

Let's talk about taper.

You've probably heard that word tossed around a lot, especially as we get closer to the end of a season, but it can still feel a little mysterious. As someone who has spent most of my life in and around this sport, as a swimmer, teammate, and now as a coach, I want to give you a clear, honest picture of what taper really is, how it works for different ages, and why your swimmer will not (and should not) be expected to go a best time at every single meet.

So... what is taper, really?

Taper is basically a planned "backing off" period at the end of a training cycle so swimmers can rest, recover, and be ready to race fast at the meets that matter most. For most of the season, your kids are training hard. Their bodies are tired, their muscles are sore, and sometimes they're swimming on low energy. That's not a mistake, that's how we build strength, endurance, and race resilience.

During a taper, we start to pull back on the overall workload. Practices are a little shorter in yardage, and we give them a bit more rest. But that doesn't mean we're just floating and playing around. We still have them swimming at race speeds in shorter chunks, and we zoom in on details like starts, turns, underwaters, finishes, breathing patterns, and race strategies. The goal is to let their bodies recover while keeping their brains and muscles sharp and ready to go when it's time to race.

Why we're not chasing best times at every meet

This is a big one, and I know it can be hard to watch from the stands.

Most meets during the season are not meant to be "all-out, tapered, best-ever time" meets. They're part of the training plan. Your swimmer might have practiced hard all week, be in the middle of a tough training block, or be learning a new race strategy that doesn't feel natural yet. They are racing while tired on purpose.

That's why you might see times that are a little off, or swims that look "off" compared to what you know they can do. That doesn't mean they're not improving. Often, the progress happens in ways that don't show up on the clock right away, better technique, stronger kicks, cleaner turns, smarter pacing, or simply learning how to push through discomfort instead of shutting down. And this is also why we don't "take it easy" before every meet. If I backed off practice intensity before every single competition, your swimmer would never get the training load they need to actually improve. We'd constantly be dipping in and out of rest, and their long-term progress would suffer. Instead, we train through many meets and then choose specific meets where we focus our rest and sharpening—those are the ones we expect to really see the time drops happen.

How taper looks different for older vs. younger swimmers

Not every swimmer tapers the same way, and not every swimmer needs a big, dramatic taper to swim fast. This is where age, training history, and maturity start to matter.

For older and more experienced swimmers, especially those in higher groups, a “real” taper can stretch over a couple of weeks. We gradually decrease yardage, keep in some race-pace work with more rest, and drill into details like starts, turns, and underwaters with a lot of intention. They’ve put in years of training and have the base to really benefit from this kind of sharpening. They also tend to be mentally mature enough to handle the weird feelings that can come with taper; sometimes you feel sluggish or off right before you feel fast.

For younger or newer swimmers, the approach is a little different. They don’t always need the same level of rest to be successful. Toward the end of the year, they will absolutely get more rest compared to the middle of the season, but you’re also going to see a lot more “racing” in practice. That means short, fast efforts designed to look and feel like races, and a ton of corrections: where to breathe, how to attack the first 25, how to finish with their head down, how to do a quick turn without extra glides or pauses.

For younger swimmers, this blend of slightly more rest plus a ton of race-focused teaching is often more valuable than a super-long taper. It keeps them engaged, reinforces good habits, and helps them be ready to qualify and race well while they’re still learning what it even means to be a competitor.

Not every meet is a “big deal” meet, and that’s okay

Throughout the season, different meets serve different purposes. Some meets are like progress check-ins. Some are “let’s try this event and see how it goes.” Others are the ones we circle on the calendar as goal meets or championship meets.

If your swimmer doesn’t get a best time at a smaller or mid-season meet, that is not a failure. From a coaching perspective, I’m usually asking questions like, “Did they stick to the race plan?” “Did they hold their stroke together when they got tired?” “Did they bounce back from a disappointing race and swim the next one with effort and focus?”

Those things matter just as much as the final time, and they build the foundation for the big drops we’re all hoping to see at the end of the season.

Talking to your swimmer about goals

One of the most powerful things you can do as a parent is help your swimmer set goals that match where they are, and support them when things get tough.

Please talk to your swimmer about what they want out of this season, and help them understand the difference between “big picture” goals and little stepping-stone goals. It might be qualifying

for a certain meet, making finals, learning a new event, or cleaning up a stroke. Not every goal has to be a time on a clock. Goals can be things like, “I’m going to kick off every wall,” “I’m not going to give up when my legs start burning,” or “I’m going to keep a good attitude even if a race doesn’t go my way.”

It’s also really important that swimmers learn to keep themselves in check when things get hard. Swimming is a tough sport. There will be meets where they feel off, practices where they’re dragging, and races where they don’t get the result they wanted. That doesn’t mean they’re not good enough, and it doesn’t mean they’re going backwards. It means they’re human, they’re in training, and they’re learning.

You can help by reminding them that one swim doesn’t define them, asking what they learned instead of only focusing on the time, and encouraging them to stay respectful to themselves, their teammates, their coaches, and the sport, even when they’re frustrated or disappointed. Those are the moments that really build character.

Wrapping it up

I know it can be confusing or even stressful when you’re trying to understand why your swimmer isn’t dropping time every weekend, or why practice still looks tough before a meet. From my side of the whistle, I promise there is a plan, and taper is a big part of that plan.

We train hard so they can be strong.

We race tired so they can learn.

We rest and sharpen at the right times so they can shine when it matters.

If you ever have questions about what phase of training we’re in, what meets we’re aiming for, or how taper will look for your specific swimmer, please ask. I’m still relatively new in my coaching journey, but I care deeply about doing this the right way, and I spend a lot of time learning, researching, and reflecting on how to help your kids succeed, not just as swimmers, but as people.

We’re all on the same team here: swimmers, parents, and coaches. Taper is just one of the tools we use to help your kids grow, stay healthy, and love this sport for the long run.