

# From Club Class to World Class

**“Success is a journey not a destination”**

## **The Journey Through Age Group Swimming**

This is a guide from Club through County, District and National competition to possible selection for international representation. It endeavours to explain, not just what can be expected at each level, but why. Some swimmers will journey all the way – some only part of the way, but all will have the best chance of reaching their full potential if they are treated as individuals. It is important that within the competitive programme individuals can compete in events which are appropriate to their stage of development and talents. This is often an issue for coaches in selecting appropriate competition, but it is also reflected in the different formats for competition at County District and National levels.

## **The Background**

Age Group swimming is about providing the appropriate opportunities for young people with particular reference to their physiological development. All human beings go through the same developmental stages from childhood to adulthood, though these stages can be at slightly different times and each stage can vary in length. There is also a gender difference in that girls tend to develop earlier than boys.

In looking at physiological development the three main systems that effect swimming are:

- the nervous system, which controls the ability to determine movement patterns (stroke technique), the ability to accurately repeat these and basic speed (reaction) times
- the muscular system, which controls mainly strength
- the cardio-vascular system.

The nervous system is almost fully developed by the time a child is 8 years old and so this is a good time to work on aspects which use this development, specifically technique, starts, turns and finishing skills. The effectiveness of these skills is demonstrated particularly in short distance events in short length pools.

The muscular system however develops at a much slower rate and the strength that it produces does not respond to training until after puberty.

The cardio-vascular system which determines the efficiency of the heart and lungs. These organs are developed through building up work on longer distances. Swimming is an endurance sport – most events last 45 seconds or more and none are similar to the 100m track event which lasts a few seconds. Training and competition for young swimmers should therefore have an endurance base. Even at senior level it is common practice for swimmers in the sprint events (50 and 100m) to train and compete in the distance above (200m). It is recognised that a swimmer may compete successfully at a distance “down” (shorter) but that it is very difficult to compete successfully in an event which is a distance up (longer).

In addition it is clear that from a very early age children should work on a wide range of movements. Up to the age of 7 children should experience as wide a number of sports as possible. If a child then looks to specialising on swimming it is equally important that this range of skills is developed by a multi-stroke approach to training *and competition*. A multi-skilled approach also reduces the likelihood of injuries.

Studies have also shown that whilst swimmers who do not specialise early have a slower initial increase in performance, they ultimately reach a higher level of achievement and have a longer

life in the sport. This is in contrast to early specialisation producing an initial rapid increase in performance, but a lower level of achievement and early retirement.

For many years the way that the body produces energy has been known. In short events this is known as anaerobic and for longer events it is aerobic. One of the most difficult skills is to change between one system and the other. Any athletic event which lasts between 45seconds and 1min 30 requires both of the energy systems. Events lasting less than 45seconds are anaerobic and the longer events are, in the main, aerobic. This change in energy production is particularly difficult for youngsters whose bodily systems are not fully developed and even then requires a skilled transition. Generally the events in swimming which fall into this range are the 100m events.

It is clear then that swimmers in the 9 –13 /14 Age groups should be encouraged:

- < to compete in a range of events
- < to include short sprints and distance events and
- < not to compete in 100m events too soon

The County District and National programme are therefore designed to reward swimmers in this age group who are successful over a range of events - a combination, determined by the age of the swimmer, of 50m, 100m, 200m distance freestyle and the individual medley. This is done with a points system and awards are made to those swimmers with the most points over an agreed range of events rather than to the individual winner of single events. The event categories and in some cases the events included within a category recognise the different rates of maturation between girls and boys. (see British Age Group categories (BAGCATS))

In the next group, the Youth age, it is important that swimmers learn to develop other skills important to competing successfully. At this age they should begin to specialise and learn the skills required for competing in heats, semi-finals and finals.

The starting ages for County District and National events are progressive and the change from Age to Youth Championships is different for boys and girls to recognise the difference in maturation rates. The Youth Championships for Girls begin at 14 years and for Boys at 15 years.

### **County Championships**

These events take place in the Spring. The Age and Youth Championships generally combine with Senior events in the programme. The Youth events will include heats and, where time allows, finals. If Finals are included in the programme the suggested order of preference of inclusion is as follows: 200m Individual Medley, 200m Form Strokes, 200/400m Freestyle and 400m Individual Medley, the 100m Strokes.

Entry to most County Championships and to District and National Championships is by achieving qualifying times, which are published each year. (See Long Course and Short Course pools).

For the younger swimmers these will take the format of British Age Group Category (BAGCAT) events to encourage swimmers to compete over a wide range of events, determined by heat declared winners (no finals). These events are (mostly) swum in 25m pools and include 50m events to give swimmers the opportunity to use all the same skills of starting, turning and finishing as in a 2 length swim in a 50m pool, together with distance events requiring more cardio-vascular endurance.

The youngest age groups will not swim 100m events as part of the County BAGCAT programme, as most swimmers at this level do not have the physiological development required to swim this event correctly. The event is included in the District and National programme but only for those swimmers with District or National qualifying times on the corresponding 200m event.

## **District Championships**

These are all swum in 50m pools and therefore offer the main opportunity for swimmers to achieve a Long Course National Qualifying Time. The programme, as the National programme is divided into two Championships, Youth and Age. The Youth Championships take place at the beginning of May and the Age Championships in June.

The Youth Championships introduces dual age bands as a progression from age swimming in single age bands, to open swimming at senior level. The relay events are included in the four day programme to introduce the concept that swimmers must be able to produce good times in individual events and then reproduce these times in team events which may be in the same session.

The Age Championships follow the BAGCAT format, but to discourage the “bash & dash” approach of one length events, do not include 50m swims. As District competition is in a long course pools the 50m events have no turns, and do not offer the same opportunity to develop skills as the 50m events in the 25m pool. However, there are 100m events for all ages. This is included for the younger swimmers at this level, to provide the opportunity for the small number of early developers, who have the talent and physiological development to begin to experience competing at this event.

Entry at District (and National) level for the 100m events for the 10 year old boys and girls and the 11 years boys age group is only open to those youngsters who have achieved the corresponding 200m qualifying time. This recognises that the majority of swimmers in these ages will not benefit from competing over 100m, but that those who have the ability achieve a District or National qualifying time on the 200m will be able to swim down a distance and experience competing in the shorter event.

There are only 4 Categories at District level and so it is feasible to include some finals in the programme. If Finals are to be in the programme, the suggested order of preference for inclusion is as follows: 200m Individual Medley, 200m Form Strokes, 200 / 400m Freestyle and 400m Individual Medley, the 100m Strokes.

## **National Championships**

These are divided into Age Championships and Youth Championships and take place in late July / early August. As from 2003, the last opportunity to achieve qualifying times for National entry will be the date of the last day of the District Age Championships (mid June). (See Long Course / Short Course Pools)

The Youth Championships include a full programme with a 3-race progression of heat, age final and Youth final which simulates the 3-race progression of heats, semi-finals and finals in major competition.

The Age Championships follow the format of British Age Group Category (BAGCAT) events with the BAGCAT points being taken from the heat swims. At this level, all events have finals (except 800/1500 free) which are used for the selections for the World Class programmes. This addresses the skill of swimming fast heats and then even faster finals.

It is practical to include finals in the BAGCAT programme at National level because, with harder qualifying times than for County and District events, an individual swimmer will qualify in fewer events in each category. This allows them, within the 4-day programme, to cope with the inclusion of finals, and relay events

## **World Class**

The World Class programmes – Start, Potential and Performance, provide training camps and for the older swimmers, competition opportunities for the top swimmers in the Country. The programmes relevant to age group swimmers are the Start and Potential Squads.

The Start Age Squad is for girls 11,12 & 13 years and boys 12, 13 & 14 years. It is selected from performances at the National Age Group Championships. The Squad is split into two groups each with a maximum of 25 swimmers.

In addition to the Start Age programme, from 2002 there is a 200 metre programme based on the Individual Medley event. This is for swimmers aged 10/11years. From 2003, the BAGCAT totals from the District Championships will be ranked and from this ranking list the top 40 girls and top 40 boys nationally in these age groups will be identified and invited onto the Individual Medley programme.

There are two Potential Age Squads, one for girls aged 12, 13 & 14 years and one for boys aged 13, 14 & 15 years, each with a maximum of 30 swimmers. The squads are selected from the National Age Group Championships and the National Youth Championships.

The Potential Youth squad is for girls 15,16 & 17 years and boys 16,17 & 18 years. This squad is selected from the GB long Course Championships, the European Junior Championships and the National Youth championships.

All the Squads are selected against a set of consideration times and the ages are based on the swimmer's age on the last day of either the National Age Group Championships or the National Youth Championships as appropriate. Each squad has a programme of training camps and some of the older swimmers will also take part in representative competitions.

More detailed information regarding selection and training camps for the World Class squads is available on from the ASA and are on the website [www.britishswimming.org](http://www.britishswimming.org)

## **Long Course / Short Course Pools**

Whilst the vast majority of pools in the UK are Short Course (25m), and most of the major championships are swum in Long Course (50m) pools, it is important for swimmers to learn to compete in 50m pools.

For the British Long Course Championships, which also act as the Trials for the major world event that year, qualifying times must have been achieved in a long course pool.

However, with the restriction created by the lack of 50m facilities in this country, this cannot apply to all competition. Therefore, for the British Short Course Championships and all ASA National events there are two sets of qualifying times - 50m times and 25m times. Swimmers entering an event with a long course (50m) qualifying time will be seeded in the event according to their entry time in the usual way. Swimmers entering with a qualifying time achieved in a short course (25m) pool will have their entries accepted and these entries will be treated as the slowest times and will be randomly seeded.

This system still allows swimmers to qualify for National events from 25m pools, but gives an advantage of being seeded to those swimmers with long course qualifying times. As all swimmers at National level should have had the opportunity to swim in their District Championships, which are in 50m pools, they will have the opportunity to achieve a Long Course Qualifying Time.

This system removes the need to rely on equivalent performance tables to convert times from one pool length to another. When an event is swum in a 25m pool, there is a time advantage, because there are more turns than when swimming the same event in a 50m pool. However, the

differences in time do not accurately reflect the turning skills of each individual swimmer, so converted times have only ever been approximate. For young swimmers, whose turning skills are still developing, it is likely that a conversion gives them a significant advantage, and many cannot repeat their converted times when they actually the event swim in a long course pool.

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**“British Age Group swimmers compete too often and train too little”**  
**Bill Sweetenham, GB National Performance Director**  
**January 2001**

### **Competition**

It is important for meet organisers, club officials coaches and parents to appreciate that not all swimmers who compete at County level will reach District or National level. What is appropriate competition for the few talented individuals at national level is not necessarily appropriate for the hundreds of swimmers who compete at County level. Equally it may not be beneficial for a swimmer competing with distinction at national level, to include County or even District Championships in their planned programme.

### **How often?**

As a general rule, swimmers should not compete more than 12 times in a year in events which require them to alter or modify their training programme, and all events that include a taper or rest from training should have clear performance targets set by the coach for the individual swimmer.

Many swimmers will “train through” some competitions or use them as part of their training programme. A swimmer may complete a full training programme and represent their club in an event on a Saturday evening, or may use a day’s competing in as many events as possible at County or District level to swim as part of their training programme.

The important issue is that this should be part of the competitive programme planned and evaluated by the coach and swimmer.

### **Training Camps**

Throughout the country there will be opportunities for swimmers to be selected for training camps at different levels. The national Sport England programme Active Sports which is based on local authority partnerships will provide training camp opportunities for many County level swimmers. There will be further camps at Active Sport Regional level and also a programme organised through the ASA Districts. The basis for selection for all of these camps for the younger swimmers will be based on the British Age Group Category principles.

**“The introduction of the BAGCAT (British Age Group Categories) in the 2000 / 2001 swimming season was a major step in the right direction. It is recognised that the introduction of the 200m events at County level has been very positive, as the number of swimmers participating in 200m and over events has increased considerably.**  
**The subsequent alterations to the programme at District and National level this current season and the developments next year are a further step forward. ”**  
**John Atkinson. GB National Youth Coach**

**ASA competition and training camp opportunities provide a pathway for swimmers “From Club Class to World Class” – *enjoy your journey.***

<b>British Age Group Category County Awards (BAGCATS) 25m pool</b>				
	<b>Boys</b>		<b>Girls</b>	
<b>9 years</b>	Sprint Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 200m form stroke - 200 free - best 100 / 200 IM	Sprint Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 200m form stroke - 200 free - best 100 / 200 IM
<b>10 years</b>	Sprint Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 100 / 200 IM	Sprint Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 100 / 200IM
<b>11 years</b>	Sprint Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 100 / 200 IM	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 100 / 200 IM
<b>12 years</b>	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 100 / 200 / 400 IM	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 100 / 200 / 400 IM
<b>13 years</b>	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 100 / 200 / 400 IM	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 100 / 200 / 400 IM
<b>14 years</b>	Sprint 100s Form Distance IM	- best 50m - best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 100 / 200 / 400 IM	<i>Note: Girls 14 years and over and boys 15 years and over will start to specialize in individual events which will have individual awards.</i>	

<b>British Age Group Category District &amp; National Awards (BAGCATS) 50m pool</b>				
	<b>Boys</b>		<b>Girls</b>	
<b>District</b>				
<b>10 years</b>	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m* - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 200 / 400 IM	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m* - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 200 / 400 IM
<b>District &amp; National</b>				
<b>11 years</b>	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m* - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 free - best 200 / 400 IM	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 200 / 400 IM
<b>District &amp; National</b>				
<b>12 years</b>	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 200 / 400 IM	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 200 / 400 IM
<b>District &amp; National</b>				
<b>13 years</b>	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 200 / 400 IM	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 800 free - best 200 / 400 IM
<b>District &amp; National</b>				
<b>14 years</b>	100s Form Distance IM	- best 100m - best 200m form stroke - best 200 / 400 / 1500 free - best 200 / 400 IM	<i>Note: Girls 14 years and over and Boys 15 years and over will start to specialise in individual events and will swim in the Youth Championships.</i>	
<b>100m events marked *</b>				