

Preparing for Your First Swim Meet

What should you expect?

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If you’ve never swum in a meet before, you may be intimidated by your own thoughts and expectations. Whether it’s fear of being too slow, feeling clueless, or just generally being intimidated by more experienced athletes, it’s easy to talk yourself into thinking you don’t belong there and won’t know how to fit in. Well, rest easy, my friend, because there are few places as welcoming and fun as a US Masters swim meet!

Oh sure, you’ll be exposed to new terminology, procedures, and logistical challenges. But every single person you’ll see at a meet has been through exactly what you’re experiencing...and they will be delighted to help you understand that what appears chaotic at first is really well-organized and navigable. You’ll make new friends, learn your way around quickly, and find that you fit in with this great group of like-minded people who are all enjoying themselves while sharing their love of swimming.

Step 1—Relax and get ready to have fun!

Here are some things to consider as you begin to think about participating in a meet:

- USMS meets are open to swimmers of ALL cultures, backgrounds, and ability levels. Regardless of your speed or current skill, it’s your participation and willingness to try that matter.
- You can always attend a meet as a spectator first. Whatever your experience, you’ll see other swimmers like yourself trying new things even though they may have initially been anxious. Be sure to notice their gigantic smiles after they finish their swims!
- While there *are* rules for starts, turns, and strokes, you are not expected to use and immediately master every technique you see when you watch elite swimmers on TV. For example, no one is *required* to dive off the starting blocks; you may start from the edge of the pool, or even from within the water. Flip turns are not required, and you can legally hang on the edge of the wall as long as you need to. And if you do make a mistake that violates a rule (such as not touching the wall with two hands during butterfly or breaststroke), it becomes a learning experience when the official who spotted the infraction will gently explain what you should do instead.

You coach and seasoned teammates are your best resources to ensure your first meet will be a great experience. Ask them for help and remember that there are no dumb questions. In the meantime, here are some additional hints and guidelines to help mitigate anxiety as you prepare for your first meet.

How Does a Masters Swim Meet Work?

US Masters Swimming offers several different types of events, from Open Water distance races to virtual events you can swim at your own pool, as well as providing educational and social opportunities. The pool-based swim meets we’re discussing here are just one of the possibilities.

The pool

When you attend a Masters swim meet, you can expect to see these things:

- A **“competition” pool** that is a standard length (25 yards, 25 meters, or 50 meters), containing lane lines, backstroke flags, and starting blocks. Timers are positioned behind the starting blocks, which is where the swimmers report before their event. Most meets will include an electronic timing system (touchpads on the start/finish wall of each competition lane and a stand with the starter’s equipment.)
- **Areas set aside for meet management.** These typically include an Admin Table for managing the timing system, and tables for check-in, t-shirt distribution, and awards. There are usually areas where heat sheets and results are posted. There may be a sound system and a meet announcer as well.
- **Seating areas** for athletes and spectators, as well as restrooms, drinking fountains, and sometimes concessions.

Before the meet begins, the competition pool will be open for warmup. There may also be “continuous warmup” lanes to the sides or in other nearby pools. All entry into warmup lanes must be done **feet first...no diving!** The only exception is when the meet referee (the official in charge of the meet) opens up designated “start lanes” (sometimes called “sprint lanes”) where diving from the wall or starting blocks is allowed. These lanes are one-way only...dive in and swim to the other end to exit the pool.

The events

The competition is divided into *events*, which designate the stroke and distance to be swum...and *heats*, which contain the swimmers who will swim together. For example, Event 1 might be the 800 freestyle, and Event 2 the 50 butterfly. The order of events is selected and published in advance by the host of the meet, and the swimmers select which events they want to swim and enter with a predicted (“seed”) time. Most meets have a limit on the number of individual and relay events a swimmer can enter that is posted in the meet announcement.

After the entries are closed and all swimmers are registered, the meet managers seed (arrange) the heats based on the entry times. Some meets (larger and/or championship meets) also seed by gender and/or age group, but it’s common to seed men and women together without regard for ages; the only criteria is similarity of entry time. This ensures that athletes who swim together in a heat will be reasonably well matched. Heats may be in “fastest to slowest” order or in “slowest to fastest” order. Most non-distance events run slow to fast, so the younger and faster folks are typically in the later heats. The number of swimmers in each heat depends on the pool size (number of lanes available) and the number of athletes entered in each event. Smaller pools will run heats with a maximum of six swimmers, while larger pools may have heats of up to 8 or 10.

Once the heats are seeded, heat sheets showing the heat and lane assignments are distributed. Most meets will make the heat sheets available electronically before the meet so you can print your own copy. The meet managers typically will also post printed heat sheets in visible location around the pool during the meet. Heat sheets typically look something like this:

Arizona Masters Swim Team HY-TEK's MEET MANAGER 8.0 - 6:03 PM 2/16/2022 Page 1
 2022 Pool Distance Meet - 2/19/2022
 Meet Program - 1650

Event number: 1
 Men & Women swim together

Event 1 Mixed 1650 Yard Freestyle

Event	Lane	Name	Age	Team	Seed Time	Finals	Place
Heat 1 of 8 Timed Finals Starts at 08:00 AM							
	1	Lucero, Michael	M51	Golden Road Aquatics-33	20:42.51	_____	_____
	2	Duke, Bauer	M60	Uc44	20:09.51	_____	_____
	3	West, Matthew R		Harrigan Masters-19	19:11.48	_____	_____
	4	Pierce, Jonathan T	M28	Golden Road Aquatics-33	17:55.05	_____	_____
	5	Harrigan, Kelly	W37	Mesa Aquatics Club-Masters-48	18:41.01	_____	_____
	6	Bracamp, David	M60	Sierra Nevada Masters-38	19:56.53	_____	_____
	7	Wiley, Thomas	W58	Las Vegas Masters-33	20:23.53	_____	_____
	8	Dezorn, David	W58	Arizona Masters-48	20:42.94	_____	_____
Heat 2 of 8 Timed Finals Starts at 08:22 AM							
	1	Halcomb, Darrell L	M54	Uc48		_____	_____
	2	Pinkerton, Melody H	W57	Uc48		_____	_____
	3	Mc Ginley, Patrick	M58	Rose Bo		_____	_____
	4	Modjeska, Mark	M68	Arizona		_____	_____
	5	Switaj, Caitlin	W32	Dolphin		_____	_____
	6	Wiley, Thomas	M59	Tulsa M		_____	_____
	7	Meadow, Alison	W48	Arizona		_____	_____
	8	Dobra, Jeffrey	M67	Long Beach Grunions-33	23:07.73	_____	_____
Heat 3 of 8 Timed Finals Starts at 08:46 AM							
	1	Shake, Scott	M63	Arizona Masters-48	25:24.18	_____	_____
	2	Hickman, Michael	M53	Dolphins of the-48	24:35.01	_____	_____
	3	Heggy, Terry	M67	Arizona Masters-48	24:05.51	_____	_____
	4	Torres, Adrian D	M44	Arizona Masters-48	23:36.01	_____	_____
	5	Gustavson, Jeff A	M60	Arizona Masters-48	23:50.76	_____	_____
	6	Frias, Maria Teresa	W49	Golden Road Aquatics-33	24:05.51	_____	_____
	7	Menard, Joanne	W73	Mesa Aquatics Club-Masters-48	24:38.15	_____	_____
	8	Merschhoff, Ellis	M71	Uc09	25:48.76	_____	_____
Heat 4 of 8 Timed Finals Starts at 09:12 AM							

In this example, Kelly Harrigan, a 37-year-old woman, is swimming the 1650 freestyle in a heat with men and women ranging from 28 to 60 years old. Kelly would need to remember that she is swimming Event 1, Heat 1, Lane 5.

A few minutes before the scheduled start of the events, the competition pool will be closed so the meet officials can ensure that the personnel and equipment are ready. There may be an opening ceremony (such as the performance of the National Anthem.) Then the announcer will call Event 1, Heat 1 to the starting blocks.

Each swimmer is responsible for being behind the starting block and ready to swim when their heat begins. As each heat finishes, the next heat should be ready to go. The starter has the option to start the next heat before the swimmers from the previous heat have exited the pool, though this isn't common at Masters meets. There may be designated breaks during the meet, but such decisions are the responsibility of the meet director.

Championship-level meets may have dozens of heats for each event (especially the short and popular events such as the 50 freestyle.) But local meets may have only one or two heats – especially in the less popular events such as the 400 IM and 200 butterfly. Therefore, it's always important to pay attention to what's happening in the pool if you want to be ready when your next event arrives!

Preparation

General meet information

When contemplating your participation in a meet, the first step is to review the meet entry information. In the USA, there are three types of competition pools, and each type has a designated competition season. Most meets for each pool type fall within those seasons:

- Short course yards (25-yard pool) (winter/spring)
- Long course meters (50 meter pool) (summer)
- Short course meters (25 meter pool) (fall/winter)

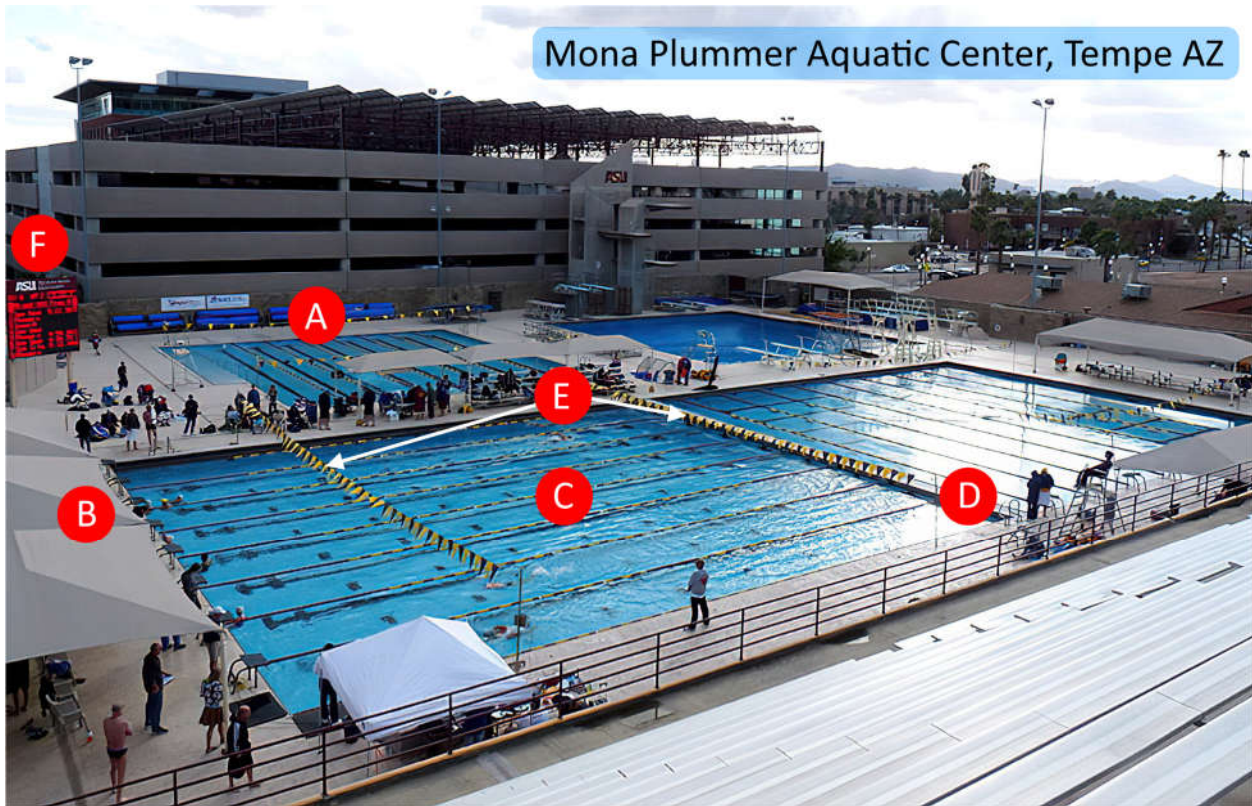
The meet info will also note the pool location, warmup times, order of events, and special considerations such as number of events you are allowed to enter each day. Your coach can help with selecting events to swim or determining entry times.

The more you know about the meet venue, the more comfortable you'll be when you arrive. Review online maps and photos from the pool's website so you can visualize yourself being there. Here are some of the things you'll see at a typical competition venue.



- A: Continuous warmup/cooldown lanes
- B. Bulkhead containing starting blocks, timers, and “on deck” heating area
- C. Main competition pool (larger meets may have multiple competition pools)
- D. Turn-wall bulkhead (used to divide long pool into segments based on meet requirements). In this example, this area would also be where lap counters would be located during distance events (500, 1000, 1650.)
- E. Possible location of heat sheets and results (taped to the wall)
- F. Scoreboard (event/heat numbers, race time readouts)
- G. Backstroke flags. (In this sample, there are also backstroke flags in the warmup area (A).

Mona Plummer Aquatic Center, Tempe AZ



- A: Continuous warmup/cooldown lanes
- B: Starting blocks, timers, and “on deck” heating area
- C: Main competition pool (25-meter course)
- D: Turn-wall bulkhead. In this example, this area would also be where lap counters would be located during distance events (800, 1500.)
- E: Backstroke flags. (In this sample, there are also backstroke flags in the warmup area (A).
- F: Scoreboard (event/heat numbers, race time readouts). SaddleBrooke swim club usually sits somewhere near the back of the scoreboard.

NOTE: Areas immediately surrounding the competition pool (including bulkheads, gutters, area in front of starting blocks, etc) must remain unobstructed to allow continual access for meet officials.

Your swims

Once the heat sheets are available, you should make note of each of your swims, including event number, heat number, and lane number. Effective ways to track this include highlighting your name and lane assignments on the heat sheet, keeping a separate note card listing each event/heat/lane, and writing the event/heat/lane numbers in permanent marker on your forearm, wrist, or hand. Be sure to include relays in these reminders.



What to bring

Plan your fueling and hydration strategy. Bring water bottles and a container with food you know is easy to digest and won't become a problem for you when you swim. (For example, while I know bananas are a great food, I tend to notice their aftertaste when I swim and find it distracting. For me, plain bagels with peanut butter, crackers, and apples/oranges seem to work best.) Many meets are all-day events and there may be *hours* between your swims, so plan your primary and recovery eating/drinking so that your digestion and energy stores ensure that your muscles are fully fueled for each race.

Bring chairs to sit in, and layered clothing (e.g., parka, jackets, pants, and a few towels) for your comfort between events. Make sure you stay warm enough between swims, so it is good to err on the side of bringing too many clothes, especially since everything tends to get wet. Don't forget hats, sunscreen, toothbrushes/toothpaste, glasses cases, scheduled medications, etc. You'll probably be walking around a lot, so it's good to have something like flipflops you can leave behind the blocks while you swim and then slip on easily when you're done. Extra goggles and an extra suit are also a good idea. If you want to take splits or make notes, bring a pen and paper...and maybe even a book or magazine to read (though you'll probably be talking to your friends and watching swimmers enough to stay thoroughly engaged throughout!) Many folks also enjoy taking photos and posting about the meet on social media.

Things to do

Plan to arrive with adequate time to figure out and take care of parking, walking from parking to the pool, and dealing with any check-in or access procedures. Some pools offer locker facilities, though you usually must provide your own lock. Most teams choose a spot to sit together, and there may be a visible team banner to guide you to that spot.

Encourage your friends and family to come with you. It's great to have your own cheering section...and they can help carry chairs, towels, water bottles, and food, etc. You may even want someone to record your split times, help with picking up awards, and making sure you don't miss your events!

Above all else, remember this time-tested axiom for any type of competition:

Don't try *anything* new on race day!

That means that you don't test out a new style of goggles, or a swimsuit you've never worn before. Don't try eating new foods the night before, or the morning of your swim. Don't change your sleep routine, try a new energy drink, or perform stretching for the first time. Stick with what you *know* works...you can always try new things *after* the meet ends.

When You Get to the Pool...

Warmup

Make sure you warm up in the main pool you will be swimming in. Slide in feet first and maybe even warm up in one of the lanes that you will be swimming in for one of your events.

If you plan to dive off the blocks, make sure you practice those during warm up in the one-way lanes designated for start practice. Warmups get crowded, so you might want to just swim enough to get used to the pool and then finish warming up in the non-competition pool. It's up to you whether you warm up separately before each swim in addition to the designated warm-up time—though it's almost always best to cool down and stretch out after each race if you can. You may need to try a few different things at different meets to find out what works best for you and your body.

Pay attention to the details of the pool as it will be different from your workout pool. Some multi-use pools have additional markings on the bottom of the pool for other course layouts or other aquatic competitions. These can be quite distracting, so figure out how you'll ignore all markings except those that help you judge when to turn and finish. Some pools also make strange noises, have weird lighting and/or odd walls, or feature unexpected depth changes—You'll need to adapt to all of these oddities.

Meters are slightly longer than yards, so your stroke counts will vary between yards and meters courses. Also, the backstroke flags are slightly further from the wall in meters, so you may need one additional stroke between the flags and the end of the pool. This may especially impact backstroke turns, so make sure you practice any stroke you will be swimming that day during the warm-up period, and dial in your flags-to-wall stroke count.

Examine the pool layout and wall design. Pool gutter depths vary, as do the materials of the walls, starting blocks, and touchpads. Some surfaces can be slippery, some gutters may make open turns challenging, and some starting blocks may have unfamiliar designs or require adjustments. Bulkheads may not extend to the bottom of the pool, so you might see open space under what your brain tells you should be a solid continuous wall. None of these issues is difficult to overcome, but it helps to be aware of them before your race begins.

As your event approaches...

Distance events (400 freestyle and longer) allow for lap counters. The meet staff will usually provide lap counter cards which can be lowered into the water so the swimmer can see how many lengths they've swum. If you are in a distance event, find someone to count laps for you and tell them your preferences for counter card position and depth. If you're *not* in the distance event, consider volunteering to count for one of your teammates.

If you want splits or special feedback from a coach, ask for it before you head to the starting area. If you have clothing, glasses, or jewelry to shed, make sure you have a safe place to store them while you swim. Remember to apply any necessary anti-fog treatment or rinse to your goggles, and be prepared to have your cap (if you wear one) and goggles securely in place before your heat is called to the starting position.

Heats go much faster for short events, so pay attention to what event and heat is currently swimming, so you'll know when you should make your way to the starting area. The scoreboard will help, but don't count on being able to hear announcements. Some teams will provide individual event and relay "wranglers" to help athletes know when they should prepare to swim, but you are ultimately responsible for showing up for your event. Make sure you are lined up behind the correct block at least several minutes ahead of when you will be swimming. The timers have sheets showing each swimmer assigned to their lane, so check with the timer to ensure you are in the correct heat and lane in plenty of time to adapt if needed.

If decide to skip an event you had entered, you can always "scratch" (drop out of) it by simply not showing up when it's your time to swim. The lane will just remain empty as the rest of your heat competes. If "being tired" is the reason you wish to scratch, though, remember that you could do it anyway, just to get a good warmup for your next event just by swimming easy...and you might even score some points for your team!

Your turn to swim

When the heat before yours finishes, the official will blow a whistle for several short blasts to signify that your heat should be positioned behind the starting blocks. A few seconds later, the official will blow one long blast, which is your clue to move to your starting location, whether you choose to start in the water or from the side or the elevated starting blocks. (Backstrokers may enter the water and grab the starting handles when this whistle blows.) After that long whistle, the starter will give the command "Take your marks," and pause briefly while the swimmers quickly assume a steady and motionless starting position. If anyone is not holding steady in the start position, the starter may command the heat to stand up to reinitiate and repeat the starting sequence properly.

When satisfied with swimmer positions, the starter then initiates the start, which consists of a flashing light and an audio signal (usually an electronic horn.) NOTE: There is no “get set” command...*only* “take your marks” followed by the starting signal.

If anyone initiates their start by moving before the horn sounds, a false start is declared and that person is disqualified. If you are unable to prevent yourself from initiating an early start, go ahead and perform the best start you can. If it's a false start, you'll be disqualified, but at least you made it look great!

At the end of your race, be sure to touch the pad firmly on its *vertical* surface (i.e., the “wall”), because the top edge of the pad may not be sensitive enough to record your finish. If you finish by putting your hand on top of the wall or in the gutter, your time may not be recorded...so make sure you hit the face of the touchpad.

When you finish your event, you may get out of the pool **IN YOUR LANE ONLY**, unless directed otherwise by an official. If the edge is too high and you need to cross other lanes to get out, you must wait for the permission of an official. This usually means you must wait for all other swimmers to finish so that you do not cross the lane of a swimmer who's still competing. Relay swimmers can stay in the water after their swim, but must **NOT** touch the pad again, or encroach into any other lane.

The officials are there to help you swim your best and to help you correct mistakes. If you get disqualified (DQ), don't be discouraged; look at it as a learning experience. Listen to what the official tells you and remember it for the future.

Common DQ issues are false starts, one-hand touches on butterfly or breaststroke, rolling onto the breast on backstroke, bad relay exchanges, and illegal kick on fly/breast. If you have questions about any of the rules, please ask your coach or a meet official.

Between events

If there are continuous warmup/cooldown lanes, you'll probably recover best if you visit those lanes immediately after your race for a relaxing swim to allow your muscles to recover. Once you feel good and relaxed, continue to follow your post-race plan, including hydration, refueling, massage, visualizing and warming up for your next race...whatever helps you be ready to swim your best at your next opportunity.

During the entire meet, multiple officials will be roaming the deck, and they need to have both physical access to the edge of the pool and visibility of all lanes...so don't clog the pathways and pool edges. Otherwise, you're free to wander around, make new friends, watch other athletes swim, take naps, etc., and thoroughly enjoy yourself.

But be aware that preparing to compete causes some folks to experience differences in the way they feel, such as experiencing additional thirst and the need for more frequent potty breaks. Many venues don't have an overabundance of toilets, so try to take care of such issues well before your event. (Remember to re-tie your suit before you swim, and keep track of your goggles!)

Other Thoughts

Coaches can answer any questions you have, and your teammates will support you and cheer for you. But don't be afraid to explore the facility and introduce yourself to folks from other teams; some competitors will become lifelong friends. Watch the good swimmers and figure out what they're doing that makes them fast. Enjoy the camaraderie, the joy of swimming, and the opportunity to challenge yourself. And above all, HAVE FUN!