

Summer Swim Meets: A Guide for New Parents

Welcome to the NSJ Blue Marlins Swim Team!

If your children are joining a swim team for the first time, and you didn't belong to a neighborhood club as a kid, you probably need some information about what actually goes on during a meet. When you bring your sleepy 6 year-old to the pool for the first meet of the season, it can be a little confusing. There certainly seems to be a lot of activity. Where do I sit? Should I be doing anything? When will my kid actually swim? What is the "Clerk of Course?" This guide attempts to answer some of your questions so that you as a parent will enjoy the meets more and, we hope, eventually join in to help.

The Central Maryland Swim League

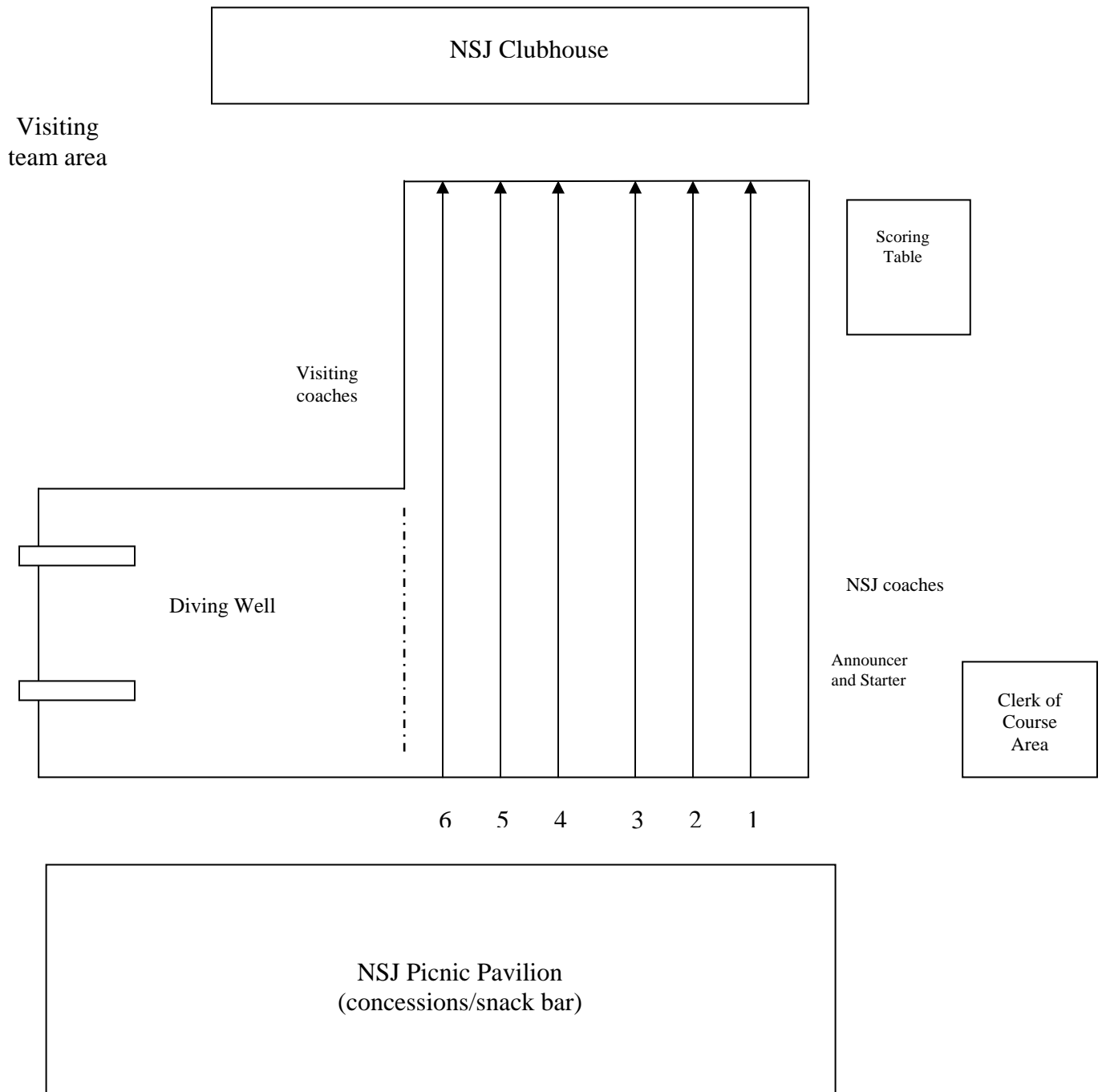
By joining the NSJ Blue Marlins, you are now part of a 35-year swimming tradition. NSJ participates in the Central Maryland Swim League (CMSL). The CMSL was organized in 1972, when the Metropolitan, Chesapeake, and Suburban swim leagues decided to combine themselves into a single league to even out the level of competition among the teams. The CMSL now consists of nine separate divisions, each division containing six teams each. NSJ currently competes in Division II, but the team can move up or down a division from year to year, depending on the win-loss record at the end of the season.

The CMSL is a formal swimming organization, with a complete set of rules governing meets and meet locations. The CMSL keeps track of league swimming record times, which are provided each season to each swim team director. The league is run completely by parent volunteers, who drop whatever they're doing each summer and become team directors, league officials, coaches, whatever is needed. They carry on the work done by dozens of parents in the years before them. Experienced parents teach the new ones, and somehow, it all comes together every year. The result is a quality, official summer league that brings fun and healthy competition to the little neighborhood pools across Maryland. Swimmers of all abilities populate the CMSL, including kids who learned to swim in the CMSL, then went on to swim in college, in the Olympic trials and even earn medals at the Olympic Games. Some of them swam as kids at NSJ!

In late July, NSJ competes against the other five teams in our division at the CMSL divisional championships. It is always the last meet of the season. There is also the CMSL "Straehle Invitational League Championship" meet, usually held on the Wednesday prior to the divisional meet.

A "Map" of NSJ

Here is a simple drawing of the NSJ pool area, set up for a meet:



Can my kid swim in a real meet?

Swimmers of all abilities are welcome to take part in regular season meets at NSJ. The only hard requirement is that a swimmer must be able to complete one lap of freestyle (one length, or 25 meters) unassisted. This is a safety issue only—it doesn't matter how long it takes your child to get from one end of the pool to the other. In fact, if your son or daughter doggie paddles all the way down the lane, stopping a few times along the way, and finishes last, the applause from the pool deck will be just as loud.

There is no concept of "first string" or "playing time" as in many team sports. Every swimmer takes part in meets.

Types of Meets

Dual meets

The main type of CMSL meet is the "dual" meet, which means a home team against a visiting team. NSJ has five of these on the schedule every summer. All are less than an hour's driving distance from NSJ. Dual meets kick off at 9 am on Saturdays. Before the meet starts, team warm-ups are held. The home team swims their warm-up laps between 8:00 and 8:30. The visiting team warms up between 8:30 and 9:00. It is important, for the coaches' sake, that you bring your children to the pool at least 15 minutes before the designated warm-up time. This will give you and your swimmers time put on their swim caps, goggles, sunscreen, and get mentally ready to swim.

Dual meets are almost always finished by 12:30. As much as we love swim meets, we all have reasons to get out of there as soon as possible. Dual meets are the focus of the NSJ season because they allow all children to participate and have a great time. In division II, your swimmer is allowed to swim up to three separate individual events in a dual meet, or two individual events and a relay. (In divisions IV through IX, they would be allowed to swim four events—because the teams are smaller.) Usually, the coaches will select the events your swimmer swims in a dual meet, based on many factors, not just scoring points for the team. Often the coaches will ask the swimmers their event preferences, and try to accommodate them.

The Black/Blue time trials

Before dual meets begin, NSJ coaches will hold a team time trial event, called the "Black versus Blue" meet. The Black/Blue follows the same schedule as a dual meet, except that there is no visiting team. The object is to record the swimmers' first event times of the season, build some team spirit, and give the parent volunteers practice running a meet before the real season begins.

In the time trial, your child will swim every event that his or her age group normally swims in meets. For example, a 6-year-old will swim the 25-meter freestyle and 25-meter backstroke. 6-year olds also can swim the 25 butterfly and breaststroke, if they're able, though they won't swim these events in real meets. All finishing times will be recorded for the purpose of seeding your swimmer to race in heats against other swimmers with similar times.

Straehle

As mentioned before, the Straehle individual championships comes up during the last week of the CMSL season. It is open to all CMSL teams, and held at one of the larger outdoor pools in the area. Straehle is an invitational meet, which means there are age group qualifying times for each stroke event that swimmers must reach in order to participate. These qualifying time standards will be posted on the Blue Marlins bulletin board on the clubhouse wall. A swimmer may qualify for many events at Straehle, but can swim a maximum of three individual events, and a freestyle relay.

Many NSJ kids work hard all summer to qualify for the NSJ relay team at Straehle. Lots of summer-only swimmers reach the qualifying times for this meet. It's a thrilling moment when you hear your kid run up to you at a dual meet, yelling: "I made Straehle! I made Straehle!"

Divisionals

The last meet of the season is the divisional championships. There are no qualifying times. Instead, the three fastest NSJ swimmers in each age group stroke event are chosen to represent the team. For example, in the boys 9-10 age group, the NSJ boys with the three fastest backstroke times will compete at divisionals in that event. For relays, coaches usually select the top four freestylers in each age group to swim that exciting event. Swimmers are allowed to compete in three individual stroke events at divisionals, or two individual events and a relay. If your swimmer has the fastest time in more than three individual events, the coach either will choose the events they will compete in, or offer the swimmer (and parent) a choice between events.

Novice meets

The CMSL offers younger and novice swimmers an opportunity to compete in invitational meets and win ribbons, medals and trophies. One of these is the Don Schaub Invitational, held around mid-summer after swim teams have logged a few practices. There are other novice meets scheduled, depending on the year. The qualifying times for novice meets are geared toward less experienced swimmers. Novice meets can be real confidence builders for newer swimmers. They are a lot of fun and highly recommended.

A Typical Dual Meet

Here is a brief description of a typical dual meet. After both teams have warmed up, the first events are the Individual Medley (IM) races. The announcer will call for all 9-10 girls IM swimmers to report to the Clerk of Course. The IMs are 100 meters (4 lengths) long. Every swimmer swims one of the four competitive strokes for each of the four lengths, in this order: 25 meters butterfly, 25 meters backstroke, then 25 breaststroke, and finishing with 25 freestyle. Since the IM requires proficiency in all four strokes, proper turning technique, and is longer, the 8-and-under and 6-and-under age groups do not compete in these events. The first IM age group is 9-10 Girls, followed by 9-10 Boys, then 11-12 Girls, 11-12 Boys, 13-14 Girls, 13-14 Boys, 15-18 Girls, and finally 15-18 Boys.

Next are the freestyle events, which are the most popular. While the IMs are being swum, the announcer will call all 6 and under swimmers to report to the Clerk of Course. (See the map.) At the Clerk of Course, your child will be given a yellow (girls) or blue (boys) 3x5 card with a label on it. On the label is their name, their seed time (either a recorded best time or an NT—no time), the name of the meet (NSJ vs. WST means North Saint John's versus Westminster Swim Team) and the date. The card also will show each swimmer's heat number and lane assignment. Parent volunteers will seat the children on benches in their proper heat and lane order so they are ready to walk out to line up behind the starting blocks to swim their race.

Swimmers will carry their event cards to the starting blocks and hand them to the race timers before they swim. There are three timers per lane. Timers will verify the name on the card with the name of swimmer reporting to their lane, because mix-ups sometimes happen. After the race, a timer will write three finishing times on the card, and hand the card to the "card runner". The card runner takes all the cards to the scoring table, where the meet results are recorded.

The same process continues through all of the remaining stroke events, in this order: backstroke, butterfly, breaststroke, and finally, the freestyle relays that conclude every meet. Many dual meets are so close that the final score really depends on the outcome of the relays. Relays are always exciting to watch. This is why many swimmers stay until the very end of the meet, even if they finished their three events earlier in the morning.

Seeding, lane assignments, and scoring

Swimmers are seeded against others with similar times in their age group event, in one or more heats. In a dual meet, the home team usually swims in lanes 1, 3 and 5. The visiting team swims in lanes 2, 4 and 6. The swimmers with the fastest seed times from each team in a particular heat swim in lanes 3 and 4. The slower seed times take the outside lanes. Often, there are only two or three swimmers in a heat. The meet official sometimes will combine two heats to fill up all the lanes, and keep the meet on schedule.

The first place finisher in an individual event heat, such as butterfly, scores 5 points for the team. Second place scores 3 points; third place scores 1. In a relay event, first place scores 5 points. The second place relay team nets 2 points; third place scores no points.

The dreaded DQ

Stroke and turn judges watch all the swimmers—except for the 6-and-unders-- to ensure they're doing regulation strokes and turns. If they spot something incorrect during a race, the judge will raise a hand to indicate a disqualification, or DQ. After the race, many judges will explain to swimmers at the finish why they were DQ'd, for example, using a freestyle "flutter" kick during the butterfly stroke, which must use a two-footed "dolphin kick". Timers write DQ on the event card, and the reason for DQ, if the stroke judge passes that on. Coaches will work with the swimmers to correct their strokes so they won't be disqualified in the next meet.

A DQ can be temporarily upsetting for young swimmers, who may have just set their best finish time. But, it's part of the sport and a character builder. Often, a DQ is just the result of trying to go really fast. Children will recover quickly from the DQ and learn from the experience.

Ribbons, medals and trophies

Swimmers win blue, red and white ribbons for first, second and third place finishes, and different color ribbons for the next seven places. In addition, swimmers winning their heats will receive a "heat winner" ribbon. At dual meets, heat winner ribbons usually are handed out by parent volunteers immediately following a race. Sometimes, a swimmer setting a personal best time will receive a "best time" ribbon after the meet.

Swimmers receive medals for the top ten places at the Straehle invitational. At divisionals, swimmers receive first, second and third place trophies, and ribbons for fourth, fifth and sixth places.

Meet workers

Timers

At NSJ, 18 timers, plus one "backup" or head timer, are needed to run a dual meet. The visiting team helps supply volunteer timers. After the backstroke events—or halfway through the meet-- a call usually goes out for relief timers, so that parents aren't required to stand up for the entire meet. Timing is one of the most important jobs you can volunteer for. Swimming revolves around finish times, so it's important to be accurate and pay attention. If you do make a mistake, the head timer will be there with a spare stopwatch to time your lane until the next heat. Timing is also the most fun job at the meet, because you get to stand behind the starting blocks and interact with the swimmers. If you've never timed before, don't worry. You'll get plenty of instruction before the meet begins, and it's really not that hard anyway.

Clerk of Course

As described above, parents at the Clerk of Course make sure the swimmers are in the right heats and lane assignments. At NSJ, you will see picnic benches lined up under the trees on the NSJ side. When your swimmer is called to the Clerk of Course, send them over to the benches. The parents working the Clerk of Course keep the meet running smoothly and on time. As a parent, you can help by making sure your swimmer reports to the Clerk of Course at the right time. Don't send them before they are called, or wait too long after they are called. Also, you don't really need to report to the Clerk with your swimmer. The parents there will take good care of them, especially the younger children, who can be nervous if it's their first meet.

The scoring table

Parents at the meet table record the results of every race into a computer program so that the meet can be scored. Notice that there are three recorded times (from three timers per lane) on every kid's event card. The scoring table records only the middle time, not the fastest or slowest. The scoring table is a vital job that requires accuracy and the ability to work quickly.

Card runner

How do the event cards get from the timers to the scorer's table? A parent runs them from the lanes to the table after every race. To keep the meet moving on schedule, the card runner has to hustle. Another important job, and a great way to burn some calories!

Ribbon "hander outers"

Self-explanatory, but an important job. You have to watch every race and figure out who finished first, so that ribbons go to the right swimmers.

Stroke and turn judge

If you're new to swimming, here's one critical job you won't be doing. Stroke and turn judges watch the swimmers from start to finish, enforcing proper starts, finishes and stroke technique. Stroke and turn judges receive training to recognize legal strokes, turns, starts, etc. Training is available to anyone, and these judges are always in short supply. So please consider volunteering.

Announcer

The announcer calls swimmers to the Clerk of Course and makes many other necessary announcements during the meet.

Meet official

CMSL will supply a meet official for every meet. This is the person wearing white shorts, a white CMSL shirt, and a whistle. The meet official starts every race and resolves any (rare) rules disputes. Training and experience required here, too.

Concessions

The swim team thrives on the money taken in from snack bar sales. Although they don't work the swimming end of the meet, the parents who help out at the snack bar are probably the most important, selfless volunteers of all. If you volunteer for this job, everyone will love and admire you.