

# Top tips for those new to competition swimming

## Advice for swimmers and parents

### Preparation – equipment, food and drink

Swimmers should be encouraged to pack their own equipment for meets, including costumes (and a spare), racing costume (if required), Bobcats hat, two pairs of goggles, pool shoes, two towels, Bobcats t-shirt, shorts & tracksuit bottoms etc, a change of clothes for after the competition, plenty of drinks (normally water), and healthy snacks (cereal/energy bars, rice cakes, fruit etc).

### Arrival

Swimmers should be well rested – so going to bed early the night before is a very good idea. They should also be nutritionally well-prepared and hydrated.

Swimmers should know what races they are competing in, and make themselves familiar with the programme **BEFORE** the event, so that they are aware of how the day will unfold. As parents should have checked the draft programme to make sure the swimmer appears in the events entered.

Meets start early, so if you are due at the first session set two alarm clocks then you won't oversleep (or lie awake worrying that you might!). If the meet is not held locally, make sure that you know the route, leave plenty of time for the journey and arrive at the time set by the coach – this will normally be at least 30 minutes before the start of the pool warm-up session. **This may seem early, but this time is important for the poolside team to confirm the Bobcats entry for events and inform the meet officials of any withdrawals before the deadline.** This time is also used for flexing before the warm-up.

### Meet types

Most meets use start sheets, to allow swimmers to know what heat/lane they are in. Sometimes, however, swimmers are required to register on arrival. The coaches will know the format and will provide guidance. Any withdrawals on the day must be discussed with the coach immediately upon arrival at the meet, and then made according to meet procedure.

### Warm-up

Proper warm-ups are essential and are intended to protect from injury and improve the swimmer's performance at the meet by increasing body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure and energy producing enzyme activity. They also give swimmers the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the diving blocks, water temperature and depths, position of the

turn flags and feel of the end walls. Warm-ups are strictly organised and swimmers must follow the instructions of the Bobcats coaches and the meet officials.

When instructed to leave the pool, swimmers should immediately dry off, take a loo break if necessary, change into their racing costume (known as skinning-up!), t-shirt and track pants, and keep warm. Swimmers should not warm up in a racing suit, as it defeats the purpose of the fabric and will reduce their life. Swimmers should remain on poolside with their team mates throughout the meet session, which build team building and team spirit. If a swimmer should need to leave the poolside they should always seek the permission of their coach or poolside manager. **Due to child welfare regulations, under no circumstances are parents to come onto poolside, unless sanctioned to do so.**

## **Race preparation**

Prior to racing, swimmers should listen carefully to any instruction from their coach. Swimmers must also listen out for instructions to report to poolside stewards, the officials responsible for gathering swimmers together and organising them into the correct heats and lanes. The stewards will check you off and tell you which heat and lane you are swimming in.

It is the swimmer's responsibility to report to the steward for their event. As meets are run to very tight schedules, the stewards and Referees are not obliged to wait for a swimmer to arrive for their heat or to fit them into a later heat if they miss their designated heat.

## **Dealing with nerves**

If you are new to competing for Burnley Bobcats, it's very likely that you'll be nervous. All swimmers get nervous – from the youngest up to our elite squad members. Nerves are not a bad thing, and often help swimmers prepare for a race. The really important thing is not to let the nerves take over, and turn into fear. Keep busy and active, and don't spend time thinking about your race until the very last few minutes. Enjoy the challenge, and just try to be the best you can be.

## **Race starts for beginners**

Competitors should leave their tracksuits, t-shirts etc, on until just before a race. When approaching the starting blocks take care not to walk in front of the officials who may be checking the finish of a race, observing the turns or starting the preceding heat. It's a good idea to put on your hat and prepare your goggles just before the steward sends you to the blocks. Most top swimmers will also carry some spare goggles with them, in case they break! Once you get there, you should take your warm clothing off and put them on the chair or in the box if there's one provided. The referee blows a short series of whistles to signal that the swimmers should stand behind the starting block, and everyone else should be quiet.

When the referee blows a long blast on the whistle you should either: stand on the block, stand near the edge of the pool if you are starting in the water, or drop into the water if it is a backstroke race.

It does not matter where on the block you stand but when the starter gives the command, “Take your marks”, you must quickly take up a position with at least one foot at the front of the block with your toes wrapped over the edge and remain completely still, until the starting signal is given. Ensure you know what that signal is – it could be a starting gun bang, a whistle or an electronic beep. If a swimmer starts before, or is moving at the time the signal is given, and are deemed to have started before the start signal. A **“one start rule” is applied, which means swimmers do not have a second chance – they are immediately disqualified (DQ’d).**

At the end of a race swimmers must remain in the water until asked to leave by an official, usually the referee.

## **Disqualification**

Swimmers can be disqualified for a number of reasons, including: delaying the start, making a false start, faulty turn, faulty stroke, faulty finish, or leaving the water before being told to do so. It helps if swimmers know the basic rules. If you are disqualified don’t be too upset. It happens to everyone at some point, even world champions! Find out why you were DQ’d, discuss it with your coach, and try not to make the same mistake again. Swimmers who are DQ’d do not have a time recorded for their swim.

## **After the event**

Congratulations, a good job done! When you’ve finished your swim, collect your warm clothes and go to see your coach for feedback about your swim. Discussion and analysis will help you to improve your technique and race tactics. If you feel you’ve had a bad race, find out if your coach agrees (they may not) and if so, why; learn from the experience, stay positive, and move on.

Depending on facilities and when your next event is, you may be told to swim down, or to dry off and get your warm clothes back on.

The key thing for younger swimmers is to practise and improve their stroke technique and learn racing skills. **This may mean that in the short term they need to slow down a little and focus more on getting their technique right.** In the longer term, once good technique has become natural to them, they can focus on maximum speed.

## **Swim-down**

At some events, particularly level 1 and 2 meets, there will be swim down facilities. A swim down is to allow the swimmer’s body to recover after the race by helping to reduce lactic acid build up in the muscles- a build of lactic acid can cause muscle stiffness and tiredness – which will help swimmers to perform well later in the meet. The coach will advise you on what to swim in the swim-down – you should make sure you stick to the programme.

## **Finals**

Some or all events, especially the longer ones, may be heat declared (with results based solely on times achieved in the heats) but others have finals, with the fastest swimmers from the heats going forward.

Finals are normally held at the end of the session, but do check. Swimmers are spearheaded, with the fastest swimmers in the centre lanes and the slowest in the outside lanes. In a 10-lane pool the swimmers will occupy the lanes as follows: 4,5,3,6,2,7,1,8,0,9 in fastest to slowest order.

## **Advice for parents new to Bobcats**

Preparation is everything. Get everything possible ready the night before. Most take a cool bag with a large supply of drinks, snacks and healthy high carbohydrate lunch items – your coach will give you appropriate advice. Don't rely on suitable food being available at the venue – very few pools, if any, have adequate facilities! If there is food available, there'll often be a huge queue and then you'll have difficulty finding a seat. Take a pen to record times/splits etc, and something (a book, an MP3 player/tablet, newspaper) to occupy you – there can be long waits between events. Oh, and dress for a Mediterranean holiday, even in winter pools get very hot.

Watching your child compete is exciting but it can also be nerve-wracking, and everyone reacts to the situation differently. Once the race is underway some parents shout hysterically, much to the amusement of other parents, officials and swimmers! Enthusiasm is great, but your child won't be able to hear you and is likely to thank you more if you stay calm. Give them a reassuring hug and wish them luck prior to the meet, but **please don't offer them any technical or tactical advice; congratulate them after their swim, and console them if they are disappointed with their performance, but without any well-meant analysis.** Leave this to the coach, as mixed messages will only confuse the swimmer and can cause unnecessary bad feeling.

Enjoy yourself and help them to appreciate the highs (and occasional lows) of the sport, and that sometimes losing, is the best way to learn how to win. **Don't expect them to achieve a personal best every time they race, as training is cyclical. This means that there will be times of the season where the main focus is base fitness and skills, and at these times, the swimmers' times will be inconsistent, and they may not be at top speed. Each squad has its main focus meets during the season. They will be prepared for these, and will hopefully swim personal bests at that point. The other meets are for practice and build-up competitions, to help teach the swimmers the pacing and skills necessary to perform at their best in the "big one!"**

**As always, if you have any questions, please come forward and ask your child's coach who will be able to help.**