

CASE STUDY: Rochester Swim Club & the Block Party Transformation

Overview

Rochester Swim Club (MN) embraced the Block Party pilot program during the 2024 swim season as a tool for developmental athlete engagement. Under the leadership of Head Age Group Coach Tom Walsh, the program not only ignited participation among beginners but reshaped the club's culture, meet structure, and volunteer engagement. This case study captures how Block Party became an essential platform for growing the sport of swimming from the grassroots up.

Challenge

Rochester Swim Club faced several common challenges in USA Swimming:

- Declining participation among younger athletes, especially 8-and-unders
- Intimidating and expensive traditional meet formats for new families
- Limited race experience for part-time or new swimmers
- A need to train new coaches, volunteers, and officials in a low-pressure environment

Solution: Implementing Block Party

Starting in September, RSC hosted monthly Block Party meets, structured as short, fun, Friday night events. Key adaptations included:

- Offering 4x50s, 100 Free, and 100 IM events to slow the pace and increase enjoyment
- Open registration for all 12-and-under swimmers, regardless of experience
- Using the meets as training opportunities for new coaches and volunteers
- Incorporating awards, prizes, and themes to make the events exciting and memorable
- Leveraging Block Party as a low-stakes, high-fun introduction to competition

Results

Block Party's impact was immediate and measurable:

1. Increased Athlete Participation

- **8-and-unders competing in meets grew from 5 to 27 athletes** – a 400% increase
- Over **2,000 total splashes**, with **1,600 from first-year racers**
- Participation in state-level meets rose by 15% over the previous year

2. Athlete Experience & Culture Shift

- Block Party became a desirable meet option even for advanced swimmers
- Peer-to-peer racing among teammates built intra-squad camaraderie
- Children reported higher motivation, enjoyment, and sense of achievement

3. Family Engagement

- New parents learned how to time, officiate, and support larger meets
- Block Party served as a “bridge” to understanding USA Swimming events
- The fun-first format helped remove barriers to entry and encouraged more families to stay in the sport

4. Staff & Volunteer Development

- Part-time coaches rotated through real meet responsibilities
- Officials used the format to train new starters and AOs in a low-pressure setting
- Block Party became a feeder for skilled volunteers and future leadership roles

5. Revenue & Sustainability

- Meets charged \$18/athlete, yielding \$200–\$400 in profit per meet

- Events were held during normal practice hours to save on facility costs
- Budget was reinvested in awards, prizes, and coach development

Key Learnings & Innovations

- *Creativity Works:* The freedom to design events around team culture led to better engagement than rigid, traditional formats.
- *Block Party as a Platform:* It was more than a meet—it became a training ground for athletes, coaches, and volunteers.
- *Demand for Fun:* Families consistently preferred Block Parties over standard age group meets due to their energy, simplicity, and value.

Conclusion

Rochester Swim Club's Block Party success proves that fun, creativity, and community-building can drive measurable retention and performance gains. By removing pressure, simplifying logistics, and celebrating every swimmer, RSC created a meet environment that not only trained the next generation—but inspired them.