




COMPETITION PATHWAY HANDBOOK



IT IS AN EXCITING TIME FOR SWIMMING IN BRITAIN. THE DOMESTIC COMPETITION STRUCTURE IS CHANGING. THIS BROCHURE WILL OUTLINE THE CHANGES, AND EXPLAIN HOW THESE AIM TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SWIMMERS IN THE SPORT GOING FORWARD.

BACKGROUND

The Long Term Athlete Development Review completed in 2012 advised that for any swimmer development pathway to be effective it must feature a fit for purpose competition framework. It concluded that a review of the existing competition framework should be undertaken to ensure the development processes, which ultimately need to be successfully exhibited by senior swimmers, are targeted.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Swimming is one of the core sports which defines any Olympic Games. In Britain, the sport has received significant investment from UK Sport and the Home Nation Sports Councils since the beginning of the lottery funded era, in addition to the collective ongoing investment of clubs and their members into the future of the sport. Given the commitment made by swimmers at all levels, and the associated support of their families, it is crucial that the sport is prepared to look critically at existing practice and is open to the potential for change with a view to ensuring it provides an opportunity for all members to meet their personal potential within the sport. The competition framework review is one element which forms part of a strategy for the ongoing development of the Pathway for Swimming.

THE PROCESS

A domestic competition review process was initiated by British Swimming's Head of Performance Pathway. This review stated a visionary goal for the sport of ensuring that all participating swimmers have an enjoyable and fulfilling experience in swimming, and those who aspire to achieve Olympic success are fully supported in doing so. The process has been overseen by the recently formed Pathway Implementation Group. This group incorporates representatives from the ASA, Scottish Swimming, Swim Wales, the British Swimming Coaches Association, UK Sport's Pathway Team and British Swimming. A paper produced by the Head of Performance Pathway was used by this group as the basis for consultation and discussion, allowing consensus to be formed on a range of recommendations tied to the overall framework aims.

Some of the key impacts that the review recommends are:

- An increased emphasis on swimmers having clear periods in their training plan which focus on the development of skill and training capacities
- The presence of clear competition periods where individuals learn to produce peak performance on the day when it most matters
- More swimmers training for the full season with access to a quality end of season competition at a relevant standard
- A progressive provision of Championship competition as swimmers get older and progress through the performance pathway.

KEY CHANGES

1. Establishment of Home Nation and British Summer Championships.

- **Rationale/Benefit:** Increased opportunities for swimmers to compete at end of season Championship competition(s).
- **Key point(s) to note:** A swimmer may qualify for different events at British and at their respective Home Nation competitions, however cannot compete in an event at a Home Nation Summer Competition for which they qualified at the British Summer Championships. The Home Nation of an individual will by default be set as the country of their ranked club. Where an individual wishes instead to be ranked in relation to their Country of International Representation they will need to declare this. Further information on how to do this will be released prior to the opening of the qualifying window. You can view your membership record at <https://www.swimmingresults.org/membershipcheck/>.
- Swimmers will not necessarily compete in all of the events for which they qualify. Coaches will lead the process at club level by directing appropriate entries for each individual.

2. Establishment of a qualifying window system for Summer Championship Meets (in the 2014-2015 season this will be from 13 March to 31 May).

- **Rationale/Benefit:** To support and encourage coaches in planning to ensure that swimmers have clear periods within their annual plan for the development of skill and physical capacity (while using competition opportunities for the achievement of process goals); and equally clear periods where peak performance is targeted. For National level swimmers, these periods will fall during the qualifying window and the Summer Championship Meets.
- **Key point(s) to note:** It is not the intention to suggest that swimmers only compete in the qualifying window and at the Championship Meets. Racing is a key component of preparation for a targeted competition. What this change emphasises is the periods of the season where racing should focus on improvement of process goals and less so on performance outcome, as opposed to those periods where the delivery of a performance outcome is the priority.

3. Qualification to Home Nation and British Summer Championships by invitation based on rankings lists from the competition window, rather than entry times.

- **Rationale/Benefit:** Entry times at National level have been used as a fixed marker against which swimmers judge their performance and progression. These times however were not indicators of achievement of a prescribed standard, they were set as required to manage the competition. Further to this, these have proven to be a standard that swimmers aim to achieve as early as possible in the season, often at odds with the aims of a periodised annual training plan. The new approach switches the focus to one where each swimmer should work with their coach to ensure they are prepared

to deliver an optimal performance within the window, and invitations to the competition will be prioritised based on the specific rankings.

- **Key point(s) to note:** It is not recommended that swimmers seek to maximise their competition opportunities throughout the qualifying window. The duration of the window (approx 10 weeks) is intended to ensure that opportunities for different strategies can be taken. Specifically, which competitions to target with reference to academic exams. It is strongly felt that a swimmer who targets peak performance at a short series of 2-3 competitions, in line with a clear coaching plan, will be better prepared to deliver an optimal performance than a swimmer who aims to attend competitions on 8-10 weekends of the window, resulting in limited opportunity for training and development between competitions.
- ### 4. Introduction of progressive minimum ages for each tier of Championship swimming (13/14 at British Level; 12/13 at Home Nation Level; 11/12 at Regional Level; 10/11 at County/District Level).
- **Rationale/Benefit:** Early exposure to high levels of competition is viewed as a contributing factor towards training habits, which lead to burnout in young athletes. It is also viewed as a contributing factor towards the development of a strong focus on the achievement of short term performance outcomes in young athletes, which is counter to the philosophy of coaching towards an individual's long term potential.
 - **Key point(s) to note:** The progressive ages relate solely to Championship Competitions (County, District, Regional, Home Nation and British Championships). There is no suggestion that younger swimmers should have no access to any competition. On the contrary, there is a clear need for good quality development meets for young age group swimmers as part of their development and positive experience in the sport.
- ### 5. Adoption of consistent use of age at 31 December for Championship Meets.
- **Rationale/Benefit:** Organising swimmers into age groups according to the calendar year occurs at international level swimming competitions. The change to the age band means that swimmers benefit from competing against the same cohort of swimmers throughout the whole summer racing season. There are always developmental and chronological factors to consider with age group swimmers. While there may be some performance bias evident towards those born early in the competition year in some sports, this has been found to exist whether the competition criteria was age on day or age in year of the competition.
 - **Key point(s) to note:** The chronological and developmental age of an athlete is just one factor among many that determine how a young athlete will develop. It is

well documented that few swimmers follow a linear performance progression through the sport. The execution of quality skills and techniques however are essential at all stages of development.

- While age at 31 December is being implemented for Championship Competitions, clubs will retain the ability to choose their own criteria for determining age bandings at their own open competitions and a diversity of approaches will be encouraged and welcomed.

6. Reemphasis of the short course (SC) swimming season, including coordinated Home Nation Short Course Championships.

- **Rationale/Benefit:** It is recognised by many coaches that racing with a high degree of skill in SC competition forms a key stage in the process of learning to maintain skill when racing under pressure in long course (LC) events. A strong view within the consultation process however was that the perceived value and credibility of SC swimming was being undermined through a lack of quality national level SC racing opportunities.
- **Key point(s) to note:** The intention is not to create wholly separate SC and LC seasons which exist in isolation from each other. Coaches will use SC preparation and racing opportunities as part of their periodised plan for the full swimming year. Placing an increased emphasis on SC swimming in the September-December period is not intended to suggest that solely SC racing and/or training will take place in this timeframe, or that these won't take place from January onwards.

7. Removal of BAGCAT points as part of Championship swim meets.

- **Rationale/Benefit:** The BAGCAT (British Age Group Category) points scoring system was implemented at ASA County, Regional and National events as a means of encouraging young swimmers to compete across a range of events and distances. While this system has had an impact in this area, it is recognised that it has its own limitations. As such, rather than promote this specific method, there is a strong view that encouraging a range of competition formats for developing swimmers which ensure access to varied events and formats would now be a more effective way to support coaches in delivering the long term development of their swimmers.
- **Key point(s) to note:** It has been recognised that due to qualifying times at Championship Competitions, there are only ever a limited number of swimmers who qualify for the range of events which allows them to compete across the full BAGCAT programme. This has led to varied implementation across the ASA Regions and Counties. It has been concluded that competition formats which focus on broad development principles are best placed being separate to Championship competitions where the range of events available to an individual is dictated by the qualification procedure.

8. An aligned and agreed competition calendar, across the Home Nations.

- **Rationale/Benefit:** Through the competition framework review, the Pathway Implementation Group has agreed an overall template for the annual competition calendar with consistency of competition format at a position in the calendar across the Home Nations. This approach ensures that all tiers of Championship Competition exist with a clear role, purpose and position in the calendar, and that the flow of events across the season supports the plan process of coaches in ensuring clearly defined training and competition phases.
- **Key point(s) to note:** The competition calendar will be subject to regular review on an ongoing basis and refinements will be made where required.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS/TIMEFRAME

In addition to changes at national level, the alignment of the competition pathway across the Home Nations clearly requires some changes in dates/programmes at English Regional and County; Welsh Regional and Scottish District competitions. The overall implementation process will be phased over the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 swimming seasons. Changes to Home Nation and British Summer National Meets (including the qualification process) will be implemented in 2014-2015. Changes at Regional, County and District level may also be implemented in this season where this is practical, however in some areas these may be deferred to 2015-2016 where this best fits the planning process at local level. Confirmation of competition dates and format for 2015 and beyond will be confirmed by the relevant Home Nation, Region, County or District Association.

CHALLENGES

Change can be a difficult process, and it is likely that there will be some challenges as the new competition framework is implemented and established. There will be some swimmers who will view themselves as short term winners or losers through the initial impact of specific changes. What is key, however, is for individuals to work with coaches to ensure they have access to a programme of competition which is relevant to their stage of development. Through engagement in this, and appropriate training environment and quality coaching, there is capacity for all members to be supported in the achievement of their individual potential in the sport.

The work of the Pathway Implementation Group has focused solely on Championship swimming, ie: British and Home Country National, English and Welsh Regional, Scottish District and English County Championships. There is clearly both need and demand for further tiers of competition to contribute to the early development of age group swimmers to provide preparation opportunities for Championship swimmers and to provide a varied programme of competition for the various levels and interests of the diverse membership base of our swimming clubs. This provides both a challenge and an opportunity to swimming clubs, club networks and local associations, many of whom have great expertise in running successful competitions to identify their local needs and work creatively to develop these crucial elements of the overall competition structure.

FUTURE STEPS

The Competition Framework review has been the first in a series of pieces of work which aim to enhance the swimmer pathway in Britain. Next steps will include:

- Publication of updated long term athlete development resources.
- Creation and roll out of a National Development Syllabus which clearly defines key skills for development in age group swimmers and provides resources to support coaches in the process of teaching these to an optimal standard.
- Further development of clear athlete pathways which are available and communicated to all swimmers commensurate with their age, ability and aspiration.

“I AM PLEASED WITH THE NEW COMPETITION PLAN. I THINK IT WILL BE GOOD FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SWIMMERS WHO ARE COMING THROUGH THE RANKS AND AIMING TO BE FUTURE OLYMPIC CHAMPIONS. I CAN ALSO SEE HOW THIS WOULD HAVE SUPPORTED ME WHEN I WAS A CLUB COACH AND LOOKING TO FIND APPROPRIATE LEVELS OF COMPETITION FOR ALL OF THE LEVELS OF SWIMMER IN THE PROGRAMME.”

DAVID MCNULTY, HEAD COACH, BATH NATIONAL CENTRE, BRITISH SWIMMING

“WE ARE IMPLEMENTING POSITIVE CHANGE THROUGH THIS COMPETITION REVIEW, TO ENSURE THAT THE PERFORMANCE PATHWAY FOR SWIMMERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY IS FIT FOR PURPOSE, AND IT SUPPORTS ALL INDIVIDUALS TOWARDS FULFILLING THEIR POTENTIAL. IT’S AN EXCITING TIME FOR THE SPORT”

TIM JONES, HEAD OF PERFORMANCE PATHWAY, BRITISH SWIMMING

“LOOKING AT THE NEW COMPETITION STRUCTURE I CAN SEE HOW IT WILL SUPPORT SWIMMERS AND COACHES IN FOCUSING ON DEVELOPMENT IN SOME PARTS OF THE SEASON AND PERFORMANCE AT OTHERS. I THINK ALL THE SWIMMERS WHO ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL WORK THAT WAY”

ADAM PEATY, WORLD RECORD HOLDER, EUROPEAN CHAMPION, COMMONWEALTH CHAMPION, CITY OF DERBY SWIMMING CLUB

“I AM IN FULL SUPPORT OF THE COMPETITION CHANGES. I CAN SEE THAT THE CHANGES ARE DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE GOOD COACHING PRACTICE, AND TO CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITY FOR QUALITY COMPETITIVE EXPERIENCES AND I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING THESE IN ACTION.”

BRIAN MCGUINNESS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BSCA

“THIS IS A MAJOR STEP FORWARD FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPORT OF SWIMMING IN THIS COUNTRY. HAVING A CLEAR PRACTICAL PATHWAY THAT TIES TRAINING, COMPETITION AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL TOGETHER MAKES PERFECT SENSE ALONGSIDE THE LTAD PROCESS AND EXPECTATIONS. THE NEW COMPETITION STRUCTURE IS FUNDAMENTAL TO THIS; YOU TRAIN TO COMPETE AFTER ALL!”

ALEX PINNIGER, HEAD COACH, UEA CITY OF NORWICH SWIMMING CLUB

“THE TIME PERFORMED IN A RACE IS THE OUTCOME OF HOW YOU PERFORMED YOUR SKILLS AND THE LEVEL OF EFFORT YOU PUT INTO ACHIEVING THAT. MOST OFTEN THESE SKILLS BREAK DOWN IN HIGH PRESSURE SCENARIOS. IF OUR DEVELOPING SWIMMERS DON’T HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MIRROR THE REQUIREMENTS OF SENIOR LEVEL COMPETITION WHERE SUCH PRESSURE IS IN PLACE, THEN THEY’RE AT A DISADVANTAGE, SO I WELCOME THESE NEW INITIATIVES TO PREPARE OUR YOUTH AS NEVER BEFORE.”

JACQUIE MARSHALL, DIRECTOR OF SWIMMING, NORTHAMPTON SC

“FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS! STEP 1: FOCUS ON GETTING THE SKILLS RIGHT AND THE CONDITIONING TO MAINTAIN THEM IN THE RACE ARENA. STEP 2: FOCUS ON PERFORMING TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY AT THE RIGHT TIME IN THE QUALIFYING WINDOW, TO GAIN THE INVITATION TO THE SUMMER CHAMPS. STEP 3: REPEAT ALL THAT AT THE SUMMER CHAMPS. LEARNING TO DO THIS TAKES TIME AND THIS NEW PROCESS WITHIN THE COMPETITION RESTRUCTURE WILL PROVIDE OUR FUTURE OLYMPIANS WITH A BETTER CHANCE OF SUCCEEDING WHEN IT REALLY MATTERS.”

RUSS BARBER, DIRECTOR OF SWIMMING & HEAD COACH, CITY OF SHEFFIELD SWIM SQUAD

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