



Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Meet Directors and Safety Personnel

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

Including athletes with a disability in your meet is easy. The goal remains the same as it has always been – to make the meet a safe, successful, and fun experience for all swimmers. There is very little to add to the list of “things to do” when including athletes with a disability. A positive attitude, knowledge of Article 105 of the USA Swimming rulebook, knowledge of LSC policies regarding inclusion, and common sense will see you through.

Including Swimmers with a Disability

The USA Swimming rules (Article 105) permit disability accommodations and 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.

Safe, successful inclusion of swimmers with a disability at swimming meets is a shared responsibility.

- *Swimmer and coach.* The coach or swimmer is responsible for contacting the meet director in advance of the meet if any *facility accommodations* are needed, and contacting the referee prior to the competition to describe the swimmer’s disability and to request any *accommodations that affect the actual competition*. Examples of *facility accommodations* include preferred parking, wheelchair seating, use of a service animal, or an additional strobe light. Examples of *competition accommodations* include but are not limited to special seeding, more time at the start, rule modifications, and personal assistants.
- *Referee.* The referee is responsible for deciding whether the requested *competition accommodations* are appropriate and feasible. The referee should consider fairness for the swimmer with a disability and for other swimmers in the competition, as well as potential 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. The referee should communicate



decisions and delegate responsibilities to officials and meet management personnel as appropriate.

- *Meet directors and safety personnel.* The primary responsibilities of meet directors include welcoming the swimmer with a disability, making good-faith efforts to provide requested *facility accommodations*, compliance with Article 105 of the USA Swimming rule book, and compliance with LSC policies on inclusion. Meet directors and safety personnel should collaborate with regard to planning a safe environment for all participants. Typical safety concerns include effective operation of pool lifts, repair of broken equipment such as lane lines that might injure a swimmer, keeping traffic areas as dry and clutter-free as practical, and review of emergency action plans to include various methods of alerting and evacuating people with disabilities in the event of an emergency. Remember that persons with disabilities may include athletes, coaches, spectators, and meet workers.

LSC Policies on Inclusion

Your LSC should have a policy about the inclusion of athletes with a disability in LSC meets. Meet management personnel, including the entry chairperson, clerk of course, and computer operator should know, understand, and uphold the LSC policies. Sample provisions of an LSC policy might include the following.

- *Meet information.* Include a sentence or paragraph in the meet information welcoming athletes with a disability. Ask the swimmer or coach to contact the meet director in advance of the meet if any *facility accommodations* are needed, and contact the referee prior to the competition to describe the swimmer's disability and to request any *accommodations that affect the actual competition*
- *Eligibility.* Describe the time standards provisions and any other eligibility criteria in the meet information. For example, many LSCs waive time standards for athletes with a disability.
- *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 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 negative impact on the meet timeline. 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). 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.

Disability Accommodations

Meet directors should provide easy-to-accomplish, practical facility accommodations upon request for swimmers, spectators, and volunteers who have disabilities. Most accommodations are common-sense adaptations to meet procedures and facility preparation that involve little or no cost to the meet host. In some cases, the swimmer with a disability simply needs your permission to provide his/her own accommodations, such as a personal assistant. The following guidelines should be useful to meet directors; however, remember that accommodations should be tailored to the individual's unique needs.

- *Personal assistants.* Personal assistants (provided by the swimmer) provide disability-specific help to the swimmer. For example, some deaf swimmers may choose to have an interpreter with them on deck so that they have access to announcements and verbal instructions from officials. Personal assistants help blind swimmers to locate and step onto the starting block, and they notify the swimmer of an impending turn or finish by tapping the swimmer's body with a soft-tipped pole. Service dogs help blind swimmers to be more independent, and should be permitted on the pool deck. A buddy can help swimmers who have cognitive disabilities by facilitating communication and by reminding the swimmer about meet routines and procedures. Swimmers with physical disabilities may need help with tasks such as personal care and entry and exit from the water. Personal assistants: (a) are not required to be members of USA Swimming; (b) do not have the benefit of USA Swimming general liability or 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.
- *Communication.* Use common sense when determining effective ways of communicating with swimmers who have a disability. Communicate with deaf swimmers through an interpreter, coach, or written word. Ask meet workers to read the scoreboard or printed information for blind swimmers. Use language that swimmers with cognitive disabilities can understand. It is polite to sit or kneel when speaking to a wheelchair user or someone of short stature so that the swimmer doesn't need to look up to see you.
- *Equipment.* Equipment needs will depend upon the swimmer's disability. Place the strobe light where it can be seen by deaf swimmers and be prepared to move

the strobe light or use an auxiliary strobe light for different events. Mats at the ends of the pool facilitate safe transfers for wheelchair users. A pool lift is not required, but if one is available, it should be used if needed and requested by the swimmer. Dwarf swimmers appreciate non-skid step stools, especially in locker rooms, so that they can reach shower controls and other appliances.

- *Facility.* Keep the pool deck and other traffic areas as free from obstacles as possible to accommodate swimmers who are blind or who use mobility equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches, or walkers. Heavy doors should be propped open or temporarily removed. Wheelchair seating should be provided on-deck or in the spectator stands as needed. Elevators should be accessible to persons with a disability.



- *Meet procedures.* Notify key meet workers such as the announcer, clerk of course, and awards personnel when disability accommodations are needed, and ask them to provide needed services as unobtrusively as possible. Post heat sheets and results low enough for wheelchair users and dwarf swimmers to read. Be cognizant that some swimmers with a disability need opportunities to earn qualifying times in the 50 y/m stroke events and the 150 y/m individual medley for Paralympic competition. Offering these events as time trials or special events is a great service. Providing proof-of-time for records or meet entry purposes is another service that should be provided upon request.

Safety at Meets

Many meet directors fear that safety is a bigger concern for persons with a disability than for other participants; however, this is rarely the case. With a few common-sense precautions, most safety risks can be minimized or eliminated. Remember to consider all participants when developing your meet safety plan – swimmers, coaches, spectators, and meet workers.

- *Emergency signals.* Consider the adequacy of emergency signals for swimmers, coaches, spectators, and meet workers who have disabilities – will they know an emergency signal has been activated? Visual signals are needed by persons who are deaf, and auditory signals are needed by persons who are blind.

- *Emergency evacuation plan.* A copy of the evacuation plan should be announced or posted to inform participants what to do in the event of an emergency. The evacuation plan should specify assistance for persons who are blind or who those have cognitive or physical disabilities. Remember that elevators should not be used in case of fire; therefore, wheelchair users may need alternate exit routes or help in negotiating stairs.
- *Slippery pool deck.* A slippery deck is especially hazardous for swimmers who use mobility equipment such as crutches, canes, and walkers. Many slips and falls can be prevented by keeping the pool deck as clean and dry as possible and by the use of personal assistants.
- *Cluttered pool deck.* A cluttered pool deck impairs mobility for swimmers who are blind and for those who use wheelchairs or other mobility equipment. Safety personnel should help to keep traffic areas clear of obstacles to prevent accidents. Personal equipment such as wheelchairs, prostheses, or other mobility devices can pose a hazard to officials and swimmers at the starting end of the pool, and should be moved to a safe location while the swimmer is warming-up or racing.
- *Sharp or rough surfaces.* Sharp-edged lane lines may be an unavoidable problem for some swimmers who are blind, causing cuts, scrapes, and bruises. Mats at the ends of the pool help prevent injuries to wheelchair users and other swimmers with physical disabilities when they transfer in and out of the pool. Towels on rough-surfaced starting blocks help prevent skin injuries for swimmers who start from kneeling or sitting positions.

Remember....

- The primary ingredients for successful inclusion of swimmers with a disability are a positive attitude and common sense.
- Use common-sense disability accommodations that enable swimmers with a disability to have a fun, successful, and safe meet experience.
- Key meet workers should be informed about Article 105 of the USA Swimming rule book, relevant LSC policies, and the need to provide disability accommodations.
- Consider the needs of participants with a disability when developing the meet safety plan.

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.