



2023 Futures Report – Joe Cucchiaro

The USA Swimming Futures Championships were held in multiple locations across the country in 2023. Although a location preference is requested during sign-up, the assigned location is not guaranteed. I participated in the Futures Championships held in Fargo, ND. During an officials briefing, the meet referee stressed that volunteering to work on a national deck is a serious commitment, and, if selected, an official should expect to work in the position and location that they were assigned. She explained that declining an invitation because you were not selected for the position or location that you requested will have a detrimental impact on your next application.

The meet lasted four days, from Wednesday, through Saturday. The meet was conducted in a prelims / finals format with time trials held after prelims each day. Each session was approximately 2 hours in duration, with time trials generally taking an additional 45 minutes in the morning. Distance sessions were held on Wednesday and Saturday, prior to the start of finals with one heat of each gender swimming at finals. On Thursday and Friday, relays replaced the distance sessions during finals. Officials are expected to stay after finals, for all awards ceremonies.

Officials' check-in was conducted prior to the start of the meet, on Tuesday evening. Officials were provided with credentials and a goodie bag including a ND swimming lapel pin, an ND swimming belt-clip credential holder, a USA swimming notebook with a pen and an NDSU insulated coffee travel cup. Each official was provided with two polo shirts in the size requested during registration. Parking passes were also provided to officials so they would not have to pay for parking at the venue.

Since all the officials were expected to work every session, including time trials, the only stroke briefing was conducted on Wednesday morning. The focus of each briefing was appearance, protocol, and jurisdiction. Discussions were held at each briefing to relay observations and to review issues observed during previous sessions and implement corrective actions to fine tune the deck protocol. Most of the officials were certified as deck refs, starters, and CJs in their LSC, so it is not surprising that the performance of the stroke and turn judges was complimented at almost every briefing. Issues and observations were most frequently related to protocol errors introduced by improper briefing and multiple inconsistent changes to the protocol, most often occurring during the conduct of the session.

The root cause of most of the issues was that the protocol briefings were awkward and inconsistent which led to confusion and frustration on the part of the officials. The CJs giving the briefings did not always understand or clearly present the protocols and grew frustrated when questions were raised. After the third briefing, the CJ gave the briefing and walked away without giving the opportunity to ask questions. Clarifications were obtained from other CJs before the start of the session.

The conduct of each session was professional and well-choreographed. The appearance and actions of the officials were of paramount importance to the leadership team. When an official observed a disqualification, they were replaced by a reserve official and removed from the deck while they discussed their observation with the CJ. The leadership team was comprised of officials that were personally known to the meet referee and were mostly from the meet ref's LSC. During the Thursday briefing, the meet referee discussed the process of becoming "known" on the national deck and set the expectation that an official should plan on being assigned to the stroke and turn role for most national meets. The USA Swimming "Walk of Stars" presentation was discussed extensively and is attached to this report.



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Officials not known to the meet referee were assigned as stroke and turn judges, which included separate stroke, turn, relief, and reserve positions. Token assignments as deck referee, starter, and chief judge were offered during time trials to increase “exposure to the meet referee” in hopes that outstanding performance in these roles would be documented in the meet report for future meets.

The host club sponsored a social on Wednesday night at the “officials” hotel and several officials coordinated private social gatherings each day after finals. Since alcohol was being served, officials were not permitted to wear any USA swimming gear to the social. Hospitality at the meet was provided by the host club and consisted of delicious food, prepared by swim families, which included a varied menu of entrees and side dishes along with snacks and beverages. Leftovers from the wedding of the Meet Director’s daughter were served on Friday. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were provided each day, however officials were not permitted to eat in the hospitality area and instead had to bring their food back to the briefing room. The large number of officials that did not wash their hands before leaving the restroom, then touching food in hospitality was disturbing.

The facilities were well laid out. In support of USA Swimming’s Safe Sport Regulations, separate locker rooms were available for 18 and over athletes, coaches, and officials. Deck access was tightly controlled, and credentials were required for entry. However, USA Swimming’s Safe Sport regulations regarding the use of cell phones behind the starting blocks were largely ignored by meet marshals and officials.

There was paid parking offered and the lot size would easily accommodate the coaches, athletes, volunteers, and spectators. However, lines to get into the lot frequently extended into the city streets because the collection point was at the entrance of the parking lot. The attendants were inexperienced at collecting fees and making change which resulted in long lines, frequently blocking the street in both directions. With the layout of the parking lot in Fargo, the collection point could have been moved further up the driveway to make room for additional cars to wait. Also, the collectors should have been provided with protection from the heat, humidity, and sun.

Participating as a meet official on the national deck is always a rewarding, challenging, interesting, and enjoyable experience. It is rewarding because you participate in the facilitation of the optimal environment for some of the best athletes. It is challenging because of all the protocols that must be followed and the constant fine tuning of protocols during the session. It is interesting because you are introduced to many officials from outside your LSC and can share and discuss your experiences as an official. It is enjoyable, because, as a stroke and turn judge, everything is mapped out for you, and you do not need to prepare in advance or make any decisions. This meet was conducted in a similar manner to other meets that I worked on the national deck, so it met my expectations. As a stroke and turn judge in this environment, it was very easy to exceed expectations with over a decade of experience.