



FAQs - Volunteering as a Technical Official

Andrew McGowan is a Judge Level 2, Dad to a swimmer in Competition Squad and is the Officials Coordinator for HSC, having started as an official in 2023. Here he answers some of the common questions parents ask about being an official:

Q: What made you want to become an official?

With a daughter who was moving from Development to Skills Squad, I'd started to spend a few weekends at races, and if I'm honest, (while it could still be interesting at times), it was also starting to get pretty boring to sit for half a day watching other swimmers, and there's only so much time I could spend staring at my phone before the battery went, or my backside got numb on those seats. I'd also started to get a little more interested in my daughter's sport and in the club, and had thought about doing something that might help out – Amateur swimming lives on volunteer help, so I read the HSC website and saw mention of the perpetual need for both Team Managers and Officials. I spoke with the Club Chair about volunteering for either, and she shared that the Officials role was often the harder one to find volunteers for, for a couple of reasons. Through talking with other parents I've since learned that there are perceptions, like that being an Official might be complicated, or require skills they might not have, or there could be pressure (a fear of potentially getting something wrong), but I can definitely attest that none of those worries are founded. I've been an official in another sport when I retired from playing, so I suppose I've always found it interesting to know the laws or rules of a sport and how they're applied. In addition, my daughter had been disqualified in her first ever race and then later once more along the way, and I couldn't help explain why at the time. So I thought it might be quite fun to gain a technical understanding of my daughter's sport for free, AND maybe help her avoid making mistakes as she grew.

Q: What was the training like?

The first step was to get registered through the club with Swim England as a volunteer, and then I took the JL1 online course which gives you the background on the timekeeping systems, the structures, and the World Aquatics rules on racing including the key rules around starts, turns, and finishes. This initial course was fairly easy, it took me about 5 hours in total, though it's done at your own pace, and saved as you go so there's no need to spend long hours in one or two sittings or do long Zoom meetings or similar. It's entirely self-led. I think I did 2 or 3 smaller sessions over about a week, sat with a cup of tea on the sofa. I did find just one part slightly tricky but I just persevered – learning through mistakes is often a good thing! You can always talk to your other club officials or coordinator for help if needed. The online course cost £20:00 which I paid for up front, but you can claim this back from the club.

Next came the second part, a period of practical assessment / mentoring, i.e. going to live race meets and putting theory into practice at the pool. A candidate needs at least 15 hours poolside experience (typically it's more like 17-18) to finally qualify as a licenced JL1. That sounds like quite a lot but it's not really, you could potentially log 4-5 hours or more at one meet. In reality you'll likely do 5 or so meets being mentored as a trainee JL1 to get competencies signed off. It's really good to have an experienced peer next to you to discuss things with, you can't really get things wrong.

Q: Did you / do you need to spend any time away from your own swimmer or family?

Not really, and though a few officials may choose to apply to some higher profile events, most officials don't ever have to go somewhere their swimmer isn't at. It's certainly not an expectation. The whole idea is that you only need to go to the same meets that your swimmer does, both in training and once licensed. In the odd case, a trainee official may *choose* to go to a particular session to get a final competency (such as relay takeovers) signed off more quickly, but no it's not required or expected. We mainly just come to the sessions where our swimmer is competing.

Q: Is it enjoyable to be a judge?

Absolutely it's enjoyable, it's really fun to be down on the pool deck with your own swimmer and the club's other swimmers and volunteers. While you do have to concentrate hard, you still gradually get to know more of the club's swimmers as they each pass through your lane with you checking them off the start list, and with repeated events you start to get to know everyone a bit better... swimmers, other officials from around the region, team managers, coaches, everyone. It's really great to be part of the event, making it happen for the swimmers, and not just watching. There's really no pressure, you do feel that you've had all the support needed to get you to a competent level, and you can relax into just doing the job with confidence. And the nice thing is that you're not alone, you're covering each other and working as a team, so even if you make a mistake (say, stopping a watch too early for example), someone has your back. And if I'm unsure of what I've just seen? Then I can consult with the referee, but the benefit of the doubt will ALWAYS go to the swimmer.

Q: What are the upsides?

My own enjoyment of the sport has been increased a lot, and I share a stronger bond through the sport with my daughter, she likes having someone poolside to bother occasionally, and she likes having someone she can discuss swimming with at home. I hadn't really been a competitive swimmer for long in my teens, so this has really helped me be able to talk with her about her passion. During the Olympics we'd talk a lot about the races that day and what infractions we'd spotted. We're nerds like that.

It's quite fulfilling to know the technical aspects of the sport, I'm often asked by swimmers at poolside "What do I do if my goggles come off during this stroke?" or "Am I allowed start from the water in breaststroke?" so to be able to help them understand their sport is rewarding. It's not really about disqualifying swimmers, it's about providing a fair and even race for everyone, and helping them understand what's fair and what may not be. And it's also so interesting to know what is happening behind the scenes, how results are arrived at, how swimmers are seeded, and why there's a 45 year old bald man in that heat of 16 year old lads.... all those things that you sometimes wonder about up in the stand, it all becomes clearer when you become involved in running an event.

Some of the other many upsides are that I've not had to pay to watch my daughter swim since 2023, I literally get the best possible poolside view of the racing, and I no longer need to pack a lunch - the venue feeds me during breaks and keeps me supplied with tea and coffee, plus endless grapes, sweets and squash through the events. And while it's an unpaid volunteer role, there is almost always a thank you gift for each official which may or may not need a corkscrew to open when you get home.

Q: What skills does a potential Official need?

There's no set requirements to be an official, and everyone brings different strengths to the team. I'd say an ability to maintain concentration and focus is probably the most useful thing to have,

because things can happen at a fast rate, but you naturally get better at it with practice. Most parents are, (by dint of having brought a child up), fairly naturally organized, methodical people, even if you might not think so! These are all good things to have, but there's no set list.

What are the downsides?

I genuinely don't think there's any significant downside. If I'm being my most honest, maybe the one tiny thing I miss just a little is being able to bale out of a meet that little bit earlier on a Saturday night when my swimmer has finished her events, but it's a small price to pay for all the good things it's brought. And I prefer to stay until the end now anyway, and there's no hanging around, and no debrief. Once the last swimmer touches the wall, you hand in your paperwork and get on your way home.