

News For

SWIM PARENTS

Published by The American Swimming Coaches Association
5101 NW 21 Ave., Suite 200
Fort Lauderdale FL 33309

A National Age Group Championships for the USA?

By John Leonard

About once every twenty years, there is a renegade attempt by someone to create a National Age Group Championship meet. I say “renegade” because the overwhelming majority of parents and coaches in the USA have more sense than to consider this concept as a potential reality. It was discussed circa 1975 and again at the end of the 80’s, both times by well-meaning but misguided parents and coaches, and again in 2010, this time led by a few coaches with motives that I cannot begin to discern, but I would not be surprised if making money was involved.

The lunacy of a National Age Group Championship is probably clear to most.

The “bottom ten” below illustrates just the starting point of the arguments against this concept.

1. Young age group children do not need the extreme pressure of swimming in something titled “National Age Group Championship.”
2. Parents without sufficient experience to understand the negative long term consequences of the pressure above, or indeed, their own role in creating it, will do massive unintentional damage to the long term prospects for their child’s swimming career.
3. The “hoopla” of flying across the country, staying in a hotel and swimming in a multi-day “big meet” is certainly a fun experience at age 10-11-12-13 or 14. Then what do we do at 17-18 or college -- compete in a meet in Europe? Too much, too soon. Most young people’s first automobile is not a Mercedes -- for good reason.
4. Where a child has “early success” in a major meet like this will put them in the straight-jacket of “You’re a butterfly!” far too many years before anything like that really becomes apparent. Button-holing will keep many potentially great careers from ever happening.
5. The financial pressure on age group families to travel across the country to swim meets, completely distorts the values of the sport.
6. Ill-informed coaches who can be highly pressured by success-seeking parents and children, will use training tactics with those children that will bring immediate success and long term disillusionment and boredom with the sport.

7. Is a high school swimming career of interest to a youngster who ALREADY has been to a “national age group championship”? The very important “stepping stone” effect of our current sport structure would be lost.

8. Ditto for “swimming in college”. The allure of “big meets” is long gone in a jaded 18 year old who has already “been there and done that”.

9. We create “has-beens” of a lot of potentially wonderful young people who happen to be “early physical developers” and we “dismiss” the late developers who regularly become our later national and Olympic champions as adults. If they are “dismissed” as unimportant early in their careers, they will disappear and we’ll not have a chance to develop their gifts at the mature age. The devastating effect on the “has been” who says “I was really GOOD at 12, I won a National Age Group Championship!” is profound and negates many of the good values our sport promotes.

10. We encourage abusive practices of all sorts to make age group athletes into “mini-champions” and thus encourages all the negative behaviors possible in youth sports. Once you’re on TV at age 12, what’s left to excite you?

THAT SAID, what is the appropriate progression for a young swimmer? It’s pretty much exactly as it is now.

1. An age group career should be focused on local or at most, State-wide competition. Compete locally and compete several times a month and LEARN THE SPORT.

2. Step up to the High School Swim Team, where peer group rewards are available and the swimmer becomes more recognized as a great student athlete within the local and state boundaries.

3. Step up once again to exciting comrade-ship and faster swimming in college, at conference and now, national championships, where the national experience is meaningful, mature and rewarding.

That, after all, is what has made the American Swimming Program the envy of the world (and unduplicate-able elsewhere) for 100 years. Keep it intact. It’s not close to broken...just the opposite, it’s ideal.