



# RATIONALE FOR STARTING NATIONAL AGE RECOGNITION AT AGE 11

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By the Age Group Development Committee, March 2010

## INTRODUCTION

The National Times and Recognition Committee presented the Top 10 single age recognition program at the September 2007 Age Group Development Business Meeting. During this meeting which involved LSC Age Group Chairs and committee members, the Age Group Development Committee recommended that the 10 & U age group be dropped as part of the recognized age groups in this program. There was minimum opposition and/or discussion to this proposal. The National Times and Recognition Committee presented the Top 10 single age recognition program with the amendment of eliminating the 10 & Under age group at the USAS Convention. Again, there was negligible opposition and/or discussion.

By and large, the decision to recognize ten, and not sixteen swimmers per event, and the decision to use single-year age groups as opposed to dual-year groups, have caused minimum controversy. However, there has been discussion regarding USA Swimming's decision to no longer recognize 10 & Under performances in its recognition program. This paper represents the viewpoints of the Age Group Development Committee in arriving at this decision.

The rationale is based on three pillars:

- Recognize the long-term development of the athlete
- Support USA Swimming and ASCA Foundation of Coaching development process of age group swimming
- Leverage current programs that balance recognition and development, both national initiatives as well as local traditions

## **Pillar I: Foundation of Long-Term Development of the Athlete**

The focus of the National Age Group Development Committee is to find and promote opportunities for age group swimmers to build a healthy foundation for making swimming a lifestyle, a life-long sport. The Committee feels that a key part of building that base as an age group athlete is accomplished by a long-term development progression. Programs that enhance this focus are supported by Age Group Development.

The Committee is continually reviewing information published by experts on athlete development to verify that the strategies of the group stay in line with what is best for age group swimmers. One such renowned expert on long-term training, and athlete growth and development is Istvan Balyi. Below is an excerpt from an article he co-authored with Ann Hamilton, "Long-Term Athlete Development: Trainability in Childhood and Adolescence."

*“Scientific research has concluded that it takes eight-to-twelve years of training for a talented player/athlete to reach elite levels... Unfortunately, parents and coaches in many sports still approach training with an attitude best characterized as “peaking by Friday,” where a short-term approach is taken to training and performance with an over-emphasis on immediate results. We now know that a long-term commitment to practice and training is required to produce elite players/athletes in all sports.”*

*“A specific and well-planned practice, training, competition and recovery regime will ensure optimum development throughout an athlete’s career. Ultimately, sustained success comes from training and performing well over the long-term rather than winning in the short term. There is no short-cut to success in athletic preparation. **Overemphasizing competition in the early phases of training will always cause shortcomings in athletic abilities later in an athlete’s career.**”*

In concurrence with this authoritative opinion, the Age Group Development Committee believes recognizing 10 & Under’s at a national level puts more emphasis on short-term accomplishments in a very narrow aspect of the sport – recognizing the “peaking by Friday”. It conveys a sense of the highest achievement, when in fact the development process is only beginning. In lieu of a national recognition of the fastest times in individual events, USA Swimming has provided other opportunities to provide encouragement and motivation that align with the building a healthy base.

## **Pillar II: Support of the USA Swimming and ASCA Foundation of Coaching development process of age group swimming**

USA Swimming has a long-established age group development philosophy that is believed to be the most beneficial for our youngest swimmers.

- Working all four strokes and individual medley
- Working to improve technique in all four strokes
- Developing a proto-aerobic base as the foundation for later training and success in racing for all distances.

This developmental progression is outlined in detail in several USA Swimming publications, most notably the Foundations of Coaching collaboration between USA Swimming and ASCA. There is a progression of programs for both coach and athlete development based upon that philosophy.

With this development process so deeply ingrained, the Age Group Development Committee believes recognizing specific achievements in one time in one event (of one stroke) is not in alignment with the philosophy grounded in working all strokes and building the strong base. It is more appropriate to reinforce with the age group swimmer, coach and parent that there are more important considerations than simply being fast – for the young swimmer, “how you get fast matters most” for their long-term development in swimming.

## **Pillar III-A: Leverage current programs that balance recognition and development: National Initiative**

USA Swimming's IM Xtreme Challenge (or IMX) is a national program that encourages all-around athlete development. This program requires that age group developmental swimmers (12 and Under) swim five events:

1. 200 (10-Under) or 4/500 (11-12) Freestyle
2. 100 Backstroke
3. 100 Breaststroke
4. 100 Butterfly
5. 200 IM

Each time a swimmer swims an event their time is converted to a point score. Upon completing the five events for each season (short course yards or long course meters) the swimmer will automatically receive an IMX score on his/her *Deck Pass* page.

It is important to note that the IMX program "works with" common biological pitfalls/challenges and helps both early- and late-maturing swimmers. Age group coaches face the obvious and common problems resulting from swimmers' uneven and unequal biological maturation every day at practice. They face the problem of keeping the small and slow-growing swimmer in the sport when most extrinsic motivators (i.e., awards, victories, publicity) are absent. Simultaneously, they face the problem of getting the big and strong early maturer's to train according to their long-term best interests and ignore short-lived motivators (awards, victories, publicity) that encourage them simply to "do what works," – that is, rely on size and strength rather than train well and develop good technique. It is often challenging to keep the first group in the sport while they await their growth spurts, and at the same time difficult to keep the second group in the sport as they are "caught" by their later maturing peers during the high school years.

The IMX program gives early maturer's the motivation to be well-rounded and not focus on an event or events where their biological advantage may allow them to overcome poor habits. And by rewarding across a spectrum and especially for longer events that respond more to stroke technique work and aerobic training, the IMX program helps retain late maturer's.

In review, IMX performance focuses on success and improvement across a broad array of strokes, in particular events more technically and aerobically oriented – and not single-event performance for 10 & Under swimmer. By leveraging IMX as a training goal setting and recognition tool, behaviors consistent with USA Swimming's development philosophy are reinforced. The Age Group Development committee feels emphasizing participation in and formally recognizing high achievement in the IMX program accomplishes these goals more effectively for the 10 and under age group than the previous National Top 16 program.

### **Pillar III-B: Leverage current programs that balance recognition and development – Local Traditions for Swimmer Recognition**

It is important to note what will stay the same. We are obviously not doing away with single-event racing. Age Group athletes will still race the 50 fly or the 50 back at meets, and they will still be given times and awards based on their times for individual events. Swimmers will still be excited and motivated by improving their best times in the 50 free and 100 IM. Finally, every team will continue their recognition traditions through team banquets, most improved trophies, best technique honors, spirit award, etc.

The Motivational Times Standards list will still help swimmers find motivation to get faster. In fact, the technology advances have made it easy for any swimmer to obtain his/her national ranking for his/her age group for any event and distance. That capability is available to everyone to monitor an athlete's progress at any point in time for either short course or long course events. With the advances made in the SWIMS database software, there does not have to be a single point in time for that tool to be used in measuring performance goals set by the athlete and coach. It constantly gives the athlete and coach the opportunity to modify those goals as the age group swimmer continues to improve.

Further, it is important to make clear the committee's intentions. We do not mean to diminish 10 and Under accomplishments – but we do want to steer those accomplishments into one stream rather than another, and to ensure that the foundations of those accomplishments are strong, secure, and long-lasting.

Nor do we mean to discourage fast swimming – but we do want that speed to be broadly-based and founded on good technique.

Nor do we mean to discourage competition – but we do want that competition to include the full range of strokes and events.

In summary, the landscape of age group teams and competitive swimming remains much the same. The Age Group Development Committee believes that the best motivation and encouragement for 10 & Under swimmers come from sources closer to home – their team, their coaches, and their family. All these powerful sources remain intact.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Age Group Development Committee supports the Times and Recognition Committee's decision to eliminate the 10 & Under category in the National Recognition program. Every reward system is based on values and philosophy. We want to measure and reward, those things we consider most important. We want to reinforce those behaviors we consider most beneficial to the swimmers involved. This means we want to encourage well-rounded swimming development across the four strokes, technical development, and aerobic base development among our youngest competitive swimmers. We believe that emphasizing existing USA Swimming and local programs for 10 & Under athletes best serves the long-term growth of the Age Group swimmer.