

# An all-you-need-to-know guide to competition

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Swimming competitions - also referred to as **meets** or **galas** - offer a chance for swimmers to challenge themselves racing against others, as well as forming a valuable component of their training in competitive swimming. Almost all young swimmers find racing an enormously enjoyable part of their swimming. However, it can also be very daunting – both for the swimmer and the parent! The guide below will helpfully clear up some questions you may have about competition and allow you and your swimmer to enjoy the experience of competing.

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## What are the different ways in which my child can compete?

### Internal competitions

The club runs several of its own competitions during the year. We run an **open meet** (see below), in November where other swimming clubs are also invited, while the others are just Newbury swimmers. The main internal competition is club championships, which will be held across several sessions in June/July. All swimmers are strongly encouraged to enter this event; being held in their home pool and limited to club members, it is a great opportunity for the younger swimmers to experience formal racing for the first time. In addition, three further rounds are held for the 400m, 400m Individual Medley and the 800m/1500m, which is mainly for Challengers and above. For swimmers nine and over this is an ideal opportunity to gain county qualifying times for the County Championships, which take place early in the following year.

### Open meets

Besides its own galas, the club also attends a number of **open** meets. These are galas held by clubs elsewhere that are open to any swimming club to enter. A calendar of the events the club will be entering over the next few months is available on the website. Swimmers should only enter events that the club has selected to attend and that have been recommended for their squad. Competitions are carefully selected to fit in with your child's training programme and entering other events can have a negative effect on their training. If in doubt, you should check with your child's squad rep or coach to find out if the competition is appropriate for your child.

Open meets are **Licensed** by the ASA. Levels 1 and 2 are the highest grades, with Level 1 meets always swum **long course**. This means that they are swum in a 50m pool instead of a **short course** (25m) pool. L1 and L2 meets will normally have a minimum entry time. This means that your swimmer must have previously swum faster than the given time at a licensed meet. Often, they will have had to have swum the time in the last 12 months. All licensed times are recorded on the ASA Rankings Database. You can find your swimmer, their swimming history and their recorded best times at [this link](#). Level 3 and 4 meets will often have maximum ('not faster than') entry times for each event. If your swimmer has swum faster than this time in competition previously, they cannot enter the event. If they swim faster than the 'not faster than' time during the competition, they may be given a 'speeding ticket' rather than being included in the medal rankings.

L1 meets are important because only times from these events can be used as an entry time for the **National Championships**. Levels 2 and 3 meets can be used to enter any other meet while times from Level 4 meets are suitable for most meets, but NOT the regional championships.

## Invitation only meets

Some clubs choose to invite only certain clubs to their **Open meets** in order to limit numbers. Other than this, these meets are the same as any open meet.

## Age Group championships

Competing at any of these championships is a great target and achievement for young swimmers. There are four basic levels: **County, Regional** (South East Region), **National** and **British Championships**. Qualifying times are required to enter each of these events. **County championships** are usually held early spring and qualifying times can be downloaded from the [Berks and South Bucks](#) web site. All of A squad plus a number from B squad and Challengers reach the level to enter the county championships each year.

Newbury are in the [South East Region](#) and these **Regional Championships** are usually held May bank holiday weekends and into June. Qualifying times (which are regularly reviewed) are somewhere between County and National qualifying times. The majority of swimmers in A squad have reached Regional standard plus a few from B squad.

The **National Age Group and Youth championships** and the **British Championships** have both summer and winter versions. The main ones are held in the summer, usually at end of July to the beginning of August. The British Championships are an invitation only meet for the fastest 24 swimmers in each event. The next fastest swimmers are invited to compete at the Nationals. Ranking times are usually taken from Level 1 times swum between approximately March and May of the same year. The youngest age group for boys is 13/14 and for girls 12/13 years. Over the last few years Newbury has sent between 1 and 6 swimmers up to the Nationals each year. During that time we have had a national champion, two bronze medallists and a number of final placings.

## League galas

Newbury are currently entered in **The Thames Valley Junior League** (12 and under) and **The Arena National league** (Everyone), with the youngest age group being 11 and under. League galas are a great opportunity for swimmers to compete for their club and have an exciting team atmosphere. Teams are picked by the coaches to be the best *team* possible - hence your child shouldn't be surprised if they are asked to swim a race that they don't see as their strongest! Swimmers are informed well in advance of the event and the dates for these events are published in Diary of Events. If your swimmer is selected for the team you should please confirm their availability as early as possible and make every effort to attend.

## Monthly time trials and ASA competitive start award

Monthly time trials and testing are important, particularly if you have not swum in galas before. They take place during normal training sessions and enable you (and us) to see the effect of all that training. The structure also gives young swimmers a first taste of swimming under timed conditions. The times from these trials are important; they are used as a guide for gala entries when a swimmer has not swum an event previously in competition, for team selection at league galas and, if fast enough, your swimmer will earn a bronze, silver or gold **ASA speed award**.

In order to start from **the blocks** in competition – the platform at the start of a lane from which a swimmer dives – a young swimmer must have deemed by a coach to have reached the standard of the **ASA competitive start award**. This means they are capable of safely executing a racing dive from starting blocks at the shallow end of the pool. All swimmers are expected to have achieved this level by the time they enter the Challengers squad. Sessions are held regularly to teach and assess this award.

## When can my child compete

ASA rules state that swimmers must be 9 years old on the day of the competition in order to enter. This is a rule that applies to **all** licensed competitions. If your child is less than 9 years old, they will therefore only be able to race in monthly time trials and specified internal events. Once they are 9, as long as they are SwimEngland category 2 members, they may enter other external meets. All Newbury members in Sprinters and above are category 2 members and as long as swimmers enter through the Club they will be in the correct category. There are many hundreds of open meets available but the open meets that the club is attending are advertised on the website. You should only enter meets that the club has selected to attend and, if the meet is not advised for your swimmer's squad, they should consult with their coach before doing so.

## Why compete?

Because it's fun! But seriously... Yes, for most swimmers, competition is something that – whilst perhaps daunting at first – turns into a fun opportunity to challenge themselves, race against their peers and be part of a team. But competing is also a key part of a young swimmer's development and training. Formal competitions provide swimmers with:

- something to train towards
- a chance to review their training progress relative to their aims and set new targets/adjust their training accordingly
- times to use in training: especially moving up through the squads, swimmers will be set target times based on current **PBs** in order to make sure they're working at the correct training intensity. Surprising as it may be, swimmers will not see the best improvement from simply going as fast as possible all the time! There are different training 'zones' that they need to be training across and heart rates and PBs are the easiest way for a swimmer to know where they are working.

In order to gain these benefits fully, swimmers need to be aware of their own PBs. Good ways to help them with this are to encourage them to look at their time (not just their position) in the results at a gala and to keep their own record of their times in their logbook or a notebook in their bag – a page per event, for example, where they can record the date and their time each time they race.

Because competitions are very much a part of training, coaches will identify particular competitions and races to fit in with an individual squad's training needs. Swimmers are strongly encouraged to follow this advice, even if it means doing events they are less keen on (longer distances, different strokes...). If your swimmer is worried by a recommendation, they should talk to their coach who will be able to help them with their concern – extra practice in training etc.

This link between training and competition also means that while sometimes a coach will ask swimmers to rest before a competition, other times they may be expected to train as normal. General rule of thumb is that if your coach/squad rep has not explicitly told you that your swimmer should not be at a session, they should be training as normal!

## How do I enter a meet?

There is a calendar of all galas that the club intends to enter over the course of a year on the website. Most galas open for entry a couple of months before their date. The steps to enter are then simple:

1. When an event becomes open for entries, you will be notified via the website. You will also be told a closing date for entries – note that if your entry is not received by this date, you will not be able to enter!  
*Note too that this date may not be the same as the closing date advertised on the website of the host club – this is because club entries must often be made in a group and therefore the NDSC meet manager needs time to process them before submission*
2. Most gala entries are now done online, although some are paper forms that you must return to squad reps. You will be asked to specify the events your swimmer will be entering and their time for that event depending on the level of the meet.
  - On the website go to 'Events', find the meet you wish to enter and click on 'Attend/Decline'.
  - On the next page click on the member's name to enter.
  - Click on the 'SELECT' drop down box and then click on 'Yes please sign up .....'. Scroll down and the events will be there with best times shown. Click on the box to the left of the Best Time on the event line and the entry time will then be highlighted in yellow. Click on all the events the swimmer wishes to enter and then make sure you 'Save Changes' at the bottom
  - If your swimmer does not have a time for a particular event you should speak to your coach/squad rep – in some cases it may be possible to use a time from monthly time trials as an indication.

*Note that meets may ask for long course – swum in a 50m pool – or short course – swum in a 25m pool – times. There are conversion tables online (e.g. [here](#)) to convert a time swum in one to the other. Generally, meets held in 50m pools will ask for long course entry times and vice versa. It is also possible in some cases to convert a time for a shorter/longer distance to the event being entered. Your coach or the meet entry information will specify if this is the case.*

3. While some meets are optional, others are advised by coaches. If your swimmer will not be entering an advised meet, you should let your swimmer's coach/squad rep know. As explained above, racing is an important (and hopefully fun!) element of a swimmer's development.

You should note that entering a meet doesn't guarantee entry. For obvious reasons, meet organisers must restrict the number of swimmers entering to prevent sessions running for hours and hours. This may be on a first-come-first-served basis, or on the basis of a swimmer's entry times. If your swimmer's entry is rejected, you will be informed and your entry fees refunded or credited to your club account.

## What should I enter?

Your coach will likely recommend events to your swimmer and you should encourage them to follow these as far as possible. You should also encourage your swimmer to enter a wide variety of events – longer events are particularly important for younger swimmers. However, it is important to remember that competition should be fun. If a swimmer is anxious about doing a particular event then it is worth mentioning it to your swimmer's coach, who will be able to address this with the swimmer in training.

When you enter a gala, it is important to consider the length of the day, the number of races and how close together they are. It is not advisable, for example, to swim every event in every session of a 2 day gala with 3 sessions a day – by the end of it, your swimmer (and you!) will be exhausted. A rough figure would be 3 races per session, but actually, this will vary depending on the races, the timings and also from swimmer to swimmer.

Olympic pool events run from 50m to 1500m in freestyle and from 50m to 200m in backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly. **Individual medley** events – where swimmers swim one quarter of the distance in each of butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and front crawl (in that order) are 200m and 400m. There are also events, rarely run nowadays, called '**skins**', where a full heat of swimmers will swim the same distance repeatedly, with the slowest swimmer knocked out on each repetition.

## What should I expect on the day of the gala?

Competitions are divided into a number of sessions – normally 2 or 3 in a day – each with its own warm up. Unless told otherwise, your swimmer needs to be poolside at least 15-20min before the scheduled warm up time for any session they are swimming. Swimmers will usually be able to take their bag poolside with them and the team will congregate together in one area alongside the pool where they will stay for the day. Swimmers should stay with the club during sessions and not leave poolside until they have finished all their swims. They should therefore have with them everything that they will need for a session (see 'What should I take to a gala?', below). It is advisable to leave plenty of time for traffic and other delays – competition days are already stressful for swimmers (and parents!) and running late doesn't help.

At some competitions swimmers will need to **sign in** for the events they entered. This is so that the gala organisers know which of the entered swimmers will be swimming, so they can arrange these swimmers to avoid empty lanes. There will usually be a table with sheets of paper listing the swimmers and events and highlighters for swimmers to highlight their name in the events they are swimming. They will need to sign in for every event separately. If they do not sign in, they will not be able to swim. Sign in sheets usually close at the start of warm up, so swimmers should sign in as soon as they arrive at the pool. For later sessions, sign in usually opens as soon as the session before has finished.

After warm up, swimmers for each event in turn will be called to the **marshalling area**, where volunteers will arrange them into **heats**. Coaches on poolside will chat to swimmers before their race and send them to marshalling at the appropriate time (usually the event before theirs). When they go to marshalling, swimmers should keep on their kit (t-shirt, bottoms, shoes...) and take with them/wear their hat and goggles. Some swimmers also like to take their drink. They will have plenty of time during marshalling to put on their hat and goggles and will be lined up behind the blocks at least a heat before their own, giving them time to remove their kit then. It is good if swimmers are aware of the events they are swimming and where they fall in the programme. This way, they will be able to decide when is best to eat and drink and know when they need to start getting ready to go to marshalling.

Heats are usually run from slowest swimmers in the first heat to fastest swimmers in the last heat. This means that your swimmer will be racing against swimmers of similar speed but not necessarily the same age group. In the results, the swimmers will then be divided by age group. Most galas are run as 'heat declared winner'. This means that the time a swimmer does in their heat will be compared to all the other swimmers in their age group to give the final results. There are no separate finals. The fastest heats are sometimes **spearheaded**, so that the fastest swimmers are in the centre lanes and the slowest in the outside.

After their swim, swimmers should look at their time, collect their kit and then go and find their coach for a debrief on the swim. Sometimes a warm down pool will be available for them to warm down before their next swim.

Results will be posted as paper lists a couple of events after the event of interest is finished. Usually they are posted in 2 places – one accessible to the swimmers (poolside, changing rooms etc.) and one accessible to parents (viewing area, reception area etc.). It is helpful if swimmers keep a record of their own times. While it is nice for a swimmer to win a medal, it is important to remember that, at this level, it is the *times* that matter and not so much the position they finish in. It is good if you are able to encourage your swimmer in this mentality.

## What should I take with me to a competition?

Packing for a full day's competition can feel like packing for a week's holiday! Swimmers may find it easier to divide some stuff into bags for each session that can be picked up from the car/you in between sessions. Your swimmer will need to take:

- 2 pairs of goggles – one for racing and a spare pair
- 2 club hats – one to wear and one spare
- 2+ swimsuits/trunks – at a minimum, swimmers should have a costume to race in and a spare. If they have enough costumes, however, it is nice to have a dry costume to put on for each session. It can also be advisable to have separate warm up/racing costumes – it is very easy to get cold when sitting in a wet costume/trunks. Thus for a 2 session gala, for example, a swimmer might choose to take 1 costume to use for both warm ups and then 2 costumes to race in – 1 for each session.

*Some swimmers have special 'racing suits'. These are made of materials designed to go faster through the water and must have a 'Fina approved' label. They must finish above the knee and, for girls, must not cover the shoulder. To be effective, they should be a tight fit on the swimmer – 2 sizes below normal training size is a guide used by older swimmers (however, for younger swimmers, who are rapidly growing, it is wise to be less strict on this!). Racing suits are, however, very expensive and fairly short lived and are by no means necessary at the level most swimmers will ever compete at. With much of the benefit mental, an alternative is to have a 'standard' costume that a swimmer sets aside only for racing in. This would again usually be a couple of sizes smaller than their training costume to minimise drag.*

- 2+ towels – one for warm up/between races and one for getting dressed after the meet. It is amazing how soggy the towels get, however, and if you have space and enough towels, a towel for every session plus one for getting dressed at the end of the day is advisable. Microfibre towels are very useful because they take up less space and dry quickly.
- Club shirt, black shorts, hoody and tracksuit bottoms – to wear poolside to stay warm between races. Having done a warm up at the start of the session, the mission for a swimmer is then to try to keep the muscles warm for the rest of their races. Keeping wrapped up warm and as dry as possible is crucial.
- Poolside shoes - an amazing amount of heat is lost through the feet. All swimmers should have a pair of shoes specifically for wearing poolside. The key things to consider are good grip on the wet surfaces and quick drying. Slip on shoes also make life easier. Velcro/elasticated trainers are ideal and croc-style shoes are also popular. Flip flops are not advisable as they have a tendency to aqua-plane on the wet surfaces.
- A dry shirt to wear home – because after a day of being put on and off when damp after a race and, particularly for girls, having hair dripping down the back of it, the shirt your swimmer has been wearing poolside all day is likely to be in no state for wearing home!
- LOADS of drink – swimmers should carry (and may drink) 1-2L+ of liquid for every session. Water is good, as is weak squash or diluted fruit juice. Sports drinks, if consumed, should be drunk in moderation alongside water and should NOT be fizzy.
- Snacks and meals – it's best for a swimmer to have more than they think they need and lots of things they can nibble on – small bites and finger food. Take loads – you can always leave some of it in an ice bag in the car to top up if necessary. Dried fruit (raisins, banana), fresh fruit (grapes, orange, melon, pineapple, ripe banana), cubed hot cross buns/malt loaf/bagel and rice cakes/cereal bars/whole wheat cereal (cornflakes, shredded wheats, Weetabix) are all good examples, but see <https://uk.teamunify.com/NewsShow.jsp?&id=509759&team=sendsc> for more detailed recommendations. Peanut butter and banana sandwich is great too for a hit of energy and protein! For meals, pasta with a tomato based sauce is a typical swimmers' go-to. Otherwise, a jacket potato or chunky sandwich. Basically, you are looking for foods with lots of accessible energy, ideally with some protein, and low in fibre.

**Note that 'accessible energy' does not equal sugar! Bags of sweets do NOT make good competition snacks and many clubs do in fact ban them from poolside.**

## Jargon

**Swim England rankings database** – a website that publically stores the licensed times of all ASA registered swimmers. Can be viewed here: <https://www.swimmingresults.org/individualbest/> There is also a database of national rankings here: <https://www.swimmingresults.org/eventrankings/>

**Swim England speed award** – badges and certificates in gold, silver or bronze that represent achievement of a particular time in each stroke/distance.

**Blocks** – the things that swimmers dive off. Backstroke starting ledges are a ledge that hangs from the blocks to assist swimmers on their backstroke start.

**Competition** – also known as a meet or gala. A competitive swimming event.

**Counties** – Berkshire and South Buckinghamshire ASA county championships (or equivalent in another county). An annual series of competitions, with qualifying times, where the best swimmers in the county compete to be county champion.

**DQ** – disqualification. If a swimmer breaks a rule of the stroke or race, they will be disqualified. Instead of a time, the results sheet will show a disqualification, along with a code to indicate the rule broken.

**Gala** – equivalent of a meet or competition. A competitive swimming event.

**Heats** – the divisions of swimmers within an event. Often, there will be no finals and the times swum in the heats will be compared to determine the swimmer's placings. Heats are usually run from slowest swimmers in the first heat to fastest swimmers in the last heat. The fastest heats are sometimes **spearheaded**.

**J1/J2...** - competitions are run by a contingent of officials (the people in white), all of whom are volunteers. These include the timekeepers, the stroke judges, the starter and referee. A minimum of 15 such individuals are needed for a competition to run and many are parents who find being poolside more engaging (and less hot!) than sitting and observing from the viewing area for hours. All officials must complete qualifications to be allowed to do the different jobs – J1 (judge level 1) qualifies you to time keep, for example, J2 to judge stroke etc.

**Marshalling** – previously known as 'whipping'; the area where swimmers are sent before their race to be arranged into heats.

**Medley** – a race in which all four competition strokes are swum. In an individual race they are swum in the order butterfly-backstroke-breaststroke-front crawl and in a team race the order backstroke-breaststroke-butterfly-front crawl.

**Meet** – equivalent of gala or competition. A competitive swimming event.

**Nationals** – an invitation only meet for the top swimmers in the country (England) who are not at the British Championships.

**Open meets** – 'public competitions', for want of a better description. May still be for specifically invited clubs or carry qualification times/'not faster than' time limits.

**PB** – personal best. The fastest time a swimmer has ever swum an event in. "I got a PB!" – I swam that faster than I've ever swum it before

**Region(al)s** – as 'counties' but for the South East region (or other equivalent)

**Sign in** – a process by which a swimmer registers on the day of a competition to confirm each event that they will be swimming.

**Skins** – a 'last swimmer standing' swimming event where swimmers will swim the same distance (often 50m) repeatedly on a fixed turnaround (usually 2 or 3 minutes), with the slowest swimmer each time being 'knocked out'.

**Spearhead** – swimmers are arranged so that the fastest swimmers are in the centre lanes and the slowest in the outside.

**Time trial** – some galas will offer the option for swimmers whose entry was rejected/have missed the closing date/changed their mind about an event/were too fast or slow relative to the qualifying times to sign up on the day for a 'time trial'. This is to fill any lanes left empty due to swimmers dropping out (not signing in) on the day. A time trial will enable a swimmer to get an official time for an event. They will not, however, be included in the placings.

**'Whipping' (aka marshalling)** – now known as marshalling; the area where swimmers are sent before their race to be arranged into heats.