

## **CASE STUDY: Santa Maria Swim Club & the Power of Creative Flexibility with Block Party**

### **Overview**

Located on the outskirts of Southern California's swimming landscape, Santa Maria Swim Club serves a geographically isolated and financially diverse community. Under Head Coach Mike Ashmore's leadership, SMSC has transformed its engagement strategy by embracing the flexibility of the Block Party pilot program. The result: a revitalized sense of purpose, expanded competition access, and measurable growth across all athlete levels—especially novices and late starters.

### **Challenge**

Santa Maria Swim Club faced several structural and logistical challenges:

- A high percentage of “free or reduced lunch” families, making traditional meet costs a major barrier
- A lack of nearby swim meets, with the closest teams 25–30 minutes away
- Shortages of available officials and high meet sanctioning costs
- A growing population of late-start athletes, including 12–14-year-olds new to swimming
- An outdated competitive model that failed to meet families' needs for affordability, convenience, and fun

### **Solution: Embracing Block Party as a Platform, Not a Format**

Rather than treating Block Party as just another meet type, SMSC used it as a **flexible platform for innovation**. Key adaptations included:

- Hosting Block Parties during regular practice times to avoid rental fees
- Zero meet fees to remove cost as a barrier
- Using assistant coaches as officials to reduce staffing costs and accelerate coach development
- Running multiple short meets tailored to different populations, including:

- Long course “first-timer” meets for middle-tier age groupers
- Pop-up meets for late-start teens
- Mini-meets for novice swimmers—three in a single day!
- Creative community-building events like festive holiday meets and dual-meet-style Blue vs. Gold showdowns

## Results

### 1. Rapid Growth in Participation

- Added over **100 unique competitors** to their roster in Fall alone
- Saw growing demand from families asking when the next Block Party would be held
- Created summer programming where **each team runs local meets**, culminating in a community-wide championship

### 2. Increased Accessibility

- No entry fees and minimal travel opened the door for all families
- Athletes new to swimming were able to compete immediately in low-stress environments
- Late-start 13-year-olds found a path to swim at high school and even junior college levels

### 3. Elevated Staff Engagement

- Assistant coaches gained confidence and new skills by officiating
- Senior swimmers led meet setup and mentorship
- Coaching staff used Block Party meets to drive development and tailor training cycles

### 4. Cultural Shift Toward Fun and Belonging

- Meets were short (often under 90 minutes), festive, and fun-focused

- Younger swimmers watched senior athletes race in the same backyard, building inspiration
- Events built community, trust, and a deeper sense of belonging among families

## 5. Strategic Alignment with Broader Goals

- Increased participation in sanctioned travel meets
- Expanded visibility into time standards and performance benchmarks
- Built retention through engagement, not obligation

## Quote to Remember

“If you haven’t read USA Swimming’s best practices retention report for 10 & unders, read it. Then ask yourself why we’re still doing the same thing. Kids leave sports because it costs too much and takes too long. Block Party fixes that.”

— Mike Ashmore, Santa Maria Swim Club

## Conclusion

Coach Ashmore and SMSC exemplify how the Block Party pilot can be more than a format—it can be a **catalyst for community transformation**. With creativity, compassion, and a willingness to challenge outdated norms, the club has made competitive swimming more inclusive, more developmental, and—most importantly—more fun.