

## From Fitness Swimming to Competition

Are you a swimmer or triathlete who does not participate in swim competitions? Do you enjoy swimming but conventional swim meets don't excite you? Then you are known as the "fitness swimmer" and you make up an estimated 50-60% of all United States Masters Swimming ("USMS") registered members.

A great thing about being an adult swimmer is that you are able to define your own goals, and those are more likely to be fitness, stress reduction and camaraderie than being a competitive shark. But being a fitness swimmer doesn't mean that you wouldn't benefit from having goals to work towards, participating in an occasional event with friends and going out afterwards for pizza or burgers. There is a way for fitness swimmers to get more out of swimming and the Masters program without betraying their fitness identity. For the answer, we need to look at running, where fitness runners routinely enter 5-mile, 10-K, and mini- and full-marathon events. These are events which are looked forward to, entered with friends and are part of many recreational runners' fitness programs.

Recreational runners generally do not participate in the 100 meter dash or 110 meter hurdles at track meets. Those events are too dissimilar to their everyday running. But in swimming, novice competitors are steered to the 50 free or other short events. An all-out sprint where the racing dive and full-speed turn consume 25% of the race? No wonder experienced lap swimmers feel like a fish out of water at their first meet!

It is time for some original thinking. What do you like to swim? What do your workouts prepare you for? How are you comfortable moving in the water? For most of us, this would be a longer freestyle event -- maybe a 500, 1000, or 1650 yard freestyle -- or even a one mile open-water swim. These are actually among the most popular events in USMS, and they are so popular because they are actually much more fun to swim.

Following are some practical guidelines for picking and swimming an event to ensure a good experience:

Choose a distance with which you will be comfortable. What distance can you see yourself swimming continuously, pushing the pace a bit but still being confident -- 500 yards or a mile? It is common to start IN the water in longer freestyle events. This eliminates the dive from the starting block, and you can wear goggles without worrying that they will come off during the dive (be sure to notify the starter in advance that you will be starting from in the water).

You can practice "pace swimming" for a longer event. Developing a sense of pace will give you a lot of confidence, giving your body a feel for the speed it should maintain in the event. For example, if you enter the 500 freestyle, practice doing five swims of 100 yards each, keeping a consistent pace with 15-30 seconds of rest between each 100 swim. If you can comfortably hold a 1:45 pace for 100 yards, aim to do 5 x 100 yard swims, completing each one in 1:45, beginning each 100 one every 2 minutes or 2 minute and 15 seconds. Avoid the major distance disaster -- going out too fast at the start and having the "piano land on your back" later in the event. Doing pace work in training helps avoid this. Another good idea is to use the first 100 yards of the event as a warm-up. Stretch out, settle in - then pick up the pace later if you want.

The bottom line: Not everyone at a swim meet is there for the same reason. As a fitness swimmer, there are USMS events that fit with how you swim and can make your total swimming experience more enjoyable. There may be Masters open-water events in your area and these are tailor-made for fitness swimmers. If not, look for a 500, 1000 or 1650 yard pool event. Either way, talk other swimming friends into going along and take the plunge!