

## Successful Swimming with Limited Pool Time

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Frequently high school swim coaches complain about the lack of pool time available for their teams. These complaints are not unfounded because in many parts of the country, such as in New England, multiple teams often share a single facility and practice time is often limited to 1 to 1 ½ hours per day. Thus, during the dual meet season, when teams often compete in two meets per week, practice time amounts to only three to five hours per week. Despite the limited pool time and the ruminations of swim coaches, swimmers and teams can still be successful on limited training time. The following eight suggestions can help coaches translate limited pool time into meaningful athletic achievement.

1. **Establish and communicate long term practice goals.** Just as every team sets goals for the season, such as winning the league championship, defeating a primary rival, or qualifying relays for championship competition, long term practice goals are equally important to establish. For example, interval times at the start of the season are likely to come down by the middle of the season. Have goals established for practice types and training intensity levels. Communicate the goals to the swimmers so that they can have practice targets as well.
2. **Make practice meaningful.** In addition to setting season long practice goals, make practice meaningful by establishing goals for individual practices and training sets. Communicate the purpose of each practice, whether it be low-impact training after a strenuous competition, an aerobic fitness building practice, or high intensity lactate training. Furthermore, be certain to prepare practice early, and either print handouts or write the practice on a white board. Preparation conveys purpose and instills additional meaning to practice time.
3. **Incorporate mental training.** Include sets that challenge swimmers mentally as well as physically. Mental challenges involve creative sets that incorporate drill and stroke changes throughout a set, or require that swimmers know all their interval times. Mental training reinforces technique, heightens concentration, and ensures that the practice is focused and purposeful.
4. **Emphasize technique.** When faced with limited pool time, a coach may frequently attempt to “hammer out” as many yards as possible. This is especially true at the start of the season because the first meet often looms only two weeks after the first practice. Yet coaches need to be wary of sacrificing technique for yards. Given the “shortness” of most high school events, efficient strokes and turns can help an athlete minimize any limitations created by abbreviated training time. Coaches should therefore incorporate significant drill time into warm up and even practice.

5. **Limit the equipment.** In an hour long practice, one three minute break between sets translates into five percent of practice time. Equipment such as hand paddles, pull buoys, kick boards and fins, while adding meaningful diversity to long practices, can easily create disruptive interruptions to short practices. Thus, the benefits of equipment training can be quickly offset by disruptions to limited pool time. If incorporated into practice, equipment use must be managed efficiently.

6. **Get creative.** Training without equipment requires that practice be diversified in other ways. Creativity, including the aforementioned drill work, is the best way to diversify practice. Underwater swimming, odd length swims, variations to intensity levels, challenge sets, and a host of other training methods enhance creativity, aid in mental training, and help to make practice meaningful.

7. **Race to train.** Coaches often use the slogan “train to race” to underscore the importance of using practice to learn how to compete. The high school dual meet season, with its compliment of ten to twelve dual meets, necessitates that meets are also training exercises. This is especially true for a team with limited practice time. While no coach expects a swimmer to achieve a best time on every performance, every coach should expect a best effort from every swimmer in every race. Dual meets offer a great opportunity to work on race training, including pacing, breathing patterns, and technique experimentation. If pool time is brief, get the most out of the time in the water, and water time includes competition.

8. **Find the time.** Often, pool time exists where it might not be realized. For example, make sure that every swimmer on the team gets in for the warm-up session after diving. Also, many meets often end prior to schedule. If ten or fifteen minutes of pool time exist after a meet, use the time for a post-competition cool down. A cool down can squeeze in an extra 600 or 700 yards on a day not technically dedicated to practice; over the course of a season, the extra yardage adds up. Most importantly, a cool down set after a competition helps to minimize soreness and injury.

All coaches would love more training time for their athletes, yet limited training time does not have to be a barrier to success. Effective communication along with creative, purposeful, and efficient training can ensure outstanding performances for all high school swimmers and teams.