



Beginner's Guide to Competitive Swimming

Runcorn Reps Amateur Swimming Club beginner's guide to parents about competitive swimming is designed to give parents and swimmers some basic information on competitive swimming and explain some of the terminology used. There is more detailed information available on the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) website.

ASA Swimmers Classification

ASA swimmers classification causes some confusion. So let's try and demystify this for you. There are three classification groups:

Category 1

Basically is for young new swimmers who are starting off in swimming and have just joined the club. This provides insurance whilst the swimmer is at training and at some low level (level 4) galas e.g. Runcorn Reps Club Championships.

Category 2

Is for the more competitive swimmer who wishes to swim for the club and enter ASA licensed meets, e.g. Wirral Metro, Blackpool Rocks

All swimmers who are in coaching and will turn 9 years old before November or are older, need to be registered as Cat 2 with the ASA.

Category 3

This classification is for all volunteers with the club.

When you join Runcorn Reps a membership fee is paid, this membership fee is renewed each year. From this fee the Club then pays for the swimmers yearly registration to the ASA.

Meets/Galas

There are different types of swimming galas/meets. At Runcorn Reps swimming galas basically come in 2 types:

- Galas/meets where the club competes as a team against other clubs in leagues or friendly galas. E.g. Merseyside and District (M&D)
- Meets where the swimmer competes individually at ASA licensed meets through the club.

Team Meets/Galas

Runcorn Reps competes in a league called the Merseyside & District League. It's always a difficult decision to select swimmers for these galas, but parents must trust the judgment of the coaching staff in doing this.

Licensed Galas/Open Meets

Licensed meets/galas are an opportunity for swimmers to compete for themselves. This is one way in which swimmers can see that their hard work in training has improved their swimming, obtain recorded ASA times, to obtain and improve on their individual personal best times (PB) and the opportunity win medals!

The club will target some local meets of this type, suggesting to suitable swimmers that they enter. In these cases all entry forms (most galas currently cost around £5 – 7 per event) should be made via Gala Secretary (who will liaise with the Club Coaches on the suitability of each individual swimmers entry request. All applications for entry to licensed galas need to be accompanied with payment - by bank transfer payment – at the same time as application form being submitted. Applications will not be entered unless confirmation of payment has been confirmed via the Club Treasurer.

The Club will process the applications and will support the Runcorn Reps swimmers with poolside volunteers. Please ensure that entries are made before the closing date set by Runcorn Reps NOT the date on the official forms. Our Gala Secretary needs to have some time to input all the requests and times before the official closing date. They too are a volunteer parent and has a proper job too!

What is Licensing?

Meets (galas) do not have to be licensed, but where they are specific ASA guidelines must be followed. Licensed meets are graded level 1-4. Electronic timing must be used on level 1-3 meets. Results from these are submitted to the ASA for inclusion on the National Rankings database (they can be found on the ASA website).

Level One Meets

Are intended to gain times for qualifying for National Championships. Minimum entry times apply equivalent to the ASA 'A' Grade qualifying times. Pools must be either 25m or 50m long.

Level Two Meets

Are intended to gain qualifying times for Regional Championships, although swimmers who achieve a National Qualifying Time at a level two meet may use that time for entry into the National Championships. Qualifying Times and Upper Limit times apply. Upper qualifying times for these meets, swimmers should not be faster than the National qualifying time for the respective age group. Pools must be 25m or 50m long.

Level Three Meets

Are intended for gaining qualifying times for County Championships, although swimmers who achieve a Regional Qualifying Time at a level two meet may use that time for entry into their Regional Championships. Qualifying Times and Upper Limit times apply. Pools must be 25m or 50m long.

Level Four Meets

Are intended for club swimmers and those beginning to enter individual open competition. Qualifying Times sometimes apply. Upper Limit times usually apply. Pools must be at least 25m long.

In practice

This means when you look at the details for an open gala they often state that they are Level 3, Level 2 meets etc. The Level indicates the standard of the meet, what the times can be used for in the future and what level of officials are used. Also higher level galas are more competitive – level 1 being the top galas. To qualify for county championships it is usually initially stated that qualifying times have to be achieved at a Level 3 gala or above. For regional championships qualification has to be at Level 2 or above. As a result most level 2 galas have a large number of regional qualifying swimmers taking part. In other words the standard is very high!

How Does a Team Meet/Gala work?

Team Selection

The Head Coach makes the selections for the team galas – initially selecting the swimmers with the best times. To help in team selection, the Head Coach may take into account current swimming performance rather than just on the swimmer's PB time.

Going to the Meet/Gala

It's usually advisable to aim to get to gala about half an hour before the posted warm up time. This gives you time to park (some venues do not have very good parking, especially when 200 kids with parents descend on them) and may get you near enough to the front of the queue to get in and get a seat!! This is very useful for the parent(s) as each session lasts around 3 hours. Take lots to drink – its very hot in most swimming pools.

What to Take To A Meet/Gala.

A swimmer needs a costume, a pair of goggles, two towels (one for poolside so that between the races they can get dry and stay warm), poolside t-shirt (if they have on) and a swimming hat. It is advisable to take a spare of each item. They need plenty drinks and possibly some food – they are going to be poolside for about 3 hours so some jelly sweets are also good a good idea. You (the parent) will need something to drink (and eat). Some parents have found a cushion useful too. It is usually very warm and humid at a swimming pool, dress in such a way that you can cope with very hot conditions.

At the Gala.

Once at the gala the swimmers have to go off and change and then have to go onto the poolside by themselves. **Parents are not allowed on the poolside** (unless they are one of the volunteers helping to manage the team). One or two people will have been nominated by coaches at Runcorn Reps and they will look after the swimmers while they are poolside.

If you are interested in becoming a poolside manager/helper please make your interest known to any of the coaches or executive committee members.

It can be a bit daunting, especially for younger swimmers in the first couple of galas. There will be coaches, team captains and timekeepers from each club on the poolside to make sure that the swimmers are okay and in the right place for each of their races.

What do the parents and supporters do?

Once in the venue the Runcorn Reps parents often try to sit together mainly so that they have someone to talk to during the long hours and cheer each others swimmers on.

If you're lucky the pool will have proper tiered spectator seating – otherwise you end up sitting very close to the pool. There is also a small charge for spectators, and maybe a raffle or two to raise funds for the hosting club.

The swimmers need to be poolside in time to participate in the warm up, it's quite a sight watching about 100 swimmers in 6 lanes swimming nose to toe!

Once the gala gets going the races happen very quickly and what looks like a daunting list of around 50 races takes around 2 hours. We try to ensure swimmers receive their times in writing where possible, after the meet.

The Swimming

Most galas are split into 2 or more sessions with a separate warm up for each session. The warm up takes about an hour with the swimmers split into older/younger boys and girls. Then it is into the races.

At most galas each event is ranked in the order of the swimmer's entry time (their PB may have changed since the entry was made). The event is arranged in heats starting with the slowest times irrespective of age. As a result it is unlikely that a swimmer will be completely outclassed.

Once the event is complete the recorded times are sorted out and the swimmers sorted into their age groups and the results posted – at which point swimmers will find out whether you have won a medal. Trophies/medals are awarded for anywhere between the top 3 and top six in each of the age groups. It varies with the gala as does the age groups.

So at the end of a great days competition, you set off home having watched your swimmer/s competing for all of about 5 minutes (depending on the number of events) but hopefully clutching some medals (always makes the day) and having recorded one or more new PB's (which is more important than a medal). Hopefully your swimmer will have enjoyed the experience.

P.B.s

For those that don't know PB means Personal Best. There is a bit of an obsession with PB's, you will begin to get obsessed if you child is a keen swimmer!

PB's are recorded in a Runcorn Reps Club database but you may also find it useful to keep a personal record. The Club endeavors to issue each swimmer a certificate of best times so that they know what there PB times are. PBs can be recorded at any time e.g. galas, club championships, club sprint sessions even training.

The ASA also holds a database of all official times recorded at licensed open galas. These are the times needed for most licensed meet (gala) entries. Once your child has recorded some times at a licensed meet you can go to the ASA web site to see where your child is ranked at county, regional and national level.

It's at this point, there is a realization of just how many competitive swimmers there are, and just how good some are! We can all dream of being Olympic swimmers few make it but there is no harm in reaching for the stars – there are around 400,000 competitive swimmers in the UK, of which about 20 go to the Olympics!

Happy competing!!!

Nutrition for Swimmers

Competing in All Day/Weekend Meets

Swimming events can last anything from 20 seconds to 15 minutes. Although each event may be brief, swim meets are usually held over one full day or the weekend, with swimmers typically competing in heats in the sessions in a morning or afternoon. Many events have heat declared winners. In most meets, swimmers may enter a large number of events and be required to swim a number of times in one day with 20 minutes to several hours between races.

So, the most important thing to consider is timing: what you can eat and drink and at what times.

What should I eat during the week leading up to the meet?

- Ensure a high carbohydrate eating plan.
- Include more rice and pasta. Most of the calories in your diet should come from carbohydrates leading up to the event.
- Include nutritious carbohydrate snacks in-between meals. Cereal bars are excellent. They are high in carbohydrate and easy to put in your packed lunch.
- Eating the right balance of increase carbohydrate and less fat is the key.

What should I eat for the Pre-Event Meal?

The pre-event meal is a mini nutrition period that occurs in the 2-3 hours before the start of a meet/gala, usually breakfast. Most swimmers don't understand the exact role of the pre-event meal and eat as much carbohydrates as possible to top-up the muscle's energy stores. This has little effect on increasing the muscle's energy stores.

Remember, to be able to perform well you usually need the energy stores in your muscles to be full. It is the foods eaten during the week leading up to the meet/gala that establishes the amount of energy stored in the muscles. By the actual day of the meet/gala, the energy stores in the muscles are most "full" and there is little that you can do to increase them in the hours before competition. High carbohydrate foods are the best options e.g. breads, cereals, fruit, pasta, rice, though you probably won't want to eat pasta for breakfast!

- Ensure that the meal is low fat - fat takes a long time to digest.
- Useful drinks to have sports drink, juice or simply water.
- Drink about 500 -1000ml of water about 1 hour before the warm-up to 'top up' your hydration levels.
- Avoid the caffeine in cola drinks, coffee, chocolate, and tea – it dehydrates you.

What can I have for Breakfast?

Do Have

- Cereals like oatmeal or oat bran.
- Select whole grain or high fibre cereals.
- Eat breads such as toast or bagels.
- Try milk, skimmed or low fat is best.
- Choose fruit, including fresh fruit and fruit juices.
- One egg with some toast.
- Choose fat free toppings like syrups and jams as an alternative to butter.

Don't Have

- A full fry-up including sausage, ham or bacon.
- Too many eggs, concentrate more on having carbohydrates rather than protein.
- High sugar children's cereals. They will give you a quick fix.
- Fast food breakfast sandwiches. They contain too much fat which takes longer to digest. This will make you feel "stuffed" and lazy in the pool.
- Too much margarine or butter.

And most importantly.....DON'T skip breakfast!!!!!!!!!!!!

Swimming on an empty stomach makes you feel like you have no energy. If you feel too nervous to eat, try a liquid meal such as a fruit smoothie.

What will I need after the Warm up?

These simple guidelines will guide you through recovery after the warm-up and prepare you for the heats.

- Replace fluids immediately after the warm-up.
- Fill your drinks bottle with water (approximately 500ml) and drink all of it!
- Sports drinks have their benefits as they replace fluids and carbohydrate simultaneously, but make sure they are Isotonic. Most of the leading commercial sports drinks are isotonic.
- If there is more than 1 hour between the warm-up and your first heat, try to eat a little something eg a banana. This will stop you feeling hungry and give you more energy.
- The best approach is to eat a little and often during the day in between events.
- Eating too much at once can make you feel heavy, sluggish and lethargic.

What should I have in between events?

Right before an event, it's best not to snack or drink. You **do not** want to start swimming with a stomach full.

- Have a drink about 15 minutes prior to the event. This will allow enough time for it to be absorbed.

- In longer breaks of at least 90 minutes have something to eat as well as some fluids.
- In shorter breaks, use a sports drink or water to replace fluid.
- The indoor pool environment is humid and dehydrating, so DRINK, DRINK, DRINK!!

Keep drinking throughout the day, drink about 500 ml every hour. However, due to the warm environment this may be more.

- Do not wait until you are thirsty until you start drinking. Once you are thirsty, you are already dehydrated.
- IMPORTANT! 2% dehydration leads to as much as a 10-20% decrease in performance!