

Ah, that first swim meet. Remember when your little one attended her first "big" swim meet?

Some days I long for those good, ole days, when expectations were low and we were just happy the kids made it from one end of the pool to the other.

Which reminds me, many new swim team parents enter the world of competitive swimming with no point of reference about swim meets. What they're expecting is often far different than their first swim meet experience. Imagine ...

What new swim team parents expect at their 1st swim meet

You hit the alarm clock at 8 a.m., eat breakfast with the family, then head to the pool. Everyone is awake and happy in the car, excited for this new experience.

While your child swims warm up, you find a spot in the spectator area. Thankfully, there's plenty of space and leg room, so you can spread out and get comfy.

While waiting for warm up to end, you text friends and make plans to meet for lunch.

After all, how long could it possibly take to swim two 25s?

About 30 minutes later, your child walks up behind the blocks, smiling happily. She looks to the stands in search of you, then enthusiastically waves when you make eye contact.

Off to the races

The starter blows the whistle, so she climbs onto the blocks. She shoots off the block like a rocket and swims an amazing 25-yard freestyle, touching the wall first. You can't help but beam with pride.

Your daughter jumps out of the pool, smiling ear to ear, and gets ready for her next race.

A few minutes later, she's feeling even more confident and is chatting with teammates before her race. The scene plays out again: stepping up behind the blocks, waving to you, ready to race. She jumps in the water for her 25-yard backstroke. She swims the most beautiful backstroke you've ever seen.

Eager for the next swim meet

With both races finished, your daughter quickly packs up all of her belongings, then finds you in the stands. You look at your watch, thrilled that you'll have an hour to return home and get dressed for your lunch with friends.

But first, you check the calendar for the next swim meet. You and your daughter can't wait to come back!

What swim meets are really like

It's Friday. You're shocked to learn that warm up starts at 7 a.m. Saturday. You're wondering why in the world you'll be waking up your child earlier on a weekend than on a school day.

The alarm goes off Saturday morning at a ridiculously early hour. You drag yourself out of bed, wake up your son, and begin packing up to leave. Panic sets in when you realize your son's goggles broke in practice the other night and you haven't had time to buy a replacement. Now you rush around frantically, hoping to get to the pool even earlier in search of goggles.

Your son has different plans in mind. He's slowly eating his breakfast, oblivious to the need to rush. "What is warm up, Mom?" he asks as he ties his shoes in record-slow time.

You load up the car, make your way out of the neighborhood and ask your son, "You have on your suit, right?"

You slam on the brakes, turn around, and head back to the house. Apparently, your son hadn't considered putting on the suit you laid out for him. He walks inside to change while you wait in the car, trying to work on your word of the year: patience.

Finally, you arrive at the pool, 10 minutes after warm up has started. The coaches rush your child along so that he can get in at least part of the warm up. They have spare goggles he can borrow for now, thank goodness.

On the hunt for goggles

You head to the merchandise table in hopes of finding goggles, but they won't open for another half hour. Fine. This will give you time to find a spot in the bleachers.

As you walk upstairs, you realize 1) you're overdressed for a swim meet, despite winter temperatures outside and 2) there's barely room for you, let alone your stadium chair, bag of snacks and purse.

After scanning the crowd, you spot a space that looks roomy enough for you and your belongings. Getting settled is the easy part. As soon as you sit down, your wet swimmer is making his way up the stands to ask for food. The two of you head downstairs to buy something from concessions (your snack bag didn't meet his standards) and to purchase goggles. The merchandise table is open for business by now.

A sense of calm overcomes you when you finally sit back down, knowing that your child's potential goggle disaster is solved and your son is fed. Now we get to the fun part: the racing.

Waiting and waiting and ...

After scanning the heat sheet, you realize there are 5 pages of other kids swimming before your son will ever hit the water. How long will that take? You'd considered having lunch with friends, but now that seems doubtful.

Approximately 90 minutes later, you spot your son lined up behind the blocks. How exciting! He's finally racing. Suddenly, you are nervous and feeling butterflies in your stomach, feelings you haven't had since high school. It seems silly - you're not the one racing, after all. But you have never been this nervous for your young son.

The scoreboard shows that heat 2 is in the water. Your son is in heat 4. He should be getting his goggles on so he'll be ready, but he just stands there.

His gaze is fixed on something off in the distance, but you can't see what it is. No matter, you're sure he'll check back in at any moment and be ready to go. Heat 2 finishes and the next heat of swimmers takes the blocks. Your son turns around, away from the blocks, and looks at some other kids who are swinging around their goggles and pretending to fight like ninjas.

Those butterflies are really moving now. Why isn't he moving up to the blocks? Is he going to miss this race? Should I yell? Why is it so darn hot in here?!?

Take your mark

The starter calls up heat 4 and all of the other swimmers take to the blocks. Your son laughs at his newfound friends, who are really perfecting those ninja moves now. You scream at your son, but he can't hear.

Beep. Off goes heat 4. Your son looks at the scoreboard, then down at his arm, where his events and heats are written in Sharpie. He repeats this three or four times before realizing something's wrong. His coach finds him behind the blocks and explains that he's missed his event.

Deflated, he makes his way back to the team area. His body language says it all: his shoulders are rounded forward, his head is down, and you wonder if his eyes are a bit teary.

Another hour passes by before his next race. This time, his coaches have reminded him how he has to pay attention behind the blocks. He can't zone out.

You're a nervous wreck, not to mention slightly annoyed that you have now sat in this sweltering facility since 7:10 a.m. to see him miss a race. Please don't miss another.

This time, he's ready. He's behind the blocks, newly purchased goggles are on, and he's listening for the whistle from the starter.

The goggle malfunction

Beep. He dives in and pulls up almost immediately. Something is wrong. Those brand new goggles have fallen off and are covering his mouth. He moves them to his eyes and starts swimming. He stops again. This time, the goggles are filled with water. He adjusts them one more time, then takes off blazing to the wall.

You shake your head and laugh, because what else can you do in a moment like this? Your son climbs out of the pool, looks at you and waves. He's smiling from ear to ear. His races - well, race in this case - are over so you pack up your belongings and head to the exit. It's been more than four hours since you arrived early in the morning. You feel like it's been eight hours. After waiting at the exit for your son for another 15 minutes, you begin to wonder where in the world he has gone. Did he forget where to meet you?

You spot him on deck, in the team area, playing a game of cards with his teammates. His stuff is scattered everywhere. Any butterflies you had earlier are replaced by feelings of rage. Come on, son! Let's go! We've been here for hours already! But he can't see or hear you, because parents aren't allowed on deck.

You look helplessly to the team area, trying every last Jedi mind trick you can think of to get his attention. Thankfully, your son's teammate walks by. You ask him to tell your son that it's time to go.

Another 5 minutes pass before your son makes his way to you. At this point, you're thinking this may be the last swim meet you ever attend.

But then he gives you a big hug and tells you how much fun he had swimming his race, how he loved playing with his teammates, and how his coach told him he did great. All of that rage melts away, and you think, "OK, we'll be back."

Once home, you unpack his bag. You smile as you think how great he did in those 15 yards once his new goggles were in place. It really wasn't that bad, you think.

You take out his towel, suit, and water bottle, and then search around his bag. But one item is missing: those brand new goggles.

All kidding aside, swim meets are long, sometimes hot and often a comedy of errors. But when our kids are having fun, it's worth every hundredth of a second.