

MEET REFEREE

A Referee's responsibilities are many and varied, but they are best summarized as:

The Referee of the Meet shall be the final authority for the conduct of competition.

The Referee's principal function is to see that the swimming rules are enforced during the meet and to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, that all athletes have uniform and fair competitive conditions. Therefore, he/she, above all, must know and understand the rules under which the swim meet is being conducted. It can be under the auspices of USA Swimming, NCAA, a High School Federation, a summer swim league, etc.

For USA Swimming meets, the Referee must know the current rules and their interpretation. He/she must have a copy of the current rulebook, study it, and bring it to the meet. They must also attend clinics when available, consult with other knowledgeable Officials, and learn all the nuances that prompted the rules.

The best way to stay out of trouble is to stick to the rules. Deviating from the rules, no matter how well intentioned, invites requests for more deviations and, most likely, protests and challenges to the Meet Referee's decisions.

Since the Referee is ultimately responsible for everything at a meet, they should feel free to reassign officials if they do not perform their duties properly. However, the Referee must avoid overruling another Official, unless confident that the other official's judgement or explanation cannot be supported. The Referee is the supreme arbiter of all problems or protests that involve judgmental matters concerning an Athlete's compliance with the technical rules. Thus, his/her decisions must be correct and impartial. There is no substitute for knowing the rules, applying them correctly and using common sense in their application.

Many people take pride in demonstrating common sense when it comes to business or family matters, yet, fail to exercise common sense in the conduct of a sport. Sometimes the official's knowledge is inadequate; other times the Official has become emotionally involved.

Coaches like to plan. Gather as much information as you can and then make your decision.

Finally, the Referee should make their decisions quickly and decisively, being confident that he is knowledgeable and is being completely fair to the individuals involved. The binding principle in rendering judgement is:

Violations that clearly occurred should be called, but the benefit of any doubt must go to the competitor!

A tip in making the tough decisions is to adopt a helpful rather than a punitive attitude towards rules enforcement. Officials are not on the deck to see how many competitors they can disqualify. They are simply there to ensure that the competition is completely fair and equitable.

THE REFEREE'S ATTITUDE

What is “attitude”? You might be surprised if you looked it up in your computer's Thesaurus to find how many of these synonyms actually apply to the Referee and officiating in general. For instance, attitude is:

Disposition and temperament: *are you calm? Or do you fly off the handle easily?*

Perspective: *Do you look at things fairly? DO you keep all Athletes in mind-not just the one with a problem?*

Perceptiveness: *which includes awareness, alertness and judgement incorporating both wisdom and common sense.*

Manner and demeanor: *Do you look and act like a professional?*

Spirit and approach: *Is your intent to always put the Athletes first, or does your ego sometimes get in the way?*

You can see that attitude can play a part in every phase of officiating. The more consistent we can become in our attitude, the more consistent our application of the rules – and our administration of swim meets – will be.

Which brings us to the Referee – the person whose attitude has the most to do with how a swim meet runs. The Referee makes sure the rules are applied equitably and fairly, he/she sets the standard for officiating, and greatly influences the atmosphere of the Meet.

Think about it – a nervous, unprepared, excitable Referee – particularly one who is running around trying to do everything themselves can make the Coaches and Athletes feel that the Meet is not under control and that things may go wrong at any time!

On the other hand, a calm, confident and competent Referee also imparts that feeling to everyone else – the whole meet reflects a secure, relaxed atmosphere – one in which an Athlete can compete to their full potential without worrying about what's going on around him. This is even more important at smaller local meets or dual meets where there are fewer and less experienced officials who are looking to the Referee for leadership.

To put it simply – a Referee can either be a chicken or a duck. The unsure nervous Referee who tries to do everything himself/herself usually ends up looking like a chicken without a head – and gets everyone else nervous and on edge in the process.

The “duck type” on the other hand looks calm and confident on top – even though they may be paddling like mad underneath! Ducks are confident around water – chickens aren't! So, how do you make sure you have a “duck-type” attitude? Let's break it down into the stages of a meet – **Pre-Meet Preparation, Administering the Meet, Handling Problems and Protests and, finally, After the Meet.**

PRE-MEET PREPARATION

First of all, to appear confident – you have to know what you’re doing!

Do you know the USA Swimming rules? Not just the stroke rules, but all Parts 1 and 2 of the rulebook? Do you have to memorize them? Of course not, but be aware of where in the book you can find the applicable rule.

Next, make sure you know your LSC rules, i.e. in Senior meets, do you swim the consols of the finals first? What are Pacific Swimming’s scratch rules?

Have you read the meet information thoroughly and made a note of pertinent parts, i.e. will deck entries be taken for relays? What is the deadline? Are awards being given? Is there scoring? Are there any special rules for distance events? Remember, the Meet Announcement becomes part of the rules of the Meet. The Meet Referee reviews the Meet Announcement before it is sanctioned. That way any incorrect or ambiguous language can be cleared up before the information is distributed.

Now that we are confident in our knowledge, what can we do to maintain a calm attitude at the Meet.

Be Proactive – not Reactive.

In other words, now what kind of a Meet you’re refereeing, then run through it in your mind.... You should be knowledgeable enough of meet procedures to be able to anticipate where problems may occur and be prepared to fix whatever does go wrong. To do that, today’s Referee needs more knowledge and experience than ever before...

But, as part of being proactive, don’t forget to stay “brushed up” on the basics! When your timing system goes out – do you still know how to determine an official time from the three watches I hope you have available.

Another step that will help you attain that calm, confident attitude – know every other job on the deck. How can you instruct other officials and help them solve problems if you don’t know what they’re doing? If you’re aware of the duties and procedures of all your meet personnel – you can often suggest methods to prevent problems.

We have often emphasized contacting your Meet Director before the meet to make sure the facility and equipment will be ready. You need to become familiar with the conditions and restrictions of the pool... especially if you’ve never worked a meet there before. Maybe your timeline shows the meet is going to run past sundown – don’t wait until the day of the meet to find out the pool doesn’t have adequate lighting after dark!

One of the most important – make sure before the meet that you are going to have enough officials. Athletes are much more likely to be judged fairly when there is a full complement of officials on the deck rather than too few. Mistakes are more likely to occur when a turn judge is trying to watch 4 lanes turn

at the same time and just catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of their eye. With too many lanes to watch, it's easy to miss the quick slip touch on the breast or fly and be convinced it was a one-hand touch. **Remember the goal is consistency** – if you really want to see a Coach come unglued – see what happens when his Athlete is disqualified for something and the Athlete in the very next lane, who did the same thing, is not!

Let's move on to the next phase ...

ADMINISTERING THE MEET

What attitudes do we need to make this a successful meet for everyone – the Athletes, Coaches, Parents and Officials. Remember, each group comes with their own expectations to the Meet. From the Athletes, who follow a black line for thousands of yards to the parents, who may have no knowledge of what happens at a swim meet. As the highest ranking Official at the meet – how do you perceive your authority? How should you perceive it?

Rank does not confer privilege or give power. It imposes responsibility.

Let's compare two different Referees – one who perceives their authority at a swim meet as “having power”. The other perceives it as “accepting responsibility”. There's a big difference. The first, who perceives it as “power” will think – I can run this meet any way I want to in accordance with my own philosophies and feelings. **They may even perceive themselves as being “kinder” than other referees, so they may decide not to apply the scratch rule, to let in athletes who forgot to check in and take “deck entries” from those athletes who forgot to enter an event. What can it hurt?**

Well, for one thing – he isn't being fair to all those athletes who filled out their entries correctly, did check in, and didn't miss their event. Remember that part of our “attitude” is “perspective”, **keeping all Athletes in mind not just the one with a problem? In addition, those who didn't have to abide by the rules will now think they can get away with doing the same thing at the next meet – so he's just make the job of the next Referee a lot harder.**

Our second Referee, who perceives his authority as an “acceptance of responsibility” thinks “it is my responsibility to run this meet in accordance with the rules, making sure they are applied equally to all athletes.”

By accepting his own responsibility, this Referee also teaches the athletes to **accept the responsibility and consequences of their own actions or inaction – a valuable lesson in life.**

Let's proceed to get the Meet started with our two different Referees.

Our “power” Referee tends to be a ‘dictator’, telling people what to do in an arbitrary “this is my way and this is the way it's going to be” manner. Have you ever noticed the “ripple effect” of people's attitude. The people who have been subjected to this type of approach become resentful and tend to adopt the same manner when dealing with the people they come in contact with, usually Athletes and Coaches. Now you have this same unfriendly, uncooperative attitude spreading around the deck. Not the right way to start a meet.

On the other hand, our “responsible” Referee knows that one of his or her main responsibilities is to instruct and help the other people working the deck. Rather than becoming a ‘dictator’, they approach the job like a ‘team leader’. First, build the team – make everyone feel they are important to the Meet and establish a mutual feeling of respect and trust.

If you can pass on your attitude of responsibility and professionalism to everyone else, you’ll make your own job a lot easier and create a much better environment for the athletes.

If you want the meet to go smoothly, you’ve got to let people know what you expect of them – and what they can expect from you. Tell them how you plan to do things and what they can do to help you – and don’t forget to ask what you can do to make their job easier.

Maintain a constant rapport and communication with those overseeing various parts of the Meet! When you meet with your team members, draw a clear line between the decisions you will expect them to make on their own and those that you want referred to you. In general, any matter within their jurisdiction that is clearly covered by the rules would be their decision; anything requiring judgments and decisions outside of their jurisdiction or that might set a precedent should be referred to you.

I can’t emphasize enough the part about setting a precedent – remember the decisions you make on the first day of the meet establish a precedent for the rest of the Meet. Athletes are entitled to know that what you do for one athlete you will, under the same circumstances, do for any other athlete. So – make those first decisions very carefully!

For the same reason, you will want your officials – particularly if you’re lucky enough to have an Administrative Referee and a couple of Deck Referees – to keep you informed of the decisions they make so you can be sure the rules are being equitably and consistently applied to all athletes.

Before you actually start the meet – there is one more group that you want to make part of your team – the Coaches! Too often, there tends to be a “we vs. they” attitude between Coaches and Officials, although we have made great strides over the years in closing that gap. We are all at a swim meet for the same reason – to see that the athletes compete under the best and most equitable conditions we can provide. Always have a Coaches’ meeting at the beginning of the meet (sometimes this is accomplished in a Zoom call prior to arriving at the Meet) – so they can voice any concerns and you can inform them of any conditions that will affect their athletes – some examples:

What’s the timeline for the meet and where is it posted? Is it just an estimate or will you make sure events don’t start before the posted time.

Will you call for athletes that don’t appear at the blocks (*this may depend on the class of meet you’re running*). Then make sure you let your Starter know that too so you can follow that exact procedure for each Athlete that isn’t there.

Well, by now our “power-driven” Referee has probably alienated a lot of people, while they runs around trying to direct everything himself. On the other hand, our “responsible” Referee has built themself a pretty impressive “team” – one he can trust and delegate things to.

HANDLING PROBLEMS AND PROTESTS

Until final action is determined, the results of any race conducted under protest, or of any protested race, shall not be announced, and no prizes for that race shall be awarded or scoring points allowed unless the protest is officially withdrawn.

Protests regarding the eligibility of any Athlete to compete or to represent an organization in any race shall be made in writing to the Referee, before the race is held, and if the matter cannot be immediately resolved, the athlete may compete under protest. If this occurs, it will be announced before the race.

The meet committee or the Meet Referee shall immediately refer such protest to the Pacific Swimming Board of Review at the earliest possible time.

Only the Meet Referee can consider protests against judgment decisions of Deck Referees, Starters, Stroke and Turn, or Relay Take-off Judges. The Referee should not overrule any such decision unless they has personally observed the alleged violation or unless the official making the decision provides a rationale that is clearly incorrect under the current rules or the violation cannot be clearly and/or consistently explained.

A protest not involving eligibility or a judgement call must also be made within 30 minutes after the race in which the alleged infraction took place. If the protest is not resolved immediately, the protestor shall, at that time, file a written protest with Pacific Swimming's Board of Review or the Meet Referee, having jurisdiction over the Meet. If the Board of Review does not satisfactorily resolve the protest within ten (10) days, the protestor may appeal, in writing, to the National Rules Chairman, within the next five (5) days, for final adjudication, which shall then be binding on all parties.

Somewhere along the line you probably will have to handle a protest. The most common usually start with a coach charging down the deck vehemently protesting some disqualification or you are faced with an emotional and often tearful appeal by an Athlete and parent against your decision or that of another official. Be careful!

Did you know that studies have shown that our opinion of a person is formed in the first 10 to 15 seconds – and that that opinion influences our subsequent actions or judgments?

Keep an open mind – just because the Coach yelled at you, don't make a snap judgment against him (*that's what our 'power-driven' Referee would do*) – Our "responsible-type" Referee remembers he's the judge – not an adversary! Judges listen carefully to both sides of an argument, consider those arguments within the framework of any laws or rules that apply and only then do they reach a decision.

With the tearful athlete, your first instinct is to react sympathetically and benevolently – but your decision here too must be based on what happened and the rules that apply.

So, how do you handle the irate Coach protesting a stroke & turn call? Off the deck – with courtesy, patience and common sense. If the Coach is really upset, allow them to calm down first – you can do this a couple of ways:

1. Let him talk, while you listen – often this is all that is needed – and you will find you can then discuss the matter calmly. Sometimes the best solution is patience!
2. If that doesn't resolve the issue, after hearing his arguments, tell him you will be glad to look into it and report back to him. This gives the Coach a "cooling-off" period and, at the same time, allows you time to consider the protest and check out the facts.

Do you have the authority to over-rule a judgment call? Yes. The Referee always has the power to over-rule an official on any infraction he personally observes. But use this authority wisely – if you didn't see the infraction, you should thoroughly investigate the disqualification being questioned and only if a rule was incorrectly applied or it appears that a mistake was made should you over-rule it.

Which brings me to a final admonition – don't be trapped into upholding a decision only because your ego is on the line and you don't want to admit a mistake may have been made (*another common trait of our "power-driven" Referee*). As a "responsible" Referee you are aware that you are not the most important person at a swim meet, neither are the Coaches, the Parents or the Stroke & Turn Judges. The most important persons at a swim meet are the Athletes – and decisions should always be made in the context of providing "fair and equitable conditions of competition" for ALL of them! Remember knowledge and experience may be the basis for your decisions, but attitude – the manner in which you handle and communicate them – is what makes your judgments acceptable.

AFTER THE MEET

At the end of the meet, our "power-type" Referee probably thinks "I really kept control of that meet and ran it well". Our "responsible" Referee know better – they didn't run that meet all by themselves. They remember to acknowledge the contributions of all the members of his team and makes them all feel appreciated.

Well, let's hope your swim meet went well and all the problems and protests were resolved. Did you make any mistakes? Are there things you could have done better? Of course there are – none of us is perfect. But we learn from our mistakes and every meet adds to our experience.