

A novice's guide to competitive swimming

Going to your first gala can be quite a daunting experience. The following information should help you prepare for a home gala, so you know what to expect. For open meets (competitions with other clubs), some of the mechanics are slightly different (swimmers generally sit in a team with their coach and there may not be a registration desk) but most of the following applies.

Signing up:

Home Series galas and Club Championships (as well as our open meets (a spring development meet held in May/June and the Neate Meet in September/October), meets hosted by other clubs being promoted by WSSC and County and Regional Championships) can be found [here](#) and online entry instructions [here](#). Emails are also sent out when events are added to this page so watch out for those.

Your child can participate in Home Series galas and Club Championships with Club Train Swim England Membership. For open meets involving swimmers from other clubs (the Neate Meet, for example), your child will need Club Compete Swim England membership.

On the day:

1. Aim to arrive at the pool twenty minutes before the scheduled warm-up begins. The warm-up time will be listed in the meet information.
2. The swimmer should immediately report to the registration desk, so the organisers know they are there and ready to race. Non-registered swimmers will not be included on the start sheets. If you are running late, please contact your child's coach or a friend who can pass on a message and register for you.
3. The swimmer should get swim-ready and report to their coach for the warm-up.
4. After warm-up, your swimmer should towel off, put on dry layers to keep warm and wait for his/her event to be called.
5. You and your child should be aware of the events they are racing in and the order of events during the session.
6. Event marshals will come to where the swimmers are congregating (for younger swimmers, this is likely to be with their parents) to call for an upcoming event. Swimmers need to listen out for their next event.
7. Marshals will inform the swimmer of their lane number and ask that they stand in lane number order, ready to move to the blocks. For faster events (25m and 50m), the marshals need to have swimmers for many heats lined up, ready to race.

The race:

8. When the previous heat has started, the swimmers should step forward and let the timekeeper know their name.
9. At this point the swimmer should also tell the timekeeper if they wish to start in the water so that the timekeeper can indicate this to the referee and starter (who will need to clear the pool after the previous heat).
10. Swimmers should then remove any footwear and outerwear.
11. They should make any adjustments to the footrest on the block at this point.
12. They should make any adjustments to their swimwear, hat and/or goggles at this point.
13. At the start of a race, the referee will blow a series of short whistles to get the swimmers' attention.
14. The referee's long whistle means that the swimmers should mount the blocks and assume a ready position.
15. The swimmers *must not* adjust their swimwear/hat/goggles on the block.
16. The referee will hold out an arm to indicate that s/he is happy the swimmers are ready.
17. The starter then takes over, telling the swimmers to 'take your marks', followed by the starting beep.
18. For backstroke, the single long whistle means 'get in the water'; the referee will then blow again to get the swimmers to place their feet on the wall before handing over to the starter.
19. At the end of the race, the swimmer should touch the timing pad (which covers the end wall). S/he may then hold the lane rope close to the wall, until told to clear the pool. Swimmers should not hold onto the timing pad.
20. Other than for backstroke, for very young or inexperienced swimmers or where a swimmer has indicated that they wish to start in the water, the following heat is started with the swimmers from the previous heat still in the water. This is called an 'over-the-top start'.

After the race:

21. Upon exiting the pool, swimmers should collect their towels and clothing and head to their coach for feedback on their race.
22. Swimmers may also wish to discuss points of self-reflection – what they did well and what they could have improved on in a race.
23. Swimmers should layer up to keep warm for their next race.
24. A print-out of results is placed on the wall by the main door to the pool area after the completion of each event.
25. The results are by age category, whereas the heats are seeded by times; a swimmer who came last in his/her heat may be the fastest in his/her age group.
26. Medal winners should present themselves to the medal table to collect their medals.
27. If a swimmer is disqualified from a race, this is a valuable learning experience. The only way to avoid making the same mistake again is by finding out what s/he did wrong. Please ask the coach to find out if s/he doesn't already know.

General points

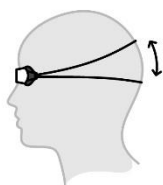
Swimmers should always:

- have something on their feet – sliders, Crocs, flip flops or socks and clean trainers are ideal
- bring layers to wear to keep warm between races
- bring two towels
- bring two pairs of goggles (in case one pair breaks or gets lost)
- bring at least two swimming hats
- bring plenty of water and snacks
- bring something to occupy the time (a book, a game, homework, etc)

Parents:

- When you arrive at a gala you will usually be asked for payment to enter and watch the races. A programme (where available) may be charged in addition to the entrance fee.
- You should be prepared for a long wait! Often a session can be between 2 and 3 hours, during which your child may only be in the water for a couple of minutes. Do consider training as a swimming official – without the correct number of officials, the swimmers' times are unusable for any other competition and the session goes very quickly if you are helping on deck! You do not need any prior experience and will receive mentoring from the friendly cohort of WSSC officials. Further information can be found [here](#).
- The pool area is usually hot. You need to make sure you dress appropriately (even if this isn't appropriate for the weather outside).

Top tips for goggles:



With split strap goggles, place the straps like this; the upper strap should sit on the crown of the head and be distinctly separated from the lateral strap.

Swimmers should consider wearing their goggles between two hats to help secure them in place.

If a swimmer loses his/her goggles at the start of a freestyle race, they may put them back on without penalty. However, if they stop and place their feet on the bottom of the pool, they must not take a step as this is not permitted.

In a backstroke race, the swimmer may adjust their goggles as long as they remain on their back whilst doing so.

Refitting goggles in breaststroke and butterfly is not permissible due to the rules relating to the arm movements.

Disqualification:

The rules of swimming are set down by World Aquatics (formerly FINA). For very young children we show some latitude where reasonable to do so but learning and applying the correct stroke rules is important for swimmers and disqualification, whilst disappointing, can be a useful learning experience. It's better to learn what not to do at a home gala than at a higher-level event!

Some of the most common reasons for disqualification of young swimmers are:

Butterfly:

- Not using a simultaneous two-handed touch at the turns and finish.
- Not bringing the arms forward simultaneously over the water throughout the race.
- Not being on the breast (front) when leaving the wall

Breaststroke:

- Not using a simultaneous two-handed touch at the turns and finish.
- Using more than one butterfly kick at the start and after each turn.
- Not being on the breast (front) when leaving the wall

Backstroke:

- Before the turn, turning onto the front and not starting the turn immediately (the swimmer flips onto the front too early).
- Not leaving the wall on the back.

Individual Medley:

- The most common mistake is for swimmers to flip onto their front to initiate a backstroke turn before the breaststroke leg. In IM, each length must be finished according to the finish rules for the stroke being swum; for backstroke, this means finishing the backstroke length on the back, then leaving the wall on the breast to commence the breaststroke leg.

The comprehensive **WSSC Competition Guide** (which includes a glossary of swimming terminology) is on the Team Unify WSSC website and this can be found [here](#).