

The Swimming Competition – What's it all about?

So you're decided to take the plunge (literally) and you've signed up for the next swimming competition.

If this is your first competition, the second, or even if you've not competed for many years, this article will hopefully help you prepare for the big day and enjoy your racing on the day.

Preparing Mentally for Racing

As a Masters swimmer, it's almost certain that swimming is not the only thing going on in your life. This means there are many variables that will influence your preparation for the competition, such as, how much sleep did you (and/or your kids) get the previous few nights, how much beer/wine you drank recently, whether you had any recent colds, and so on. The key message is to 'roll with the punches' and accept that you might not turn up to a swim meet in top condition. Just try to make the most of the situation and aim to enjoy yourself, knowing that you're taking part in something that will be of benefit physically and mentally. While you may have noticed there can be emphasis on breaking records, winning relays, etc., we are all at this stage in life, mostly competing against our own expectations, and thus, ourselves. From your training sessions, and by discussing with your coach and swimming friends, you can start to build your own set of expectations that will guide you during your swim meets.

The Swim Meet Schedule

Most pool competitions at SA Aquatic (Marion) commence with a 30 minute warm-up period starting at 8:30 am. The first race or event then commences at about 9:00 am. During the running of the events from 9am, the two end lanes (0 and 1) are usually kept for warm-up and cool-down laps at any time during the competition. For safety reasons, be sure not to dive into these lanes – the meet officials will warn you! There is usually a dedicated lane (lane 9) for diving practise during the initial warm-up period (8:30 to 9:00 am).

Each event (e.g. 100 metres freestyle) is organised in a series of heats of up to 8 swimmers (one per lane). Swimmers are assigned to heats according to their nominated time on their entry form. The heats are ordered from slowest to fastest. The more popular events like 50m and 100m freestyle can have up to 10 or more heats.

The competition programme can be obtained from the MSSA website and it lists the swimmers assigned to each heat and event. It's a good idea to bring a printed copy with you and note down what lane and heat you're assigned to. Don't worry though, your club captains and other fellow club swimmers will be on hand to help you in case you can't remember your lanes, heats and events.

Warming up before your race

It's important to warm up before your race. Usually, the entire pool is used for warming up laps between 08:30 and 09:00, before the race events start. Once the races have commenced, lanes 0 and 1 are usually dedicated to warm up laps if the competition takes place at the SA Aquatic Centre Marion (see image – lanes 0 and 1 are to the left). At other pools, it's usually one or two end lanes that are used. It's a good idea to do a few warm up laps about 30 minutes before your race, in order to loosen up shoulders and legs. Doing a few skill sets is also highly recommended such as one-arm freestyle, kicking only, or catch-up. This helps to reinforce good technique habits just prior to your races.

Another aspect you can practise is your diving. An end lane (Lane 9 at SA Aquatic Marion) is usually reserved for diving practice during the 08:30 to 09:00 period prior to the events . If you're new to it, learning to dive efficiently can take some time, so it's best to put the effort into diving practise during your training sessions (ask your coach!). Diving practise is therefore best used to get a 'feel for the block' and maybe tinker with a few minor changes to your diving setup (e.g. block back position etc..).



Marshalling before your Race

Before each event, swimmers are called out to meet and line up at the marshalling area. This is often at the eastern or starting end of the pool corner near lane 0 (see image – left side far end of pool). Here, the marshalling coordinator will check off your name on the event list, and then invite you to sit down on the chair labelled with your lane number lined up with other swimmers in your heat. As the races progress, you'll move forward in the rows of chairs until your heat is up next. At stage you'll be invited to walk to your lane and stand behind the timekeepers.

The Race Start and Dive (or in-water start in case you don't want to dive)

This is often the trickiest part of the race and many first time competitors worry that they'll do something wrong and/or worse, be disqualified. First of all, just relax. If it's your first time in a race, and you've never seen one before, have a look at some previous races to get a feel for the procedures. On the internet you can find many swimming races (youtube etc.) so it's worth having a look at the pre-race procedures.

So, let's run through the sequence of events to start a freestyle, breaststroke or butterfly race:

Once the competitors from the previous race have cleared the pool, you can stand just behind or adjacent the block for your lane, and adjust the block back position you prefer (it's best to try this during the diving practise at the start of the meet – the number #3 or #4 setting for the SA Aquatic Marion pool blocks should work for most people).

Swimming starting blocks these days often have a movable back position which allows you to place your feet in a forward/backward position (one foot on the back position, and one with toes just over the front of the block). It's perfectly up to you if you want to use this type of dive setup as the

previous method (both feet at the front of the block) is perfectly fine. It may take some time to get used to the new 'split feet' or track method so it's best to try a few practise dives at the start of the meet, or discuss it with your coach at a training session. If block is an older type, you can place both feet at the front of the block.

After the starting judges long whistle, you can climb up to the block and get your feet into the correct position to dive. At this stage, you don't need to crouch down to take your marks, so just relax in a half bending position, taking care not to fall in. You're allowed to ask for assistance in climbing onto the block and your helper is allowed to stay in contact with you just prior to the starter's "take your marks" command. As mentioned above, you're also allowed to start in the water.

The starter will then say "take your marks", at which time you should reach down to touch the front of the block, or if you can't bend that far, get ready to dive. Try to remain as still as possible during this time. After a few seconds or so, the starter will blow the start bell or horn and then you're off, and you can commence your race.

For backstroke races, the sequence is slightly different. The starter will blow the whistle and you can then jump into the water and grab the starting handle in relaxed fashion. At the starters command "take your marks", you can lift yourself a bit higher in the water in prone position. When the starter blows the start bell or horn, you can then spring backwards as fast as you can, and you're off. The backstroke start can be a tricky for newcomers so it's worth taking some time to practise it during training or in the warm up dive lane at the start of the competition.

The Race Itself

Your approach to racing depends on many factors, as discussed earlier. The most important fact is that racing in any sport relies on how you trained for that race. In this case racing involves swimming at maximum effort (usually) which leaves little time to think about all of the technical things your coach may have said to you in the training pool.

During the race, you'll be busy just putting the effort into going fast, so it's best to concentrate on no more than one technical aspect and making that your race strategy. This could include breathing every three strokes in the first 2 laps, and then every 2 strokes thereafter, making sure you kick hard off the wall following each turn, or concentrating on kicking hard (in a short sprint race). By focusing on one aspect in each race you'll gradually learn what skills or aspects can benefit your performance. With practise, you can put these together.

See you at the next pool swim meet!