

Pre-Season Planning

by Mel Roberts, Tooele, Utah



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It doesn't matter whether your season is in the fall, winter, or spring; a little preparation before will relieve a lot of headaches and stress. More than 25% of high school swimming coaches will either be coaching a different team or coaching for the first time when the season begins. The following suggestions are offered as a guide to all coaches, some were unfortunately learned the hard way. Through NISCA, coaches have the opportunity to share lessons learned and new ideas to help each other and in the end; the swimmers themselves. **"A rising tide lifts all boats."**

Preparation for successful meets

Running a high school meet used to require a ton of people; including timers, runners, place judges, stroke and turn judges, starter, referee, announcer, and scorers (with their undecipherable carbon paper copy of the meet results) with the coach having to wear a couple of different hats. With the advancements made in the computer and electronics industry, running a meet now is much easier if your equipment works and you have the right people helping out.

- ❖ **Starter System** – Very reliable if you keep it charged and it can double as a PA system. Today's models will work only when operating from the battery pack; so make sure it is fully charged before you use it.

The **microphone** is equipped with a button to activate the horn and timing console. It is a delicate instrument, if it is dropped, there will be problems. If possible, make sure it is secured in the holder when not in use and

the cord is either taped down or out of the path of swimmers and officials. Keep a spare on hand, just in case.

- ❖ **Computer console** – Again, very reliable if taken care of and stored properly. Before the season begins check the batteries and replace with new ones if needed; in the event of a power failure you will still be able to run your meet.
- ❖ **Computer operator** – With nearly every one going to electronic entries for meets, you will need someone to run your meet program. (Meet Manager, Easy Meet or similar programs) You will need someone who is familiar with the program and dependable. Your spouse, team manager, parent, or a student from a computer class will fill the bill. This person will need to be at the meet early and be very patient. There will always be last minute changes in the entries due to illness, academic problems, missing the bus, etc. This person is someone you want to treat very special. When they do their job correctly, your meet will go smoothly, the results will be ready after the meet and it will look like the meet just ran by itself.
- ❖ **Touch pads** – pads generally last 7 – 10 years. The banana plug that connects into the deck plate or cable must be kept clean. Lime-A-Way or CLR work well in removing built up deposits on the prongs. Not putting the pads in until the end of warm up will help prolong their life. If possible have 2 spare pads and set up a plan of purchasing 1 new pad each year, especially if your budget does not allow for replacing all pads periodically.
- ❖ **Deck or Cable Connections** – With deck mounts the constant exposure to water can cause a build up in the inlets for the plugs. A cotton swab and alcohol will clean out the opening and insure a good connection.
- ❖ **Scoreboard** – Scoreboards are either of the

light reflective or LED variety. About the only problems you will incur with a score board are sticky digits with the reflective model and blown fuses in the LED model.

- ❖ **Printer** – It is hard to check how much toner or ink you have left in your printer, so try to have an extra cartridge available.
- ❖ **Backstroke flags** – The flags need to have at least 3 pendants over each lane, be 7 feet above the water and be 15 feet from the end wall. Flags are fairly inexpensive and can really help dress up your pool.
- ❖ **Lane lines** – Check for frayed or worn areas in the cable. Swimmers have a tendency to sit on the lane lines during the warm-up. A broken lane line can really cause problems, especially if you don't have an extra one available.

There also needs to be a marker of some kind at the 15 meter mark from both ends, if a different colored disc is not on your lane lines you can use either cones on the deck or “water wings” around the lane lane.

- ❖ **Starting blocks** – Blocks should fit solidly into the pool deck. Single post blocks tend to have of a problem with wobbling. Unsafe blocks will have to be removed for the safety of the swimmer, resulting in all swimmers starting from the bank or in the water.

The top surface of the block should provide good traction for the swimmers.

The bars for the backstrokers should also be checked for stability.

- ❖ **Sound System** – Make sure you have a copy of the National Anthem. Many meets also play music during the longer races.

Make up a tape or CD with some of the great “Rock and Roll” songs. Bill Stetson, NISCA Awards Chairman, came up with the

idea of playing the “*William Tell Overture*” (Lone Ranger theme) during the 400 yd. Free Relay while his son was swimming for the University of Wyoming. It is great way to finish the meet.

- ❖ **P. A. System** – If you use a remote microphone, check the battery and replace if necessary.
- ❖ **Stop Watches** – New batteries may be needed since the liquid crystal models will run continuously. Have a few extra batteries on hand for the season.
- ❖ **Officials** – How you get officials will vary from school to school and state to state. Officials may be paid or volunteer their services, be assigned from a central office or it is left up to host school to get them. No matter where you are, there will be clinics for swimming officials offered either from the state association or the coaches association. Find parents who have several children high school age or younger and get them involved. Offer to pay their expenses to get certified and then get the school to pay the officials at your meets.
- ❖ **Timers** – One of the worst ways to begin a meet is with this statement: “*We cannot begin the meet until we have 5 more timers.*” There are several available avenues to get timers.

Cheerleaders – contact the cheerleader advisor and ask if they could send 5 or 6 cheerleaders to time at your home meets, generally if there is not a football, basketball or wrestling meet going on at the same time they will oblige your request.

Parents – There is not be a lot of pressure involved with being a timer and they will have a great view of the meet in addition to supporting their child.

Boy / Girl swimmers – If their seasons are different, the boy's team can time for the girls meets and visa versa. This will also help form a

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closer alliance between the two teams.

Boy / Girl Friends – Get members of your team to ask their friends to come a volunteer as timers.

Age Group Swimmers – This will give the younger swimmers a chance to see how much fun high school swimming can be as well as providing a valuable service for you.

No matter where you get your timers from give them a team T-shirt and have the meet announcer recognize them and thank them for their service. It doesn't take much to let them know they are appreciated.

- ❖ **Clipboards, pencils, etc.** You will need enough clipboards for the timers, starter and referee along with a supply of sharpened pencils.
- ❖ **Posters** – Posters for the pool and school advertising your meets will do a lot to advertise your team and build their morale. Once they are up, you need to make sure they have current information on them. You can also assign someone to get announcements of home meets in the daily bulletin or announcements for the day of a meet and the results the day after.
- ❖ **Rules and meet procedures** – take a few minutes each day or a portion of a practice to go over the order of events, rules, and meet protocol. Assuming everyone is familiar with these items will come back to haunt you during the season.
- ❖ **Intra-squad meet** – Put everything together for an intra-squad meet prior to the start of the season. Divide the team up equally and let the captains come up with the entries for the meet. This will give them a chance to know what it feels like to be a coach. Exposing them to last minute changes needed when someone is ill or doesn't show up for the meet, new swimmers asking how much longer until their event, what's the score, and ever present "so-and-so is on my relay and we can't find

them." This will give the officials a chance to practice and you can check out all of the equipment.

PRE-SEASON MEETINGS

Team Meeting

2 - 5 weeks prior to the start of meets, you should hold an introductory meeting for potential team members for the purpose of introduction to the season as well as to learn more about who your team will be.

You can hand out school forms to be completed, go over team rules, cover the schedule for practices, discuss the schedule of meets, talk about 2-a-day and Saturday practices, if you plan on having them, and talk about specific team items, such as suits, caps, warm-ups, T-shirts, etc. You can also discuss your hopes and goals for the season. About one week prior to the start of the season, it's smart to include one more meetings to cover similar material and also to catch any swimmers who may have missed the first meeting.

These meetings are also good opportunities to recruit new swimmers, as they can find out what the swim team is all about. At the second meeting, make sure all forms required by the school are given back to you. Each school will have different paperwork requirements before an athlete starts practice. Make sure you check carefully with you Athletic Director and understand what is required of you in this regard.

Parents Meeting

A meeting for swim team parents before the season begins is most beneficial. At this meeting, you can cover your expectations from their children during the season, and what you consider to be the benefits to the child from their participation. You can use much of the same information you have provided to the team members for this meeting as well, so parents are well aware of what their children are being told.

Other areas to be covered may include:

- ❖ An introduction to you and your background

- ❖ Your philosophy and what you want to accomplish
- ❖ How team members are to dress on the day of a meet
- ❖ Eligibility requirements, fees, physicals, and other school policies concerning participation in extracurricular activities
- ❖ Fundraising and how they can help
- ❖ How many team members will be traveling to away meets and how they are selected
- ❖ Lettering requirements and criteria for any team awards during the season or at the conclusion of the season
- ❖ How the events a swimmer will swim are determined
- ❖ How you select the relay teams
- ❖ Qualifying procedures for District, Region, State, and any other big meets
- ❖ Explain opportunities to volunteer
 - Serve as timers for home meets
 - Scoring at meets
 - Becoming certified officials
 - Operating the computers and timing system
 - Help chaperone on overnight trips, etc.

Parental volunteers - These get harder and harder to find as parents are more and more involved with earning a living and other activities. However, their help is very important in everything from getting swimmers to practice, to helping run home swim meets, to helping with social events and team activities. What your parent volunteers can do is limited only by your needs and their willingness to help.

Spending time recruiting good parent volunteers is a worthwhile venture and some will continue to volunteer long after their own children are finished swimming.

How to recruit them? *Have a defined task and ASK for their help*

Some parents will be totally new to the sport and will need a short course in what competitive swimming is all about. Having a handout with the fol-

lowing information will be valuable to the parents:

- ❖ The order of events
- ❖ How the meets are scored
- ❖ The basic rules
- ❖ How dual, invitational, and championship meets are conducted
- ❖ Addresses and directions to the pools for away meets

Your goal is not to make them swimming experts, but simply to provide them enough information to allow them to enjoy watching their children compete. **Allow time for them to ask questions at the end.**

Other critical items that should be discussed are:

- ❖ Establish that when parents have any concerns, they should **CALL THE COACH FIRST!**
- ❖ Parental questions are welcome, but please, at the correct time! (Designate when to and how to contact you.) You teach, you coach, and you have a life outside of school.
- ❖ Ask for the parents' support in looking for additional swimmers to join the team. They are great allies.

Make sure you provide plenty of notice and time before the meeting to all parents. Mailing notices to the parents is the best way. You will be very lucky if half of the handouts you give students

ever find their way to the parents. Parents appreciate being communicated with on team activities. (It is not always easy to get accurate information out of teenage children at home!)

Tryouts

You can announce "tryouts" as a way to build interest in the team. You can test for ability to swim all four

strokes, ability to do turns, starts, and similar skills.

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This can then become an inventory of which athletes have what skills entering the season. You can then revisit the inventory after the season to demonstrate to the team how much they have learned.

If you are in the position of using “tryouts” to “cut” the number of people on your squad (and this is unfortunate), you must have clear-cut and well defined objective measures of what “makes” the team and what doesn’t. Examples may include something like:

- You need to swim 50 yards freestyle in under 36 seconds, or
- You need to be able to complete a set of 10 times 50 yards on a 1:00 interval.

Anything other than an objective measure is sure to be challenged. Hopefully, you will never have to cut anyone from your team, and you can use the “tryout” simply as a way to draw attention to the first week of practice, and then post a list with everyone’s name on it at the end of the week, for those who “made” the team.

At the same time you hold “tryouts,” or meet with the team for the first time, you need to start accumulating information on the swimmers. You will want to send home or have the athletes fill out basic information forms to include information such as: name, address, telephone number, parents’ names, parents’ phone number (work & home), emergency contact, list of any previous swimming experiences, and other swim coaches they have worked with.
