

Glossary of Swimming Terms

Age-group swimming: The term applied to youth club swimming in America, both year-round and summer league. Swimmers compete in the following age brackets: 8 and under, 9-10, 11-12, 13-14 and 15-18. Their age on the first day of a swim meet is their age for the whole meet, even if their birthday falls during the competition.

Blocks: The platform from which swimmers begin races. Decades ago, they were simple metal or wooden blocks and looked more like podiums than the sleek, high-tech ones of today, but the old name has stuck.

Buoy: flotation device used to stabilize the legs and correct body position in the water.

Catch: The point in a swimmer's stroke at which the swimmer's hand grabs the water in front of them and applies downward pressure to move the body forward.

Chase Starts: Used in long course meets; back-to-back heats will start their events on opposite ends of the pool; when the heat in the water completes 3/4 of their race, the heat at the opposite end of the pool will start their race

Circle swimming: swimming in a lane in a standard counter-clockwise direction, up the right side and back down the left.

Clerk of Course: Person responsible for receiving deck entries at a meet and for handling the circle-in process for swimmers

Competitive Strokes: there are four competitive strokes: butterfly (fly), backstroke (back or "bk"), breaststroke (breast or "br"), and freestyle (free or "fr")

Deck: The area surrounding the pool at practices and meets, not including the bleachers or stands.

Descending: increasing one's speed incrementally during a set distance

Dolphin kick: Once just the leg motion for butterfly, the dolphin kick (which mimics the undulating motion by which the sea animal moves through the water) is now considered the fifth stroke. It is done underwater in streamline position to in order build momentum on fly, freestyle and backstroke starts and turns. Swimmers are even allowed to take one dolphin kick in breaststroke off each wall.

Drill: A teaching exercise involving a portion of a stroke which is used to improve technique

Dryland: A catch-all term for all physical conditioning done outside of the water. This can range from pre-practice stretching to regular sessions dedicated to lifting weights or doing resistance exercises, yoga, Pilates, spin classes, running, etc.

DQ (Disqualification): This occurs when a swimmer has committed an infraction of some kind (ex. Freestyle kick in butterfly). A disqualified swimmer does not receive points for that swim, nor can the time be used as an official time

Even splitting: the act of completing both the first half and last half of a set distance at equal speeds.

False Start: Occurs when a swimmer is moving before the start is sounded. May result in immediate disqualification, depending on the meet.

Finals: The last competitive round of an event. Usually, the top six or eight swimmers move on from preliminary rounds to the finals.

Flags: Backstroke flags placed 5 yards from the end of the pool. The flags enable backstrokers to execute a turn safely and more efficiently

flip turn (or turn): one of the turns in swimming, used to reverse the direction in which the person is swimming. It is done when the swimmer reaches the end of the swimming pool but still has one or more lengths to swim. Flip turns are only permitted during freestyle and backstroke races.

Hand entry: The position the hand is in at the time it touches the water after the recovery and before the catch phase. The hand should enter with the fingers together and pointing downward, as if putting on a glove. It should also enter in line with the shoulder to avoid injury.

Heats: Swimmers are grouped in heats according to their entry or seed time, with the fastest swimmers in each heat assigned to the middle lanes and each heat getting progressively faster.

Heat sheet: Printed listings for each heat and lane assignment of each event to be swum. Swimmers should already be aware of what events they are entered in, but the heat sheet will tell them the order of events as well as the group and lane to which they are assigned. Athletes should take this timetable into consideration when planning when to warm up and when to leave the deck to go to the bathroom or the vendor area, lest they miss their heat.

High elbow: By keeping the elbow hinged during the recovery phase above the water, the high elbow catch maximizes the surface area making contact with the water. It essentially positions the forearm, wrist and hand to act like an oar, pushing more water than the hand could manage on its own. Thus, the swimmer covers more distance with each stroke. This technique also keeps the shoulder in a more stable position, which helps prevent repetitive-use injuries.

Hypoxic training: any type of set where a breathing pattern is the focal point of the drill.

IM: This term stands for individual medley, an event in which a swimmer performs all four competitive strokes. The order is butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle. (The order is different in a medley relay, where the order is back, breast, fly, free.) IM race distances are 100 (one length of each stroke, contested only in a short course, or 25-yard or meter pool, mostly for 10-and-unders), 200 and 400. In a short-course pool, a 200 IM is 50 yards/meters or two pool lengths of each stroke; in a long-course or 50-meter pool, it's one length. In a 400 IM, the swimmer does 100 yards/meters of each stroke. In short-course, that's four lengths; in long course, it's two

Interval: the time given to complete a certain drill. A 2:00 interval for 100 meters means that if you can swim 100 meters in 1:40 minutes, you will have 20 seconds of rest before repeating the next one.

Long course: A 50-meter pool. This is the true definition of Olympic-sized pool. Most long-course racing is done in the summer from May to August. A swimmer's long-course times will generally be slower because there are fewer turns.

Medley Relay: Relay in which four swimmers each swim one of the four competitive strokes. Order is Back, Breast, Fly, Free

Negative Split: the act of completing the second half of a set distance faster than the first half.

NS (No-Show): When a swimmer does not report to swim the event or misses the event.

Official: A judge on the deck of the pool at a sanctioned competition who enforces swimming rules. There are stroke and turn judges, administrative officials, starters, and referees

On the top: starting a set on the 12 o'clock (or 60-second) mark on a poolside pace clock.

On the bottom: starting a set on the 6 o'clock (or 30-second) mark on a pace clock.

Pace: the time per repeat you can hold consistently during a set, and ideally the time (per 100 meters, for instance) that you can hold during a race.

Paddles: plastic hand-disks used to maximize an upper-body pulling workout. Available in several shapes and sizes, depending on your skill and preference.

Positive Check-In: Performed by swimmers upon arriving at a meet to designate their intention to swim a race. The swimmer or coach will actually circle in their name for each event they intend to swim at that competition. Usually done for longer events

Prelims (Preliminaries): Races in which swimmers swim in order to qualify for the finals (or championship heats of an event)

Psyche sheet or program: This is a roster of all the swimmer registered to compete in a meet.

Qualifying Time: Time necessary to compete in a particular event and/or competition. Also known as a cut.

Recovery: This term has two meanings for swimmers. It can pertain to the point in the stroke in which the hand is above the water line preparing for the next stroke. It can also be used to describe the process of resting and refueling after practice or a race.

Relay: An event in which four swimmers compete together as a team to achieve one time

Repeats: the components of a set; 5 x 100 is a set of a 100 distance repeated 5 times.

Scratch: To withdraw from an event at a meet.

Sculling: A drill in which the swimmer gently moves their forearms and hands back and forth through the water, developing a sense of how each move affects the swimmer's forward progress.

Seed Times: the time a swimmer uses to enter a meet. This time determines the swimmer's heat/lane assignment

Set: a grouping of distances composing part of a workout or drill; 5 x 100 is a set that is 500 meters long; 500, 400, 300, 200, 100 is a set that is 1,500 meters long.

Short course: In America, this term usually means a 25-yard pool. Most USA Swimming-sanctioned racing during the fall, winter and spring is done in short-course yards,

including high school and college meets. The term can also pertain to 25-meter pools, although they are more common in summer league and abroad.

Split: The time for a portion of a race, such as each 50 of a 100-yard-race. Coaches will compare the split for the first (or front half) part of a race with the second (or back half) to determine where the swimmer was fastest and slowest.

Streamline: When the body is pointing in a long, straight line with the arms at the ears, locked together with one hand on top of the other, while the legs are together and the toes are pointed. It is used on starts and turns because it minimizes drag or resistance underwater.

Taper: A few weeks before a major meet, the coach will begin scaling back the volume or workload at practice in favor of working on fine details, like starts and turns. This allows the swimmer to get more rest in hopes of dramatically improving their times at their goal meet. Warning: You may find your swimmer suddenly has a lot more energy after practice while at the same time telling you, "I can't take the garbage out because I'm on taper."

Threshold: the maximum time you can hold, or repeat, for a given distance during a highly aerobic set.

Time Trial: A time-only swim, which is not part of a regular meet, but held at the end of the session at an extra cost to the swimmer. Times obtained in a time trial are official results.

Touch Pad: A large touch sensitive board at the end of each lane where a swimmer's finish is registered and sent electronically to the timing system

Underwaters: The time a swimmer spends below the surface doing dolphin kick in streamline position or the breaststroke pullout. Swimmers are permitted to go 15 yards or meters underwater off the start or turn.

Vertical kicking: special drill executed in deep water (diving wells and deep ends of hotel pools when lap swimming is not an option) where one kicks in a vertical position with arms crossed over chest, or extended above head for various intervals/sets.

Yardage: The total distance your swimmer covers in per practice, day or week and usually measured in yards (e.g. "my child's group practices 5,000 yards a day or 25,000 yards a week"). This number can vary widely depending on your child's age, whether s/he sprinter or distance swimmer, how long the practice is and their coach's philosophy. Note: it's still called yardage even when they're swimming long course meters.

Zones: A regional long-course championship meet held at the end of the summer, comprised of age-group swimmers from one of four zones: eastern, western, central or southern. In this case, swimmers may represent their city or state on a relay with swimmers from other clubs.

50: generally refers to 50 yards or meters, a common repeat distance for sprinters and endurance athletes alike. In a short course pool, this is two laps. In a long course pool, it is just one.

100: twice the length of a 50

500: 500 yards or meters, this is a longer distance common in many endurance workouts (equivalent to 0.33 of a mile).