



Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Local Swimming Committees

The mission of the Disability Swimming Committee is the full inclusion of swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming programs

Swimmers with a disability participate in USA Swimming programs for the same reasons as all swimmers – they want to have fun, they enjoy swimming, they want to be with friends and make new friends, they want to “get in shape” and stay healthy, they want to improve their skills and performances, and they enjoy competition. Swimmers with a disability are attracted to USA Swimming programs because of the quality of coaching and competition, and they are participating in greater numbers every year.

This brochure was written to help LSCs respond to the challenge of including swimmers with a disability. Although each LSC has the flexibility to tailor policies, procedures, and programs to meet the unique needs of its own athletes, coaches, and volunteers, there are some areas of commonality which each LSC should consider when formulating inclusion policies and programs.

Inclusion in Meets

According to Article 202.2.13 in the USA Swimming rule book, LSCs may develop special administrative standards and conditions to encourage athletes with disabilities to participate in their meets. The following concerns are commonly addressed in LSC policies.

- *Meet information.* Many LSCs suggest that meet hosts include a sentence or paragraph in the meet information that athletes with a disability are welcomed and asked to provide advance notice of necessary accommodations.
- *Eligibility.* USA Swimming rules permit disability accommodations and rule exceptions for swimmers who have “a permanent physical or cognitive impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.” This definition encompasses swimmers who are deaf and hard of hearing; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.
- *Qualifying Time Standards.* Qualifying time standards are a major obstacle to the inclusion of some swimmers with a disability in swim meets. Imagine the performance of some elite athletes if asked to swim without using their legs or using only one arm. Extremely talented and well-trained individuals are unable to achieve qualifying time standards when faced with such limitations. Recognizing this dilemma, many LSCs have developed policies that waive the qualifying time standards at regular season meets for swimmers with a disability.

Other LSCs have so many open meets that they see no need to develop special policies for anything other than their championship meets. For championship meets, it is common practice for a LSC to grant the meet director and/or meet referee the authority to include a swimmer with a disability who has not achieved the qualifying time.

- *Classification.* Ignore references to classification. Classification is a method of grouping swimmers for competition according to ability/disability characteristics at disability-specific competitions such as the Paralympic Games. USA Swimming does not recognize such classification systems, preferring that swimmers with a disability be seeded into existing “regular” events just like any other swimmer.
- *Seeding.* If a coach/swimmer requests special seeding, and the referee approves this accommodation, they should collaborate to determine appropriate methods of inclusion that are fair to the swimmer with a disability and to other swimmers, with little or no impact on the meet timeline. A referee’s decision shall affect only the current meet and shall not set precedent for modifications at other competitions. Special seeding may include swimming out-of-event (e.g., completing a 100 while other swimmers in the event complete a 200); swimming out-of-age group (e.g., a 13-year-old swimmer competing in an 11-12 event); and special lane assignments (e.g., placing a deaf swimmer in a position to see the starter’s movements and strobe light). Keep in mind, however, that most athletes prefer to train and compete with their same-aged peers. The times for any athlete with a disability in special seeding circumstances should be incorporated into the actual event for the proper age group and distance. If such an event is not offered in the meet, the swim should be treated as a time trial or special event.
- *Awards.* Determine whether you wish to offer special awards for athletes with a disability. Remember that recognition is more valued when it is earned and that awards such as ribbons and medals are usually valued more by younger and novice swimmers.

Facility accommodations. The LSC should encourage meet hosts to make common-sense adjustments to their venues to accommodate the needs of athletes with a disability, such as a visual starting cue for swimmers who are deaf or hard of hearing, non-slip step stools to help dwarf swimmers reach shower controls and other appliances, mats at the starting end to facilitate transfers for wheelchair users, and nearby parking for persons with mobility limitations. Pending referee approval, swimmers with a disability may have personal assistants on deck to provide disability-specific help such as interpreting for swimmers who are deaf or hard of hearing, “tapping” for swimmers who are blind, helping with transfers for wheelchair users, and serving as a buddy for swimmers with cognitive disabilities. Personal assistants: (a) are not required to be members of USA Swimming; (b) are protected by USA Swimming general liability insurance, but do not have the benefit of excess accident insurance

unless they are members of USA Swimming; (c) may not coach unless registered as coach members; and (d) must not interfere with meet operations.

Each LSC should develop a meet inclusion policy that accommodates swimmers with a disability and which is appropriate given the nature of meets conducted within the LSC. Once that policy is in place, it is important that meet directors and referees be educated in the intent and implementation of the policy. In addition, the policy should be communicated regularly to coaches, swimmers, and parents via meet information packets, newsletters, and swim guides. Here is a sample LSC policy on the inclusion of swimmers with a disability.

**Inclusion of swimmers with a disability
in Virginia Swimming, Inc. sanctioned meets**

- A. In all regular season meets and District/Regional Championships, disabled swimmers need not have achieved the qualifying time standards. The Meet Referee/Meet Director, working with the coach of the disabled swimmer to insure that no undue focus is placed on the swimmer during the meet, shall have the authority to accommodate the swimmer without substantial negative impact on the meet timeline. Examples of such accommodation include:
 - 1) Allow the disabled swimmer to compete at a shorter distance, e.g., a 50 yard distance within a 100 yard event.
 - 2) Seed the disabled swimmer by time rather than age, e.g., a 13-year old disabled swimmer could be seeded in the 11-12 age group of the same event.
- B. In all LSC Championship meets, disabled swimmers may enter provided the swimmer has achieved a time better than 87% of the listed qualifying time for the U.S. Paralympic National Swimming Championships. The entry may involve permission of the Meet Director and Senior or Age Group Chairman.
- C. The Meet Referee may make accommodations as described above (or others, as recommended by the Disability Swimming Committee based upon specific disability). Final seeding decisions rest with the Meet Referee.
- D. Places and awards for disabled swimmers can only be earned in the swimmer's actual event and/or age group. At the discretion of the meet host, special awards may be given to disabled swimmers.

Athlete Programs and Services

Support swimmers with a disability by insuring that they are eligible to participate in every program conducted by the LSC and by informing them of opportunities for national-level competition and recognition. Here are some examples of effective inclusion.

- *Camps.* Plan for the inclusion of athletes with a disability in LSC camps and other athlete development activities.
- *Recognition.* Recognize the accomplishments of swimmers with a disability through LSC award ceremonies, newsletters, web sites, special awards, and swim guide recognition pages.
- *Speaker.* Invite a swimmer with a disability to speak at programs, camps, and workshops. Members of the USA teams who compete at the Paralympic Games and Deaflympics have fascinating stories to tell and can provide perspective and motivation to athletes, parents, coaches, and officials.
- *Travel funds.* Consider appropriating LSC travel funds to swimmers with a disability to compete in their championship meets.



Education

Include information about disability swimming in LSC workshops, swim guides, newsletters, brochures, and policies.

- *Swimmers and parents.* Welcome swimmers with a disability to participate in meets and other LSC athlete development programs. Provide copies of meet inclusion policies to swimmers and parents upon request.
- *Clubs.* Encourage clubs to accept swimmers with a disability and to contact the LSC disability swimming chair or USA Swimming headquarters for any resource materials or information they might need.
- *Coaches.* Educate coaches about LSC policies related to inclusion.
- *Officials.* Discuss meet inclusion policies at clinics so that officials are prepared to implement those policies fairly at LSC meets. Consider using LSC travel funds to support participation by officials at disability-specific swimming meets, with a goal of subsequently educating other LSC officials about disability swimming.
- *Meet directors.* Provide copies of meet inclusion policies to meet directors and suggest that a summary of the policy be printed in meet information packets.

Disability Swimming Chair

Each LSC should have an individual who serves as the disability swimming chair. The chair's responsibilities may include helping to educate members of the swimming community about disability swimming, promoting participation by swimmers with a disability in LSC meets, facilitating recognition of the accomplishments of swimmers with a disability, and serving as a "disability conscience" at LSC administrative meetings to promote inclusion in LSC policies and programming.

A LSC may combine positions and responsibilities such as diversity and/or club development with that of the disability chair to suit local needs. Regardless of how this position is conceptualized, consider making the disability swimming chair a member of the LSC Board of Directors and/or House of Delegates. LSCs are also encouraged to fund disability swimming chairs to attend the annual USA Swimming convention and other meetings and workshops so that they can learn more about disability swimming.

Conclusion

Every LSC has swimmers with a disability. In many cases these swimmers already are included by member clubs and at LSC meets with no need for accommodations. Other swimmers with a disability are just waiting for a little encouragement to participate in USA Swimming programs. Here are ways in that LSCs can help to facilitate inclusion.

- Welcome swimmers with a disability by giving visibility to the goal of including all swimmers in USA Swimming programs.
- Educate members of the swimming community about inclusion and appropriate disability accommodations to facilitate a successful experience for swimmers with a disability.
- Establish policies on meet inclusion to provide guidance to meet directors and officials.
- Support swimmers with a disability by providing travel funds to their championship meets and by recognizing their accomplishments.

Resources

Article 105 of the *USA Swimming Rulebook*.

Article 105 Case Studies: Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities at USA Swimming Competitions. Document posted on the disability swimming page of the USA Swimming web site.

Safety/Risk Management and the Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities. Document posted on the disability swimming page of the USA Swimming web site.