

Including Swimmers With a Disability:

A Guide for Officials

Swimmers with a disability are participating in greater numbers at all levels of the USA Swimming program, creating new challenges and opportunities for officials. Officials are encouraged to help USA Swimming in providing fair competitions for these swimmers. All it takes is some common sense and flexibility.

What Constitutes a Disability?

The USA Swimming rules permit disability accommodations and rule exceptions for swimmers who have “a *permanent* physical or mental impairment that *substantially limits* one or more major life activities.” The referee must assess whether a swimmer’s condition satisfies this definition, usually by talking with the swimmer and watching the swimmer during meet warm-ups. Special accommodations are often appropriate for swimmers who are deaf; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities such as mental retardation, severe learning disabilities, or autism; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.

Swimmers with temporary injuries or minor impairments do not qualify for special considerations. For example, accommodations to the technical rules usually are inappropriate for swimmers with musculo-skeletal injuries such as tendonitis and broken bones, or limitations to range of motion in the shoulder, knee, or ankle that make it impossible or difficult for the swimmer to perform a legal breaststroke or butterfly. These swimmers might be advised to avoid competing in strokes that they cannot perform legally, much as a short person might be advised to choose a sport other than basketball.

In most cases, disability accommodations are also unnecessary for swimmers with health impairments such as asthma, cystic fibrosis, or transplants. Although swimmers with health impairments might have permanent conditions that affect some major life activities, most of these swimmers

have the capability to perform the strokes legally. They might need to choose event distances that match their capabilities, but they should be expected to follow the technical rules in those events.

Disability Accommodations and Rule Exceptions

If a swimmer satisfies the criteria for disability under Article 105 in the rulebook, the official should consider the possible need for accommodations or rule exceptions. Make accommodations only when there is a genuine need – when the swimmer's disability prevents him/her from complying with meet procedures or from physically performing a start, stroke, or finish according to the rules.

The accommodations that you consider should be appropriate for the *individual* swimmer. Article 105 and the suggestions which follow can be used as guidelines; however, be prepared to use *common sense* when you face unique situations – it is impossible to legislate solutions for all of the possible permutations of ability and disability that officials might encounter at meets.

Remember that the purpose of disability accommodations and rule exceptions is to provide fair conditions for competition, not to relax standards for performance. Swimmers with a disability should not be coddled and officials should not be afraid to make calls.

Swimmers who are Deaf

Personal Assistants. Some deaf swimmers may choose to have an interpreter (personal assistant) with them on the deck so that they have access to announcements and verbal directions from officials.

Start. Unless requested otherwise by the swimmer, the starter should use the hand signals described in Article 105. The strobe light should be placed where the athlete can see it, and the starter should stand where the deaf swimmer can see him/her.

Stroke, Turns, & Finish. Rule exceptions are unnecessary.

Communication

- In distance freestyle races, a visual cue may be substituted for the bell or gun signal.
- Important announcements should be communicated in writing or through an interpreter.
- Disqualifications should be conveyed to the swimmer with help from the coach, parent, or interpreter. Providing a copy of the DQ slip might be an effective means of making certain the swimmer understands the violation.

Swimmers who are Blind

Personal Assistants. Some swimmers who are blind need assistance from another person to locate and step onto the starting block. Blind swimmers may also require tappers, helpers who use a soft-tipped long pole to tap the swimmer's body as she/he approaches a turn or finish.

Start

- Swimmers might need assistance and a little extra time in getting set and oriented at the block.
- Blind swimmers sometimes surface in the wrong lane after the start and should be allowed to complete the race in the "new" lane if it is unoccupied, or should be directed by the tapper to return to the correct lane if needed.

Stroke. Swimmers are expected to perform strokes and turns legally, with a few accommodations.

- A break in stroke cycle might occur during an inadvertent lane change and should be permitted.
- In butterfly and breaststroke, a blind swimmer in close proximity to the lane lines often has difficulty bringing both arms forward simultaneously. An asymmetrical arm recovery should be permitted if it was caused by a lane rope "collision."

Turns & Finish

- Swimmers might need tappers (the athlete must provide the tapping device and the personnel) at the turns and finish.

- Blind swimmers sometimes surface in the wrong lane after the turn and should be allowed to complete the race in the “new” lane if it is unoccupied, or should be directed by the tapper to return to the correct lane if needed.
- Swimmers might have difficulty with a simultaneous two-hand touch when in close proximity to the lane lines.

Communication

- An auditory signal may be substituted for lap counters.
- A blind relay swimmer may receive an auditory command or tap on the leg as a signal to start.

Swimmers with Cognitive Disabilities

Examples of cognitive disabilities include mental retardation, severe learning disability, or autism.

Personal Assistants. A buddy may help the swimmer with on-deck procedures and to facilitate communication with other swimmers, coaches, officials, and meet workers.

Start. A little patience while the swimmer reacts to whistles and commands might be needed. Starters should be prepared for unorthodox starts, such as not bending down when the “take your mark” command is given and/or slow reaction times.

Stroke, Turns, & Finish. Swimmers with cognitive disabilities must perform all starts, strokes, turns, and finishes in accordance with the technical rules.

Communication. Officials should use vocabulary that the athlete can understand when explaining a disqualification.

Swimmers with Physical Disabilities

Examples of physical disabilities include amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.

Personal Assistants. Athletes might need help from a friend or family member with tasks such as personal care, entry and exit from the water, and moving any prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs, or other mobility equipment from the start end of the pool to the finish end.

Start

- It might be necessary to have someone holding the swimmer steady on the block or in the water. This person must not provide any propulsive movement to the swimmer. Swimmers doing an in-water forward start must be facing the course.
- A towel on the starting block or a mat on the deck should be permitted.
- Gripping the block or gutter with two hands on the backstroke start should be modified for swimmers with only one arm or hand or with one arm much shorter than the other.
- Swimmers with cerebral palsy or other neurological disorders might have poor balance and/or extraneous movements causing “twitchy” starts.

Stroke. Common-sense adjustments to the stroke rules are often necessary.

- If the athlete has no leg function, the breaststroke cycle obviously will not include a kick.
- Officials must rely on their common sense when judging a swimmer with hemiplegia who may not be able to achieve symmetry in stroke technique.
- Athletes with physical disabilities may not use hand paddles, fins, or other devices.
- All judgments should be made based on the actual rule, not the swimmer’s technique. The goal is to officiate the ability the swimmer has.
- Swimmers with severe physical disabilities are eligible to compete in the 150 yard/meter individual medley in some meets. The order of strokes is backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle.

Turns & Finish

- An athlete with only one arm/hand cannot do a two-handed touch, but must move whatever limbs s/he has simultaneously.
- At the turn and finish of the butterfly, an athlete with no leg function may perform a half-stroke with the arm(s) recovering forward under the surface of the water in order to contact the wall.
- A swimmer unable to push off with his leg(s) may perform one asymmetrical stroke to attain the on-the-breast position in breaststroke and butterfly.
- In relays, the swimmer may stay in the lane until the last swimmer has completed the race.

Communication. 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.

Hints for Officials

- Be aware of the types of rule exceptions or accommodations that may be considered as provided in Article 105.
- Apply common sense when determining whether to uphold or overrule disqualifications called by deck officials.
- Be aware of LSC policies in regard to inclusion of swimmers with a disability.
- Be aware that swimmers with a disability sometimes need a personal assistant(s) on the deck. It is perfectly reasonable to allow this. It is not necessary for the personal assistant to be a member of USA Swimming unless s/he is also coaching, in which case s/he must have a coach registration.
- Be aware of the hazard that prosthetic devices, wheelchairs, or other mobility equipment can pose when left at the start. It is wise to make certain that someone moves them out of the way during the race.
- Be cognizant that swimmers might need official times for the 50's in strokes and the 150 I.M. for entry into USA Swimming Disability Championships.

- Ignore any and all references to classification. Ability/disability classifications are a means of leveling the playing field at disability-specific meets, but usually have no relevance at LSC competitions.
- Remember there might be times when officials will need to educate athletes or coaches, such as when they fail to notify the referee before the swim that a swimmer has a disability.
- Review the brochure for meet and safety directors on inclusion of swimmers with a disability.

Remember ...

- There is no substitute for common sense!
- Pay attention to the individual – do not over-generalize.
- Know Article 105!
- Don't coddle!

Resources

Officials who encounter situations not described here or in Article 105 are encouraged to simply use their common sense. Specific questions about officiating swimmers with a disability may be referred to USA Swimming headquarters:

USA Swimming
One Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
(719) 578-4578
www.usa-swimming.org

Other sources of information include the USA Swimming rule book (especially Article 105) and LSC policies on inclusion.

Acknowledgements

This brochure was developed by the Adapted Swimming Committee as a service to officials.

This “Guide for Officials” is part of a series of five brochures on including swimmers with a disability. USA Swimming has also published guidelines for swimmers and parents,

coaches, meet directors and safety directors, and local swimming committees.

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