, young people should learn how to train and develop sport specific skills. This is a good time to work on developing excellent technique in all four strokes as well as starts, turns and finishing skills. A multi stroke approach to training and competition will not only reduce the likelihood of injury but also ensure interest levels will remain high with the result that swimming should continue to be fun. Studies have also shown that swimmers who do not specialize early may have a slower initial increase in performance; however, they ultimately reach a higher level of achievement and are more likely to have a longer life in the sport. This is in contrast to early specialization, which may produce an initial rapid increase in performance, but a lower level of achievement and early retirement...”

So, what part do competitions play in the long-term development of swimmers?

Put simply, competitions should be used to test and refine the skills that are learnt in training sessions. The recommended training to competition ratio is 75% to 25%, this being planned over one annual cycle, and it is vital that this is borne in mind when planning not only how many meets to compete in, but also the events at each meet. An over-emphasis on competition during this stage is likely to cause a young swimmer not to reach their full potential, since they have missed taking the opportunities given to them during their training of perfecting their skills to the full.

It is definitely not my intention to take away the value of competing. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, it is why young swimmers join a competitive swimming club such as YDSC, and it is an essential part of the sport. However, any competition has to be both age and skill appropriate and must be recognized as not just about achieving times. It is far more than that! It teaches young swimmers about race experience, the value of teamwork and peer support, as

well as the ability to manage psychological stress. These character-building opportunities are invaluable for any young person to learn and ones that make swimming the immensely rewarding sport it is.

Everything that has been mentioned so far has fed into the revised squad criteria, which now have no mention at all of achieving certain times, the emphasis being placed on skill mastery and technique.

Put simply, the progression through the squads should be based on swimmers effectiveness at sustaining particular skills. This ability to sustain techniques becomes increasingly important in the longer events (such as 200m and 400m events) where any weaknesses will be exposed. These events can be very demotivating for young swimmers if their skill set is not sufficient, and there is absolutely no positive outcome for a swimmer to compete in a race for which they are not technically equipped. They will struggle to complete the distance, get disqualified and definitely not enjoy the race. This is contrary to the ethos that we are trying to uphold at YDSC!

Bearing in mind all that has been said about the importance of training over competitions, and the need for complete skill sets as criteria for squad progression, the following events should be the focus for particular squads.

- **Pre-skills** - time trials only after Christmas and 25's and 50m free at our club champs.
- **Skills** - 50's and 100IM at time trials and club champs.
- **Development 1** – Level 3 & 4 meets- 50's and 100IM only. Include 200 Free and IM at club champs
- **Development 2** - Level 3 & 4 meets - 50's, 100IM, 200 free. Include 400 free at Club champs if the coaches agree the swimmer is consistently holding correct technique during training.
- **Potential 1** – Level 2 & 3 meets- 50's, 100IM, 200IM, 200 free. Include 100's and 200's and 400m Free at club champs if coaches agree consistent technique is held during training.
- **Potential 2** – Meets and events targeted will be based on the Assistant Head Coaches observations. However they will still follow the LTAD guidelines.

I appreciate that a great deal of information has been mentioned here, so please do not hesitate to contact me about any aspect of the structure of the club, and especially with regards to squad criteria and progression. Communication is key to any successful organization and YDSC is no different.

Rebecca Richards
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