



Swimming for Excellence: Fundamentals to Focus

Swimming is a great sport for people young and old and can be a foundation for health and success. You can build strength, endurance, confidence, grit, and become a better leader and teammate in the process. Swimmers often have the highest GPA of their athletic departments and even across the entire student body, and with the work required, swimmers are often highly sought after to pursue professional careers that require long term commitment and mastery.

When a child first joins the swim team, we want them to build relationships, learn skills, and learn to learn, while having fun in the water. Through competition settings, they learn to challenge themselves, evaluate their progress, find places to get better, and go into the next phase of “training” with a growing sense of purpose and connection between behaviors, choices, and outcomes.

“At a young age, kids should explore, they should do a lot of different things so that they can find something they truly love. As you get older, you’ll find out where your strengths are and you’ll slowly start to gravitate toward that niche. With that being said, at some point kids do need to move forward in one direction. That depends on your maturity, your drive, your objective and your skill level. For some it could be 16, for others it could be 11. Everyone is different.” [Don Heidary](#), former president of the American Swim Coaches Association

Sometime between the ages of 11 and 16, our kids start to find a direction that makes sense for their body and what they enjoy. Some kids fall in love with one sport early and they love everything about it. Some kids enjoy all sorts of land, water, individual and team sports, and that is also a great opportunity for development and exploration. This natural aligning process also happens inside of a sport as some kids fall in love with breaststroke, pitching, being a goalie or being in the defensive backfield.

In every activity, whether athletic, artistic, musical or academic, we learn the fundamental skills, like how to hold a brush, racket, bow or bat, and get familiar with the subject as a whole and all the possibilities within it. The same is true in swimming as the kids learn the basic rules of being in the water and the strokes and turns involved in the events. As they develop, they may find that some skills or strokes come more easily than others, and that’s perfectly fine.

Learning can take many forms and paths, but it’s important to keep in mind, that just because a child acquires proficiency more easily in a stroke or event, does not mean that they will ultimately find high performance in that same stroke or event. The learning process is different from the mastery process, so at the learning phase of development, we want all of our swimmers to become proficient with the fundamentals of the sport and explore all sorts of ways to engage in all it has to offer.

There’s a saying in swimming, “you don’t choose your events, your events choose you.” It’s important to try all sorts of events as we develop our fundamentals so we have a broad base to explore from and understand how the fundamentals contribute across all areas of performance. Just as there are benefits to a general liberal arts education for knowledge development so too in sport and especially swimming.



Becoming a well-rounded athlete is needed to build a firm foundation in order to pursue mastery in specific performances later.

At some point, performance naturally starts trending in a more specific direction as athletes discover and hone their strengths. During this time, it's important that they continue to expand their skills broadly and to build character through tackling their weaknesses. An early pop of performance may indicate their ultimate destination in the endeavor, but it also may be the first of many bursts of light revealing potential areas of high performance. As we go through this phase, we get glimpses of our future, but we're not quite done with our development. It's important to hold steady and build the richest foundation we can to support the last two phases of focus and full immersion.

In all activities, abilities begin to become more and more clear. Sometimes this is purely genetic, we come with different muscle fibers, natural base aerobic strengths, arm and legs of different lengths and joints with different levels of inherent flexibility. These also respond to training stimulus in different ways and when we go through puberty we may end up completely different on the other side. Sometimes our abilities are determined by our mental capacities and how fast we can learn certain skills and we find that our pace of learning in one area far outperforms our pace of learning in another.

As this process finds its way, we lean into the opportunities afforded by our minds and bodies as best we can and find a way to contribute to the team using the tools we have and can develop. When we get to high school, we start being selected for various event programs. In high school swimming, athletes can swim a total of 4 events including both team relays and individual events. At the club level, a championship program can range anywhere from 2-6 events, with up to 4 events scoring Club Excellence team points.

The chart below represents USA Swimming's development model, an example of the highest level of performance in youth swimming. Swimmers at an early age are primarily evaluated on their general development (IMX) over specific events, but by 14 years of age specific events have already taken precedent over the general (IMX).

	Age of Performance	1st Priority	2nd Priority	3rd Priority
Zone Camp	Girls 12-13 Boys 13-14	Top 7 IMX scorers by single age/gender	Fastest LCM performer in each Olympic event	
National Camp	14-16 year olds	Fastest 3 LCM performers in each Olympic event	Top 6 IMX girls scorers ages 14-15, Top 6 IMX boys scorers 15-16	
Junior National Team	Under 18	Fastest 2 LCM performers in each Olympic event	3rd & 4th ranked swimmers in the 100 and 200 Freestyle	Female athletes with a top 75 world ranking Male athletes with a top 100 world ranking
Senior National Team	None	Fastest 6 LCM performers in each Olympic event		

As swimmers enter high school, they will contribute to their teams and qualify for enrichment opportunities through high performance in a handful of events, and if they enter the college recruiting process at the end of their sophomore year in high school, colleges will be looking for the highest potential scoring program at dual meets, their conference meet, and their national championship meet.



In college, athletes can swim a combination of 5 relays and 3 individual events in a championship meet, 2 individual events and 2 relays in dual meets. We want to showcase our swimmers to attract the attention of college coaches as they look for the best possible fit for their programs. Our priority is to prepare our swimmers to be leaders both in and out of the pool so they can secure positions at the school they desire and set themselves up for their adult lives. Ultimately, we'd like our swimmers' athletic performance to open the door to academic experiences they may not have had access to without their ability to contribute as a student-athletes. SwimMAC is committed to supporting our student-athletes through this process.

Through swimming, our children learn about the water, learn about the sport, and explore their talents. As they immerse themselves in SwimMAC, they learn about the process of developing themselves as people and homing in on excellence, and through the process of chasing excellence in swimming, they learn how to chase excellence in life.

SwimMAC: Empowering young people to be champions in life through excellence in swimming.