

Including Swimmers With a Disability:

A Guide for Meet Directors and Safety Directors

Including athletes with a disability in your meet is easy. The goal remains the same as it has always been – to make the meet a safe, successful, and fun experience for all swimmers. There is very little to add to the list of “things to do” when including athletes with a disability. A positive attitude, knowledge of LSC policies regarding inclusion, and common sense will see you through.

What Constitutes a Disability?

The USA Swimming rules permit disability accommodations and exceptions for swimmers who have “a permanent physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.” This definition encompasses swimmers who are deaf; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities such as mental retardation, severe learning disabilities, or autism; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.

The meet referee is responsible for determining whether a swimmer satisfies this definition and is therefore entitled to special accommodations when competing. The meet director is responsible for welcoming the swimmer with a disability, implementing LSC policies on inclusion, and providing needed disability accommodations. The meet director and safety director share the responsibility of ensuring the safety of all participants, including swimmers, coaches, spectators, and meet workers who have a disability.

LSC Policies on Inclusion

Your LSC should have a policy about the inclusion of athletes with a disability in LSC meets. This policy might specify exceptions to entry qualifying times or flexible seeding procedures. Make certain that the policy is printed in the entry information packet and that meet management personnel, including the entry chairperson, clerk of course,

and computer operator know, understand, and uphold the LSC policies.

- **Meet information.** Include a sentence or paragraph in the meet information welcoming athletes with a disability and asking them to provide advance notice of necessary accommodations.
- **Eligibility.** Describe the time standards provisions and any other eligibility criteria in the meet information. An example of an LSC policy might be the waiving of time standards for athletes with a disability in events 100 y/m or shorter.
- **Classification.** Ignore references to classification. Classification is a method of grouping swimmers for competition according to ability/disability characteristics. Classification is used at major disability-specific meets, but is impractical at LSC meets because there are usually too few swimmers with a disability, because LSC officials are typically not prepared to make classification-specific rule exceptions, and because authorized classifiers are usually not available at local meets.
- **Seeding.** If special seeding is required, contact the meet referee as soon as possible so that s/he can determine the best way to include the swimmer without a negative impact on the timeline or without undue focus on the swimmer during the meet. One possibility is to allow the swimmer with a disability to compete at a shorter distance than others in the event, e.g., a 100m distance within a 200m event. Another option would be to have the swimmer with a disability seeded within an event for a younger age group. Keep in mind, however, that most athletes prefer to train and compete with their same-aged peers. The times for any athlete with a disability in special seeding circumstances should be incorporated into the actual event for the proper age group and distance. If such an event is not offered in the meet, the swim should be treated as a special event.
- **Awards.** Determine whether you wish to offer special awards for athletes with a disability. Remember that recognition is more valued when it is earned and that awards such as ribbons and medals are usually valued more by younger and novice swimmers.

Disability Accommodations

Meet directors should provide accommodations upon request for swimmers, spectators, and volunteers who have disabilities. Most accommodations needed at a swimming competition are common-sense adaptations to meet procedures and facility preparation that involve little or no cost to the meet host. In some cases, the swimmer with a disability simply needs your permission to provide his/her own accommodations, such as a personal assistant. The following guidelines should be useful to meet directors; however, remember that accommodations should be tailored to the individual's unique needs.

- **Personal assistants.** Personal assistants (usually provided by the swimmer) provide disability-specific help to the swimmer. For example, some deaf swimmers may choose to have an interpreter with them on deck so that they have access to announcements and verbal instructions from officials. Personal assistants help blind swimmers to locate and step onto the starting block, and they notify the swimmer of an impending turn or finish by tapping the swimmer's body with a soft-tipped pole. Service dogs help blind swimmers to be more independent, and should be permitted on the pool deck. A buddy can help swimmers who have cognitive disabilities by facilitating communication and by reminding the swimmer about meet routines and procedures. Swimmers with physical disabilities may need help with tasks such as personal care and entry and exit from the water. Personal assistants are not required to be members of USA Swimming; however, they may not coach (unless registered as coach members) and must not interfere with meet operations.
- **Communication.** Use common sense when determining effective ways of communicating with swimmers who have a disability. Communicate with deaf swimmers through an interpreter, coach, or written word. Ask meet workers to read the scoreboard or printed information for blind swimmers. Use language that swimmers with cognitive disabilities can understand. It is polite to sit or kneel when speaking to a wheelchair user or someone of short stature so that the swimmer doesn't need to look up to see you.

- **Equipment.** Equipment needs will depend upon the swimmer's disability. Place the strobe light where it can be seen by deaf swimmers and be prepared to move the strobe light or use an auxiliary strobe light for different events. Mats at the ends of the pool facilitate safe transfers for wheelchair users. A hydraulic lift is not required, but if one is available, it should be used if needed and requested by the swimmer. Dwarf swimmers appreciate step stools, especially in locker rooms, so that they can reach shower controls and other appliances.
- **Facility.** Keep the pool deck and other traffic areas as free from obstacles as possible to accommodate swimmers who are blind or who use mobility equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches, or walkers. Heavy doors should be propped open or temporarily removed. Wheelchair seating should be provided on-deck or in the spectator stands as needed. Elevators should be accessible to persons with a disability.
- **Meet procedures.** Notify key meet workers such as the announcer, clerk of course, and awards personnel when disability accommodations are needed, and ask them to provide needed services as unobtrusively as possible. Post heat sheets and results low enough for wheelchair users and dwarf swimmers to read. Be cognizant that some swimmers with a disability need opportunities to earn qualifying times in the 50 y/m stroke events and the 150 y/m individual medley for the USA Swimming Disability Championships. Offering these events as time trials or special events is a great service. Providing proof-of-time for records or meet entry purposes is another service that should be provided upon request.

Safety at Meets

Many meet directors fear that safety is a bigger concern for persons with a disability than for other participants; however, this is rarely the case. With a few common-sense precautions, most safety risks can be minimized or eliminated. Remember to consider all participants when developing your meet safety plan – swimmers, coaches, spectators, and meet workers.

- **Emergency signals.** Consider the adequacy of emergency signals for swimmers, coaches, spectators, and meet workers who have disabilities – will they know an emergency signal has been activated? Visual signals are needed by persons who are deaf, and auditory signals are needed by persons who are blind.
- **Emergency evacuation plan.** A copy of the evacuation plan should be printed in the heat sheets or meet program to inform participants what to do in the event of an emergency. The evacuation plan should specify assistance for persons who are blind or who those have cognitive or physical disabilities. Remember that elevators should not be used in case of fire; therefore, wheelchair users may need alternate exit routes or help in negotiating stairs.
- **Slippery pool deck.** A slippery deck is especially hazardous for swimmers who use mobility equipment such as crutches, canes, and walkers. Many slips and falls can be prevented by keeping the pool deck as clean and dry as possible and by the use of personal assistants.
- **Cluttered pool deck.** A cluttered pool deck impairs mobility for swimmers who are blind and for those who use wheelchairs or other mobility equipment. Safety marshals should help to keep traffic areas clear of obstacles to prevent accidents. Personal equipment such as wheelchairs, prostheses, or other mobility equipment can pose a hazard to officials and swimmers at the starting end of the pool, and should be moved to a safe location while the swimmer is warming-up or racing.
- **Sharp or rough surfaces.** Sharp-edged lane lines may be an unavoidable problem for some swimmers who are blind, causing cuts, scrapes, and bruises. Mats at the ends of the pool help prevent injuries to wheelchair users and other swimmers with physical disabilities when they transfer in and out of the pool. Towels on rough-surfaced starting blocks help prevent skin injuries for swimmers who start from kneeling or sitting positions.

Remember....

- The primary ingredients for successful inclusion of swimmers with a disability are a positive attitude and common sense.
- Use common-sense disability accommodations that enable swimmers with a disability to have a fun, successful, and safe meet experience.
- Key meet workers should be informed about relevant LSC policies and the need to provide disability accommodations.
- Consider the needs of participants with a disability when developing the meet safety plan.

Resources

Meet directors and safety directors who need additional information are encouraged to contact USA Swimming headquarters:

USA Swimming
One Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
(719) 578-4578
www.usa-swimming.org

Other sources of information include the USA Swimming rule book (especially Article 202.2.12 and Article 105) and LSC policies on inclusion.

Acknowledgements

This brochure was developed by the Adapted Swimming Committee as a service to meet directors and safety directors.

This “Guide for Meet Directors and Safety Directors” is part of a series of five brochures on including swimmers with a disability. USA Swimming has also published guidelines for swimmers and parents, coaches, officials, and local swimming committees.

The mission of the Adapted Swimming Committee is the full inclusion of swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming programs.