

The Real Anatomy of a Swim Season: Why Meet Lineups Change, When Drops Happen, What Counts as a Red Flag, and Why We Don't Always Swim Favorites

If you've ever left a meet thinking, "Why did my kid swim that lineup?" or "Why wasn't this a best-time weekend?" you're not alone.

From the stands, a season can look like a string of weekends where we show up, race, and hope for drops. From my coaching seat, a season is a planned sequence of skill-building, training stress, recovery, and strategically timed chances to race fast, because when and how you race matters as much as the races themselves.

Here's what I want you to know right away: not every meet has the same job, time drops usually come in waves, one "off swim" is normal, and we don't always swim favorites because comfort builds short-term happiness but variety builds long-term speed and complete swimmers (especially for IM development).

Before we go further, quick translation so we're speaking the same language. When I say "taper," I mean a planned reduction in training so the speed you've built can actually show up on race day.

In competitive swimming, research reviews and practical summaries commonly describe performance gains on the order of a few percent with taper, often around ~3% on average, with variation depending on the athlete and taper strategy.

When I say an "add," I just mean a swim that's slower than their typical time. It's not a character issue. It's information.

When I say "race plan," I mean the simple execution plan for the race: how we start, how we surface, how we pace the middle, how we handle walls, and how we finish.

And when I mention "underwaters," I mean the streamline and kicks off the wall, the free speed a swimmer gets when they commit to strong push-offs and consistent breakouts.

A swim season isn't a straight line, and meet schedules shouldn't be either

A good season has phases. Early season is about building the engine and re-teaching fundamentals. Mid-season is where consistency, aerobic capacity, and efficiency stack. Late season is where we sharpen speed, tighten race skills, and then finally allow real recovery so the work can "show up" on the clock. That last part matters more than most people realize, because without recovery, improvement stays locked in the body and never fully appears in racing.

This is why meets have different purposes. If we treat every meet like a championship meet, swimmers either get physically fried or mentally worn down, or both. We can race all season, but “race well” doesn’t always mean “swim fastest.”

What different meets are actually for

Some meets are learning meets. These are where swimmers get better at the meet environment itself, warm-up routines, nerves, listening, racing legally, and learning what it feels like to execute skills under pressure. Especially for younger or developing swimmers, those reps are what eventually create “fast.”

For BNSC, these meets are usually the ones that are taking place early in the season. Think of the intrasquad meet, our local meets in the first month or so of the season and typically that first travel meet that is offered.

For younger swimmers it's important to attend some smaller meets a few times early in the season to start understanding what the bigger picture is of competing. This helps them knock off some nerves and feel more prepared.

For older swimmers it's important to attend both smaller and meets that are a little bigger early in the season. Smaller meets build confidence and familiarity. Bigger meets break them out of the mind set of knowing how they will place in an event before they even swim. There is a lot of power in training when you are swimming against people you have never met and you are no longer putting yourself in a box of only being able to do so well. This is where real racing and stress get put on their technique and we can truly see if they are retaining what they learn in practice.

Some meets are training or fitness meets. These are the weekends where we race during heavier training. The goal isn't always best times; the goal is to see whether technique holds up when they're tired.

For BNSC's short course season these are most of the meets in November-December.

These meets tell me what breaks first, breathing patterns, kick timing, turn speed, confidence, pacing discipline, so we can fix it in practice.

Some meets are benchmarks. These are planned check-ins where I might care more about splits, stroke counts, turn quality, and back-half speed than the final time. A benchmark meet can be a huge win even if the time isn't, because it gives us real data we can coach off of.

For BNSC's short course season this is typically one meet in January. For those who qualify for Circle City Classic that is their main benchmark meet. For those who didn't qualify we shift our focus to Heat's Prelim Final Meet in January. Both meets offer high competition, are well run and offer the ability to truly practice meet routines.

Some meets are qualifiers. These are chosen because they give us the right opportunities to chase standards. Event selection gets more targeted here, and we're usually thinking about how to put swimmers in the best position to hit a specific goal.

For BNSC's short course season this is our last home meet or regionals.

And then there are priority meets. These are the meets we want the best performances at. Those weekends get the most intentional preparation, the clearest event strategy, and the tightest focus on recovery and execution. This is also where taper concepts matter. Again, the big idea is simple: when training volume drops in the right way, performance often improves by a few percent on average, and that's a meaningful change in swimming.

How I choose meets, and why I'll sometimes say no

Meet selection isn't just about what's nearby. I'm weighing where we are in the season plan, how many race weekends we've stacked recently, what the swimmers need next, whether we need qualifying opportunities, and whether the meet format supports development.

A fast, well-run meet with good competition can be worth more than a poorly organized meet that drags for two days and leaves swimmers exhausted, under-fueled, and sitting around between races.

I'm also watching repetition. Repeating the same lineup can create short-term comfort but long-term plateaus. A swimmer who only swims sprint free eventually hits a ceiling because they avoid aerobic development and back-half strength. A swimmer who only swims their best stroke often avoids the very weaknesses that are limiting their IM, their consistency, and their ability to finish races.

Sometimes the best coaching decision is fewer meets, not more. More meets can be more fun, but if they're not aligned with training, they can turn into expensive workouts with very little payoff.

When swimmers should expect time drops, and why they don't always happen "on schedule"

Time drops tend to show up in waves, not every weekend.

Early season, swimmers often look "flat" because training load rises and technique work can make them feel awkward. That's normal. When we change mechanics, even for the better, times can temporarily stall because the body is learning a new pattern.

Mid-season is where you often see steadier progress, especially in 200s and longer events, because aerobic fitness and efficiency start paying off. Sprinters can still drop mid-season, but sprint drops often require more precision and more recovery than distance drops.

Late season is where the bigger drops typically appear, assuming the work was consistent and recovery is respected. That's when we sharpen speed and allow the body to absorb the training.

This is also why I don't measure progress only by "best time." If splits are more even, turns are faster, underwaters are longer, the stroke holds together on the last 25, or the swimmer races with more control, those are real gains that usually become time later.

The "add" conversation: what's normal, what's a warning sign, and what I'm actually watching

Every swimmer has off swims. Adds happen. The real question is whether it's an isolated data point or a pattern that tells us something is off.

One add that makes sense doesn't worry me much. Heavy training week, new event, pacing mistake, poor warm-up, a cold they're fighting, a stressful school week, a growth spurt, those are real variables. What gets my attention is when big adds happen repeatedly across multiple events and multiple meets with no clear explanation, especially when effort looks high but skills fall apart quickly.

I also want parents to understand this: seconds can be misleading because adds scale by distance. A small change in a 50 is a big deal; a small change in a 500 can be noise. So I care less about one number and more about the story of the swim. Did they follow a race plan? Did they hold skills on walls? Did they stay mentally engaged when it got uncomfortable?

Here are three "real life but not about anyone specific" scenarios that explain how I think.

In the first scenario, the time is a little slower but the swim is actually better. Their turns are faster, their breakout is more consistent, and they finish the last 25 stronger than usual. That swimmer is often closer than you think. Execution shows up before big drops show up.

In the second scenario, the time is slower and it tells us something useful. The swim falls apart the same way every time, breathing gets messy, kick disappears, turns get lazy, the last 25 becomes survival. That's not a reason to panic; it's a coaching roadmap. Now we know exactly what to train next.

In the third scenario, nothing pops and the swimmer looks emotionally flat. That's not always a "push harder" moment. Sometimes it's a recovery moment. Sleep, nutrition, stress load, meet frequency, and routines matter, and they show up in mood before they show up on the scoreboard.

Red flags I watch that have nothing to do with the clock

Warm-up is a big one. Warm-up isn't optional background noise; it can meaningfully influence performance. Research reviews in swimming have specifically looked at how warm-up structure can affect outcomes. If a swimmer is late, unfocused, skipping pieces, or treating warm-up like a social hour, it almost always shows up later as "mystery fatigue" or sloppy execution.

Between-race recovery is another. If swimmers don't cool down, don't sip fluids, don't eat for hours, sit cold all day, and live on their phone between races, performance decline late in the meet is usually a recovery failure, not a fitness failure.

Sleep is the one families underestimate because it's not "swimming," but it impacts everything swimming needs: energy, mood, learning, and recovery. It's recommended that teens ages 13–18 get 8–10 hours per 24 hours on a regular basis. When a teen is consistently short on sleep, racing becomes harder to execute even when fitness is there.

I also watch emotional patterns. If a swimmer melts down after anything less than a best time, we have to train resilience because championship racing requires resets, not perfection. If a swimmer looks disengaged and indifferent, that can be a burnout signal we need to address.

Technically, I'm watching starts, turns, and underwaters. If a swimmer has a great stroke but gives away a body length off every wall, that's not "unlucky." That's free speed left on the table.

And yes, disqualifications matter, but not always the way parents assume. A DQ can be a growth moment if it came from pushing a legal skill faster than they can currently control. A repeated DQ for the same rule, meet after meet, is more concerning because it tells me the skill isn't being learned or isn't being respected.

Why we don't always race favorite events

This is usually the part that frustrates people most, so I'll be blunt. If we always race what a swimmer loves, we build a season around comfort. Comfort is not the same as development.

Sometimes we avoid the favorite event because we're early season and installing a technical change, and I want reps without turning every swim into an identity test. Sometimes we avoid it because the swimmer needs to learn pacing or confidence in an event that currently limits their IM and their back halves. Sometimes we avoid it because repeating the same event too often can create stagnation and mental pressure. Racing is a stressor. It's also a mental investment. I want swimmers building athletic range and competitive toughness, not attaching their whole identity to one event.

When we pick a less-comfortable event, we're usually building a skill that transfers everywhere: better underwaters, better turns, stronger aerobic support, better pacing discipline, better finishing speed, and more confidence when things feel hard.

The end goal is not a swimmer who can swim one event well on one random Saturday in December. The goal is a swimmer who can walk into any meet, any lineup, any pressure situation, and execute with skill and composure.

The takeaway I want you to hold onto

A swim season is a long game. If you only measure success by best times every weekend, you'll miss the real story, and you'll unintentionally put pressure on outcomes that aren't always appropriate for the phase we're in.

I promise there is almost always a reason behind meet choices, event lineups, and the timing of "go time" weekends. My job is to build athletes who improve year over year, not just swimmers who look good on one random weekend.

If you ever want the simplest way to understand what I'm thinking at a meet, ask me this: what is the job of this meet for my swimmer? Once you know the job, the lineup almost always makes sense.