



# 11-12

# RETENTION

## — PLAYBOOK —



# WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

After creating the Best Practice Guide for Growth and Retention of 10 & Under Swimmers, we recognized the need to keep digging into the ongoing challenge of declining participation in youth sports. As we spoke with clubs, they not only confirmed the trend but also offered inspiring ideas worth sharing. That sparked the creation of this new resource focused specifically on the retention of 11–12-year-old swimmers, a critical age for long-term engagement in the sport.

Retention isn't just about numbers; it directly impacts team culture, business stability, and athlete development. As Elmbrook Swim Club in Wisconsin put it, "Retention is a cornerstone of our program. If an age group is not there at 8&U, it will be that way for the life of the age group." This guide brings together insights to help teams strengthen their foundation and keep swimmers in the sport longer.

To better understand what helps swimmers stay in swimming and thrive, we connected with a varied group of clubs from across several LSCs and Zones—ranging in size, club structure, and staff makeup. This diversity became a key strength, revealing that while many successful teams share common strategies, they implement them in ways unique to their mission and culture.

We specifically reached out to clubs with retention rates above the national average for swimmers aged 11–12 and 13–14, aiming to learn what sets them apart. Our conversations centered around four core areas: keeping swimming fun and social, engaging and educating parents, supporting long-term athlete development, and preparing swimmers for the next level. The insights we gathered offer flexible, proven ideas that you can adapt to fit your own team's goals and values.

As we gathered feedback from clubs across the country, one key theme stood out. Most decisions, whether about group structure, programming, or priorities, are grounded in each team's unique mission and values. Teams had both of these clearly defined and used them as a guide for making intentional decisions. While challenges are universal, like limited lane space, staffing hurdles, and rising operational costs, the successful clubs weren't ignoring them. These teams are actively engaging in conversations to find solutions.

We also discovered that many of the responses received could fit into multiple buckets. For example, efforts to engage parents often included deeper engagement with swimmers and strategies for preparing athletes for the next level frequently tied into long-term athlete development. These overlapping themes highlight the importance of connection within a group, across a team, and throughout the athlete's journey. When coaches and staff align around a shared vision and work together with

purpose, the results can be transformative.

**This resource is designed to help clubs turn insight into action with ease and impact, by focusing on four key buckets:**

**PART 1-** More than a sport: The fun and social side of swimming

**PART 2-** Parent engagement and education

**PART 3-** Long Term Athlete Development

**PART 4-** Preparing for the next level of swimming

**Each bucket was broken down into three sections, based on the feedback from the clubs:**

In the **FROM CLUB INSIGHT TO ACTION** section, we've grouped the most common themes shared by clubs and what this looks like put into action.

**READY, SET, GO** offers quick, practical tips that any team can implement right away.

The **GOLD MEDAL IDEAS** highlight some of the most inspiring and creative submissions straight from clubs across the country.

While reviewing the responses we found the top life skill that teams focus on with this age group, along with the top factor they consider for retention of their swimmers. What are they? You'll have to read on to find out.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thank You to the Contributing Clubs .....	4
PART 1 - More Than A Sport: The Fun and Social Side of Swimming .....	5
PART 2 - Parent Engagement and Education .....	8
PART 3 - Long Term Athlete Development .....	11
PART 4 - Preparing For The Next Level of Swimming .....	14
Overview .....	16





## THANK YOU TO THE CLUBS THAT CONTRIBUTED

92nd Street Flying Dolphins- MR	Monocacy Aquatic Club- MD
Arlington Aquatic Club- PV	Multnomah Athletic Club- OR
Bartlesville Splash Club- OK	Nashville Aquatic Club- SE
Bellevue Club Swim Team- PN	Naval Academy Aquatic Club- MD
Boulder City Henderson Swim Team-CA	NOVA of Virginia- VA
Cape Cod Swim Club- NE	Oro Valley Swim Team-AZ
Carmel Swim Club- IN	Peoria Area Water Wizards- IL
Carolina Aquatics- SC	Pikes Peak Athletics- CO
Central Bucks Swim Team- MA	Rancho San Dieguito- SI
Charles River Aquatics- NE	Riptide- MN
Columbia Aquatics Association- MD	Rochester Swim Club- MN
Crescent City Swim Club- LA	Rockingham Area Youth Swim- NE
Dads Club Swim Team- GU	Santa Clara Swim Club- PC
Dayton Raiders- OH	Sarasota Sharks- FL
Diamond State Aquatics- MA	Scarlet Aquatics- NJ
Elmbrook Swim Club- WI	Sea Devil Swimming- MN
Fairland Aquatic Swim Team- PV	South Davis Aquatics Team- UT
Frederick Area Swim Team- MD	South Florida Aquatic Club- FG
Fox Valley Swim Team- IL	Southern Tier Aquatics- NI
Front Range Barracudas- CO	Spy Swimming- MD
Greater Somerset County YMCA- NJ	St. Charles Swim Team- IL
Gwinnett Aquatics- GA	Storm Aquatics- WI
Howard Suamico Storm Breakers- WI	Tampa Y Swimming- FL
Irvine Novaquatics- CA	Team Eugene Aquatics YMCA- OR
Jersey Aquatic Club- NJ	Upper Dublin Aquatic club- MA
Lakeside Aquatic Club- NT	Waves of Wilmington- NC
Long Island Aquatic Club- MR	Worthington Swim Club- OH
Mansfield Aquatic Club- NT	YMCA of Greater Monmouth County- NJ
Mason Manta Rays- OH	



# PART 1- MORE THAN A SPORT: THE FUN AND SOCIAL SIDE OF SWIMMING

## Introduction

Creating a fun and socially engaging environment is a key focus for many swim clubs. Across the clubs we connected with, there was a common commitment to keeping the sport enjoyable for the swimmers, their families, and the coaches. This is supported by ongoing staff discussions and intentional planning. Whether through team-building activities away from the pool or fun traditions during practices and meets, clubs are making a consistent effort to ensure that swimming remains a rewarding experience.

## From Club Insight to Action: Bringing ideas to life

### ■ Be intentional with creating and planning team events

- Develop a parent engagement committee to plan and coordinate.
- Plan out the year versus playing it by ear.
- Designate a group parent representative to help with group specific activities and communication.
- Fun ideas are shared among the staff and incorporated into the team progression and season plans.
- When making practice schedules, meet schedules, and team events ask yourself “Could we make this more family friendly.”
- Most teams said the topic of “keeping it fun” is a regular part of their staff meetings and discussions.

### ■ Recognition of swimmers

- Have a special kickboard that we give a new swimmer each month which represents “Swimmer of the Month”
- Recognize swimmers on social media for outside achievements.
- Give away fun trinkets, like rubber ducks, instead of heat winner ribbons.
- Every week post a “Swimmer Spotlight” with their picture and fun facts.

### ■ Introduction to team travel

- Team travel provides many opportunities to teach responsibility and ownership. Teams need to make sure the parents know this is part of team travel and discuss

how parents can support this.

- Offers connection with teammates and coaches in a new and different way.
- Creating memories away from the pool that will last a lifetime.
- Have older swimmers role model expectations during team travel.
- Provide an athlete Code of Conduct for them to sign.
- For families traveling separately, create a hotel room block so that there is a lot of socializing off the deck also.

### ■ Create traditions to give kids and families something to look forward to in practice, meets, and at social events

- At the end of the year, award a special cap to 9-14 swimmers that completed their IMX events, regardless of the score they generate.
- Hold events and practices that connect the older swimmers with the younger swimmers throughout the year.
- Offer a separate 10&U banquet which is more of a fun carnival including a DJ, face painting, magician, and balloon artist.
- Traditions associated with holidays For example, silly sock exchange during a winter party or costume contest for Halloween.
- Swim-a-thon has evolved over the years. It can be used as a team wide event that includes an awards banquet, dunk tanks, friendly competitions, and special guest speakers like Olympians.
- Write greeting cards to the patients of a local Veterans Administration Hospital for Veterans Day.
- Super Bowl practice where swimmers break into teams based on the teams in the Super Bowl.
- “Watermelon Wednesdays” all summer long, the kids can earn an ice-cold slice of watermelon at the end of practice.
- Invite high school age club swimmers to an age group practice to demonstrate key skills. It is followed by a



Q & A and pictures with the older kids; the kids and parents love it.

#### ■ Keeping it fun with in-water skill development

- Play a video of a stroke skill on loop for the kids to watch during the set.
- Provide a whiteboard for coaches to draw pictures and write stroke cues.
- Use different types of equipment for the kids to experiment with.
- Use of video playback for the coaches to show and talk to the kids about.
- Have the big kids demonstrate and teach the younger swimmers.
- Beyond usual equipment, find reasons to use rubber ducks, wiffle balls, and pool noodles to keep the swimmers engaged.

#### ■ Provide opportunities for kids to explore and play

- Allow time before or after practice for the kids to have free play time, where coaches and parents don't organize the play.
- Individual groups do ice breakers during dryland to help the kids get to know each other and find common ground.
- Let the swimmers do “water exploration”, this will be a large part of practice time with novice groups and less time as the groups progress. It is always present, including senior level groups.

#### Ready, Set, Go: Actionable tips for every team

- When planning, have the mindset of “what will make the kids want to come back.”
- Find what is best for your team. Some teams found the families too overscheduled and didn't plan a lot of outside activities. While others found that a huge part of their success is building a community among the team.



- Easy culture building idea- End each practice with the team cheer.
- When planning group structures and group moves, keep in mind the importance of friendships at this age.
- Find people on staff that are good at things like creating culture, keeping the sport fun, and community building. Ask how you can support their ideas and let them run with it.

#### Gold Medal Ideas

- ▶ “We have a “coaches in the wild” social media effort where kids can take a picture with a coach they see outside of practice and it gets posted.” (NOVA of Virginia- VA)
- ▶ “We aim to be the premier youth sports team in the Midwest. We have an emphasis on community, not an elite swim club.” (Carmel Swim Club- IN)
- ▶ “We do a bingo card challenge with different skills based on group ability, that is a big hit.” (Carolina Aquatics- SC)
- ▶ “Every week in our coaches meeting we vote on a “Swimmer Shout Out”. Coaches can nominate someone from their group and the Head Coach will email the family to complement them on their swimmer’s achievement.” (Bellevue Club Swim Team- PN)
- ▶ “We have money in our annual budget specifically allocated to support training group parties outside of the pool.” (Bartlesville Splash Club- OK)
- ▶ “Social events are open to parents and their siblings, we try to encourage family fun.” (Rockingham Area Youth Swim- NE)
- ▶ “We have had a “Big Sister Day” since 2012, where the 15-18 group does things with the younger swimmers. It has evolved over time but is still completely swimmer planned and executed.” (Oro Valley Swim Team-AZ)
- ▶ “Swimmer scavenger hunts to help with team building.” (Scarlet Aquatics- NJ)

**“We have constant reminders for staff to develop relationships with the athletes outside of the pool. We talk about “door to door coaching”. This means we are coaching them the moment they walk on deck until the moment they leave the building.”**

- Fox Valley Swim Team - IL





## PART 2- PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

### Introduction

At this stage of age group swimming, teams found that parent engagement is still an important focus, even though the kids should be becoming more responsible for their own swimming. The parent involvement continues to play a crucial role in team success, retention, and building a positive culture. Most clubs are incorporating parent education through structured efforts like new parent meetings at the start of the season, group-specific meetings, and consistent weekly/monthly communication. However, some teams go beyond just these communications, offering more comprehensive strategies to deepen parent buy-in and foster a stronger partnership between families and the club.

### From Club Insight to Action: Bringing ideas to life

#### ■ Find ways to educate parents on the benefits of the sport and “the process”

- Offer a “parent practice” where the swimmers teach their parents some of the finer things about the sport.
- Teams provide educational articles in their emails to parents.
- Education specific to the time of year. For example, as you head into championship meets, educate parents on the particulars of a prelim/final meet.
- Highlight the positives outside of just swimming. For example, one team mentioned that their high school groups have maintained a GPA over 3.5 for the last 22 semesters in a row. Parents see that and want their kids to be involved with their team. They use this for marketing.
- Bring in outside speakers to present on different topics important to the sport and the swimmers.
- Let parents know your team philosophy and philosophy as a coach, this includes the how and the why of what you do.

#### ■ Teach parents what it means to be a member of your team

- Clearly communicate with swimmers, parents, and coaches about how they can progress through the entire program. Start this from the beginning of the season.
- Let parents know that volunteering and the culture in the stands help showcase who the team is and what

they are about.

- Many teams have a group parent rep or practice level representative to help answer questions and mentor new parents.
- Be clear from the beginning about the philosophy of your team and your group. They can’t buy in, if they don’t know what they are buying into.

#### ■ Communication

- Understand that people consume information differently, there is no one right way to communicate.
- Develop a group specific web landing page for parents to find information.
- Let parents know when the coaches will be available for questions. It helps with transparency if coaches are available for parents to connect with.
- Parent meetings at the beginning of the year that include a new parent focus, group specific focus, and overall welcome to the new season information. Most teams also mentioned that they use this as an opportunity to connect parents with other parents.
- Communication through group specific emails and team wide newsletters.
- Be consistent in what is communicated. Coaches need to ensure they are saying the same thing and not contradicting each other.  
Tip: When sending weekly emails, include the coaches from the group above and below.
- Create a “what to expect” document that are tailored to each group.

#### ■ Volunteering

- Create short videos that summarize what a volunteer position is and what they would need to do. This can take away the fear of the unknown for parents.
- Find ways to allow parents to train or “try out” a volunteer position. This could be during a Swim-a-thon, unsanctioned meet, smaller intersquad meet, or Block Party meet.
- Let the parents know, when they get involved, the swimmers often get motivated to also care about the sport.





- Honor the top volunteers by recognizing them at the banquet and presenting them a custom gift.

#### ■ Help parents understand what their role is

- As ownership shifts more onto the swimmer, the parents need to know what this means and why that is important. Do not assume they know that is the expectation or what that needs to look like.
- Describe what their role is and some tips. Start this conversation at the beginning of the season. For example, on the ride home from a meet, what are things they can say?
- Provide education about failure. Let them know it is ok if the swimmer fails from time to time.

#### Ready, Set, Go: Actionable tips for every team

- Evaluate the swimmers on being great teammates, avoiding drama, valuing teammates, and adhering to values. Apply the same standards to the parents.

- When communicating through email, use bullet points to be clear and concise.
- Novice groups have very little (almost zero) volunteering requirements, to make their first two years a pleasant experience.
- Have parents sign a Code of Conduct when they register every year. This helps them know the expectations and as a team it can be referenced back to it for any issues.
- Plan time throughout the year to touch base with every parent. This open conversation about swimmer progress and any questions they may have.
- If the kid isn't bought in, then the parents are more reluctant to help. But if the kids are leading the way and demonstrating that this is important to them, it's easier to get the parents to come along.
- Prioritize listening to parent concerns and feedback, this helps create the coach-parent-swimmer relationship.
- Make it a point to learn parents' names.

- Do not assume that the education you provide at the parent meeting and beginning of the season is enough. There needs to be ongoing education throughout the year.

#### Gold Medal Ideas

- ▶ “We have a Parent Handbook with regularly scheduled reviews and updates.” (Arlington Aquatic Club- PV)
- ▶ “We have parent committees that help take the lead on many things (social media and finance for example) and this serves as a test ground for potential board members.” (Fox Valley Swim Team- IL)
- ▶ “Provide a high-level Cultural Handbook, which includes conversations to have with kids on the car ride home and expectations for practice/meet days.” (Charles River Aquatics- NE)
- ▶ “Educate-educate-educate. Be willing to answer their questions with honesty.” (Lakeside Aquatic Club- NT)
- ▶ “Our education doesn’t just come from a place of science but focused on quelling emotions. If we can keep parents from getting into that emotional side and instead seeing that all of these things are to be expected, they tend to be more patient during the process.” (Storm Aquatics- WI)
- ▶ “Coffee with Coaches- We pick a certain topic and allow parents to ask questions. These are offered during some Saturday practices while the kids swim and another coach covers the practice.” (Carolina Aquatics- SC)
- ▶ “We have goal meetings with the swimmer and their parents. We discuss goals, important meets, areas for improvement, and the conversation evolves from there. This has helped build stronger relationships and an opportunity for parent education.” (Rochester Swim Club- MN)
- ▶ “We connect new parents with “seasoned” parents at their first meet. They have a buddy parent to walk them through heat sheets, Meet Mobile, and more.” (Tampa Y Swimming- FL)

“Be straightforward with parents: Coaches should communicate openly and honestly with parents. This builds trust and helps the parents feel involved in their child’s development.”

- Waves of Wilmington - NC







## PART 3- LONG TERM ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

### Introduction

When working with 11–12-year-olds, teams concentrate on teaching essential life skills that align with their broader goals for Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD). Ownership stands out as the top skill emphasized at this level, with many programs also focusing on teamwork, leadership, and time management. Several teams utilize outside resources to support this development and find it helps validate the work the coaches and teams do.

While this section doesn't delve into technical skills, many teams noted the importance of continuing to develop basics like streamlines, stroke count, and proper stroke technique. It's clear that foundational skills, both in and out of the water, are actively being developed as part of their LTAD plan.

### From Club Insight to Action: Bringing ideas to life

#### ■ Define team values and mission

- “Word of the Month” to highlight a specific value  
Examples: Courage, perseverance, and determination.
- Group shout outs help build swimmers' confidence through recognition from teammates.
- Create swimmer progress reports. They encompass specific in water skills, as well as core values and life skills.
- Encourage older swimmers to help in other areas of the program. This helps them grow into leaders and role model leadership to the 12 & unders.
- Discuss team values daily, so the swimmers can articulate what they are.
- Include team values on email signature lines, team shirts, and the Parent Handbook.

#### ■ Staff professional development

- Create a book club and watch videos, then foster conversation among the staff.
- Have coaches report back and share after a clinic they attended.
- Develop a staff culture of staying current on technique and best practices to help swimmers reach their full potential.

- Discussion around technique should include ways to adjust for each swimmers ability, strength, mobility, and more.
- Require staff to do continuing education every year to better themselves as coaches.  
Tip: There are a lot of free resources on USAS Network & University if budget is a challenge.

#### ■ Goal setting

- After swimmers fill out their goal sheet, set up meetings to discuss. This includes mid-season meetings to review how they are doing.
- Goal setting is framed from the perspective of imagining what is possible for them.
- Goal setting includes swimming and also incorporates academic goals to highlight that they are more than just a swimmer.
- Swimmers are asked to set personal goals, as well as goals for their entire group.
- Part of the goal setting process is how to make realistic goals and specific steps to reach those goals.

#### ■ Teaching life skills and character-based development

- Instead of dryland once a week, have a group discussion  
Examples: How to be a good teammate and how to recover from a bad race.
- Rotate lanes so the swimmers can make new connections.
- Let the kids be more responsible for things, like pace clock management. Don't get mad when they fail or make a mistake, talk through it with them.
- Talk about accountability and how they ultimately are in charge of what they do with the information, feedback, etc. that the coach provides.
- Use swim journals to teach ownership and to help the swimmers learn about themselves. Coaches can provide prompts and examples of how the swimmers can use the journal. For example, make a gratitude list, progress update on goals, and self-reflection.



## ■ Use outside resources

- Identify staff who have strengths and skills that can be utilized. For example, teachers might have access to resources you can adapt for your program)
- American Development Model provides a great groundwork and progression plan for what swimmers should be focusing on in and out of the pool.
- Bring in an outside speaker. For example, a nutritionist, sport therapists, or psychologists.

## ■ Swimmers take ownership of their swimming

- Describe ownership as “owning their success”
- If the expectation is that senior athletes are the main communicators with the coaches, that must start with the 11-12 group.
- Start early with pieces of ownership. For example, 8&U’s learning how to read a heat sheet and telling the coach when they will miss practice.
- Swimmers should know their best times and have an understanding of motivational times.
- Provide parent education on ownership. For example, let the kids circle themselves in for events, check meet information, and packing their own bags.
- As the coach, provide ways for them to lead. For example, picking meet events, goal setting, and race strategies they will try.

## Ready, Set, Go: Actionable tips for every team

- Be flexible when you notice something needs attention in practice or at meets and address it immediately.
- Create a mindset of HIVE Mentality- “What’s good for the bee is good for the hive and vice versa”.
- Talk to the swimmers about being physically tough but also being mentally tough, these are both important for success now and in the future.
- Be intentional about what is best for each swimmer and not stuck on a linear pathway that everyone must follow.
- Do something charitable that helps support the community. This also helps the swimmers think of something other than themselves, learn to work together, and support team values.
- Create rotating swimmer roles, like a Deck Manager that cleans up the deck after practice and a Dryland Manager that organizes dryland equipment. Added



bonus, facilities appreciate when everything finds its owner, the lost & found, or the trash.

- Create a culture where kids are excited to try new things, like open water and longer events.
- Talk about what “fast” is in our sport. Provide examples of other meets to qualify for, past results, and creating discussion around what is needed to compete at that level. This gets swimmers thinking bigger, faster, and can be framed so that they do it together as a team.
- At the end of the year awards banquet, recognize things other than performance. For example, Community, Character, and Teammate awards.
- Encourage participation in other sports and activities. With this, teams are transparent with families and swimmers about what that can mean when splitting time out of the pool. This is not meant to be discouraging, but rather honest and transparent.

## Gold Medal Ideas

- ▶ “Team Mantra of For the Team was created to get kids more involved and to recognize them when they go above and beyond to help someone around them or make the team better.” (Sarasota Sharks- FL)
- ▶ “We have 10 themes that we rotate each month. We emphasize these themes during our team building activities and talk about what each word means and how it applies to our team. Examples: Community, pride, and resilience.” (Santa Clara Swim Club-PC)
- ▶ “Our mission statement is emphasized at all board meetings, practices, and from the top to bottom of the team. It is not just a tagline on our website. It is a living, breathing, growing anthem.” (Elmbrook Swim Club- WI)
- ▶ “One of the major themes of our staff meetings each week is keeping it fun and how to engage members. We call it “experiences”. We have a parent group that helps with that, and we have traditions that we keep going from year to year. Pancake breakfasts are the number one favorite.” (Nashville Aquatic Club- SE)
- ▶ “Mental Fitness Fridays- Coaches present a variety of discussion topics that focus on learning how to use your mind to help you be the best you can be. Examples: Resiliency, confidence, building habits for success, keeping an athlete journal, and getting out of your comfort zone.” (Riptide- MN)

**“We teach being proud of accomplishments but not settling. Learning from failure and setbacks. Bad swims do not make you a bad person.”**

- Monocacy Aquatic Club - MD







## PART 4- PREPARING FOR THE NEXT LEVEL OF SWIMMING

### Introduction

When preparing young swimmers for the next stage of their swimming journey, it's essential to have a clear, structured progression from the entry level to the highest levels of competition. A club guided by Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) principles, should be able to outline this path and ensure it supports steady, age-appropriate growth. It's not just about the plan on paper, coaches and staff must fully understand the progression and their specific roles in guiding swimmers. Equally important is having a consistent focus on daily practices that equip swimmers with the skills, habits, and mindset they'll need to succeed as they move up. These teams have demonstrated ways to set young swimmers up for long-term success by aligning development strategies, team structure, and staff responsibilities.

### From Club Insight to Action: Bringing ideas to life

#### ■ Swimmers need to see the future

- What is the next group, who is the coach, and what is expected? The sooner they know this, the better they can prepare in the current group.
- Offer practices where groups can swim together throughout the year.
- Have coaches work with multiple groups above and below theirs- the kids will get to know them.
- Coaches share a workout for the group below to try, making necessary adjustments to intervals and distances.
- Offer a transition practice, which means they are invited to one practice a week with the group that they will be moving into. This gives them a taste of the next level without overwhelming them.

#### ■ Clearly define expectations for group moves

- The entire staff must clearly understand the training groups and progressions of the team. For example, creating an online folder that includes test sets, stroke count progressions, breathing pattern progressions, and group move criteria for the staff to reference.
- Group criteria are continually reviewed, discussed, and open to any necessary changes.
- Constant staff communication about what groups above

and below are doing, to ensure a smooth transition.

#### ■ Prepare the kids to compete at the next level, before they age up

- Try the “big” events in practice and at an intersquad meet that has less pressure.
- Discuss what the next meet options are for the swimmers, steps to get there, and what events the older swimmers on the team are attending.
- Have swimmers that attended a big meet come back, show off any awards they received and talk to the younger groups about the experience.

#### ■ Planning for the future

- Define as a team what skills are important for the swimmers to progress from group to group.
- Create good training habits now so they are prepared for more intensity and duration later.
- Incorporate bodyweight dryland exercises similar to those used in the older groups, as a way to introduce the skills.

### Ready, Set, Go: Actionable tips for every team

- Remember, 11-12's are not mini-senior swimmers. Keep things in perspective.
- Peer groups are a major consideration at this age when looking at group moves.
- Emphasis on technique is still key, as they are starting to learn how to train.
- Consistency in language used among the group. For example, drills, skill progressions, and stroke cues.
- Swimmers receive feedback and instruction from all coaches on the staff, this helps the swimmers feel more comfortable at practice, meets, and when they move up.
- Teach kids about relay selection and lane intervals, so they start to get a better understanding as they move up.
- Plan out when it is appropriate for your program to expose new challenges to your groups and individual



swimmers. These moments need to also include an educational component for the swimmers and parents. For example, team travel and prelim/final meets.

- No matter where they are in the program, make sure to reinforce what they already know. This is important for their confidence as they progress.
- Part of preparing the swimmer for the next level is having a 1-on-1 meeting with the parents to make sure they are also ready for the next level.

### Gold Medal Ideas

- ▶ “New coaches have an on-boarding season, where they are not expected to contribute by leading but rather shadowing a returning coach.” (Worthington Swim Club-OH)
- ▶ “There is heavy emphasis on stroke technique at every practice for this age group.” (Bellevue Club Swim Team- PN)
- ▶ “Our goal is for them to begin to learn to push themselves and value doing hard things while still having fun.” (Upper Dublin Aquatic Club- MA)
- ▶ “Each group builds specific skills to prepare swimmers for the next level- from technical execution to emotional readiness.” (Pikes Peak Athletics- CO)
- ▶ “Expectations to move to the next group are clearly written in a three-column rubric. The descriptive criteria are rated as “developing”, “meeting”, or “exceeding”. Working with the coach below, swimmers can identify what parts of their swimming can be improved to prepare for the next group.” (Multnomah Athletic Club-OR)

**“Improvement in time is one of many measurements for success, we also congratulate for the courage to try new events and new skills.”**

- Jersey Aquatic Club - NJ





## OVERVIEW

### Key Takeaways

The key takeaways from this document highlight the most common themes observed from the clubs we spoke to and offer a valuable opportunity for reflection and growth. The most effective way to use this section is to identify an area to focus on and use the prompts provided to begin having honest and constructive discussions among the staff. By conducting a thoughtful assessment of your club, you set the stage for continuous improvement and long-term success.

#### ■ Clubs must be proactive and intentional about what they are doing. When an issue surfaces, dig in to find out why it happened and create conversation to find a solution.

- Do we have team policies and procedures that help us address issues in a constructive manner?
- Does the coaching staff feel comfortable sharing concerns they are hearing or experiencing with members of the team? Do they know who to take these concerns to?
- What is a current challenge we are facing and who else can we include in the discussion to find solutions?

#### ■ Communication is vital

- What is the communication plan for our team? Does it include communication with members and the coaching staff, how the information is delivered, and when the information is delivered?
- How can we survey our members and coaching staff to determine where we can improve our communication?

#### ■ Staff must be on the same page with team progression, terminology used, coaching roles, and team values

- What can we do to ensure the staff understands the team progressions and follow the progressions? What does accountability look like for the coaching staff?
- Do we have an on boarding manual for new staff, along with an on boarding process?
- Do we have a central location where all coaches can share and find team resources?

#### ■ Retention of the coaching staff

- “Retention starts at the top. When you have happy coaches that buy into your club whole heartedly,

parents see that.” (Sea Devil Swimming-MN)

- What are we providing to keep the coaches mentally healthy? For example, one team asked coaches to take a day off after a long meet and worked to get their practice covered.
- What are we doing for professional development to create a mindset of learning, growth, and keeping them mentally engaged in their coaching?
- What else can the team provide to help the coaches be their best?

#### ■ Be intentional about discussing and incorporating Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) principles

- What resources or data can we use to assess the competency progression of our swimmers through the program?
- What life skills are important to fulfill our team mission and vision? How can we implement these throughout our program?
- How do we incorporate discussions around LTAD among our staff?

#### ■ Create a sense of team culture

- Does our team have our culture defined in a way that new staff, swimmers, and parents will understand the expectations?
- What and who can we tap into to help us create the culture we want for our team?
- Show off any awards they received and talk to the younger groups about the experience.

### Conclusion

One of the most powerful themes that emerged from our conversations with clubs was the emphasis on life skills, especially ownership, as a cornerstone of athlete development. Another standout insight for this age group was the importance of friendships, which was mentioned time and again as a vital part of keeping swimmers engaged and enjoying their experience.

Clubs also openly acknowledged the real challenges they face, from managing operations to the rising costs. What set many of these clubs apart was their commitment to finding solutions or



at the very least, continuing the dialogue when answers weren't immediate. Many teams found that reflecting on the questions posed to them in this guide helped uncover both the strengths they hadn't fully recognized and areas they had unintentionally overlooked.

This process of questioning, assessing, and strategizing is where true progress begins. We encourage you to choose three things that stood out from this resource and explore them more deeply with your staff, swimmers, and parents. Ask tough questions, evaluate where you are, and work together to build a team that supports your success now and in the future.

Thank you for taking the time to read this resource and all that you do for the swimmers, parents, and coaches in our sport.

