



Reimagine Sports Report

USA Swimming Block Party Pilot Program Phase 1

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For: USA Swimming

Executive Summary

This report reviews the rollout and early results of Phase 1 of USA Swimming's Block Party Pilot Program, launched in April 2024. USA Swimming developed the Block Party initiative to enhance growth and retention within USA Swimming by increasing the availability and accessibility of meets, increasing the percentage of athletes participating in competitive events, and creating scalable best practices for nurturing competitive swimming.

The initiative also seeks to guide athletes and families through learning to swim, compete, and ultimately, cultivate a love for competition and unwavering passion for the sport. Another critical component of the pilot is recruiting and developing USA Swimming-certified officials, and addressing the shortage of officials in many regions of the country.

The purpose of this report is to provide an analysis of Phase 1, focusing on the lessons learned, the challenges faced, and the key recommendations to inform and shape the next phase of the pilot. Phase 2, set to begin in October 2024, holds the promise of expanding to a more diverse group of teams across the country, offering valuable insights into the program's scalability and its potential to create long-term positive effects on athlete retention within the sport.

Despite the challenges faced in Phase 1, one thing remains clear: USA Swimming benefits from a highly engaged base of stakeholders who are passionate about the sport. All stakeholders need to unite, collaborate, and rebuild trust to create progress. Identifying areas to collaborate will be a top priority moving forward into Phase 2 of the pilot program.

Chapter 1: The Rollout

Phase 1 of the Block Party Pilot Program launched in April 2024 with 34 clubs across various LSCs. Phase 1 club participation grew to 70 clubs by the beginning of June. These clubs ranged in size and structure from small, coach-owned teams to larger, institutionally backed organizations. The diverse nature of the clubs provided an essential cross-section of USA Swimming's membership base.

Key Objectives:

- **Increasing Competitive Opportunities:** The program aimed to create more accessible competitive events, especially for teams and athletes who struggle to host or attend traditional USA Swimming-sanctioned meets.
- **Simplifying Meet Operations:** By offering a streamlined sanctioning and management process, Block Party sought to reduce administrative barriers for clubs and allow them to focus more on athlete development.

Challenges Encountered:

- **Communication Breakdowns:** A significant issue in Phase 1 was the failure to communicate the goals of the Block Party pilot to LSCs and committee leaders. This led to misunderstandings, suspicion, and sometimes, active resistance.
- **Repairing Relationships:** During the first six weeks, significant time was spent repairing the damage caused by an information leak. Stakeholders were reluctant to listen to the facts, preferring to remain skeptical or disengaged, which hindered early progress. Efforts to rebuild trust through small group conversations with LSC leadership groups, ASCA, committee chairs/members, and other stakeholders helped begin to repair the initial misconceptions.
- **Delayed Engagement with Clubs:** Due to the initial resistance, we were unable to engage effectively with teams during the first month and a half. This significantly impacted the number of swim meets held during the summer months.

Progress in Summer 2024:

- **Positive Reception to Technology:** Coaches particularly appreciated the simplicity of Block Party's technology. The ease of managing meets through the club portal and seamless tools for recon (registration reconciliation) and results uploads have been widely praised.
- **Collaboration with the National Officials Committee (NOC):** The NOC collaborated with us to establish best practices for officiating and made an effort to communicate with the LSC officials chairs.
- **Continuing Education for Pilot Clubs:** Working with the pilot clubs to understand the stewardship involved concerning the USA Swimming Rule Book- for officiating (102.10.4) and timing (102.23).
- **Identifying and onboarding teams for Phase 2** began in early July.

Notable Details (Technology):

- USA Swimming staff repeatedly provided technical assistance and solutions promptly and competently during Phase 1.
- The sanctioning process in SWIMS is simple, and the payment system works perfectly.

- Recon is more complex; teaching teams this process has been the most challenging part of the tech. This has become a primary component of onboarding new teams to ensure they are comfortable with the process.
- Results upload: no issues other than a few teams needing help understanding how to unzip a results file.
- The credit card payment system has worked flawlessly. We are actively working on solutions for more flexible payment options in the future, such as promo codes, bundling, and e-commerce-led marketing options to drive competition.
- While there were some minor recon issues, such as unregistered athletes at two meets, these were quickly resolved. One YMCA team also had a misunderstanding about the rules regarding combining USA Swimming-registered athletes with non-registered swimmers.

Notable Details (Officiating):

- The NOC has been open to participating in the solution.
- Coaches have repeatedly stated the desire and importance of having USA Swimming-certified officials at these meets.
- Only 14 of the 71 meets held were Officials Tracking System (OTS) eligible. This highlighted a shortage of certified officials and the need for more support.
- Coaches learned quickly the importance of focusing on their assigned roles (coaches can't coach and officiate at the same time).
- OTS is inconsistent among the LSCs, which confused clubs who intend to train officials in Block Party Meets, and many local officials chairs and registrars have offered to support the OTS process. In LSCs where this is not the case, we have a workaround.
- The education of local officials chairs will be a critical element in Phase 2. We need everyone involved in supporting Block Party pilot clubs so we can evaluate the effectiveness of these meets for training officials.

Chapter 2: LSC Conversations

Engagement with LSCs during Phase 1 highlighted several critical challenges in the broader swimming community, particularly around change management and innovation.

Resistance to Change:

- **Initial Reluctance:** Many LSCs responded defensively to Block Party, viewing it as a threat to their control over the meet calendar and financial models. The shift from a centrally governed LSC meet structure to a more club-focused approach was met with skepticism. LSC leaders felt excluded from the decision-making process, making them reluctant to support the initiative.
- **Opportunities for Collaboration:** Conversations with individual LSC leadership groups yielded mixed results. Some LSCs recognized Block Party as an opportunity to support an initiative that could positively affect growth and retention in their LSC and viewed it as an opportunity to invest in the grassroots. Other LSCs elected to erect barriers. There is a massive opportunity for focused collaboration with LSCs. This is a priority moving forward into Phase 2.

Key Observations:

- Embracing the Entrepreneurial Spirit: We will learn from the LSCs who have been able to embrace Block Party as a valuable tool for local growth and retention. LSCs led by individuals with entrepreneurial backgrounds have been the most likely to support the Block Party initiative.
- Budget Prioritization: Few LSCs are budgeting for recruitment and retention programming. Instead, funds are typically allocated to athlete reimbursement based on performance, which fails to address the need for broader meet participation and club growth.
- Embracing Change and Change Management: There is a significant opportunity to work with stakeholders and emphasize the strength of community and our collective power to come together and embrace needed change in our sport's antiquated business structure and business objectives.
- LSC Mission Statements and Related Focus: Focus is weighted on athlete support. "We are here for the athletes..." was stated repeatedly. While empowering athletes is essential, the critical role of coaches and clubs in the process of supporting athletes needs to be addressed. By refocusing support at the club and coach level, LSCs can ensure athletes receive the guidance and opportunities they need to thrive. Block Party is just one potential solution to reach athletes through the coaches and clubs.

Chapter 3: Club Conversations

Feedback from clubs participating in the pilot revealed both positive outcomes and significant challenges:

Positive Feedback:

- Streamlined Meet Hosting: Clubs appreciated the ease of hosting meets under Block Party's guidelines. Block Party offers a more feasible alternative for many small teams that struggle to meet traditional sanctioning requirements.
- Coaches and Officiating: Many clubs indicated that having their coaches complete officiating training (and becoming certified) would be a priority for the upcoming year.
- Easing Financial Burden on Clubs and Participants: Block Party meets are less expensive. Contributing factors to savings include: meets are held during practice (water already paid for), other costs don't apply with these meets (cost of officials, LSC splash fees, etc.), and no travel costs for families. Feedback has indicated that meet participation has grown for pilot teams.

Challenges/Opportunities:

- Under-Resourced Clubs: Even larger clubs often feel under-resourced regarding meets. Block Party allowed these clubs to host smaller, manageable events, but the resource gap remains a barrier, particularly regarding volunteer availability and access to competitive opportunities throughout the year.
- Technology Investment: Smaller teams need more technology infrastructure (e.g., touchpads, timing consoles) to host larger meets. For example, some clubs mentioned the cost of purchasing touchpads at \$1,500/each or timing consoles at \$5,000, which is prohibitive for many.
- Volunteer Scarcity/Family Dynamics: New swimming families are less willing to volunteer, and many prefer to pay for services rather than donate their time. This shift in volunteerism is an important factor in our sport. There is an opportunity before us; recognizing we are no longer

“business as usual” in that our customers have changed, and we need to address their consumer profile and offer products and services they are eager to purchase.

- Threat of Competition from other sports: This has always existed, but it is more prevalent as sports such as flag football and pickleball increase in popularity. This threat has emphasized the need for a product new families wish to purchase.

Participation Data

10&U: 1448

11-12: 1037

13-14 :662

15-18: 496

19 and over: 16

Meet Type

Intrasquad: 53

Dual: 17

Tri: 2

Quad plus: 3

Chapter 4: Phase 2

As the program moves into Phase 2 (October 2024 to September 2025), the focus will shift toward supporting clubs that have not hosted meets in recent years and those with significant recreational/AAU programs. Phase 2 will also aim to onboard a broader sample of teams to collect more quantitative data.

The applicant pool included 164 teams, 89 of which have never run a sanctioned swim meet. 60 teams have full-time staff, 68 are nonprofit organizations, 46 are institutionally owned, 48 are coach-owned, and 115 do not have any certified USA Swimming officials attached to their club.

140 of the applicant teams have been added to the pilot. In addition, all Lifetime Fitness teams have been added (about 35 clubs).

Key Focus Areas for Phase 2:

- Targeting Non-Traditional Clubs: Over half of the 140 clubs accepted into Phase 2 have never hosted a USA Swimming-sanctioned meet, presenting a unique opportunity to engage new teams in meet hosting options.

- **Comprehensive Onboarding:** One-on-one conversations with each new club have emphasized the importance of technology onboarding and community stewardship. Phase 2 will continue to prioritize educational efforts to ensure all participating teams understand the program and are prepared to run meets by the USA Swimming Rule Book.
- **Officiating and Volunteer Recruitment:** Recruiting and training more officials will continue to be a critical focal point. Block Party provides an ideal environment for training new officials in low-pressure, smaller meet settings without the added time and financial burden of traveling to an away meet.
- **Meet Management Technology Training:** To provide additional training and support for less familiar teams with digital meet management systems. Online tutorials, webinars, and one-on-one coaching sessions will ensure all clubs are comfortable with the technology behind running a swim meet.
- **Enhanced Communication Strategy:** A robust communication plan must be implemented to avoid the misunderstandings that plagued Phase 1. This should include regular updates to LSC leaders, a clear outline of Block Party's benefits, and detailed guides for participating clubs.
- **Flexibility and Scalability:** We will continue emphasizing flexibility in meet formats and allowing clubs to tailor events to their needs. The program can engage more teams and offer broader participation across different swimming levels by maintaining an inclusive approach.
- **Collect feedback, formats, and Block Party embedded season plans and share them amongst the pilot teams.**
- **Block Party National Meet Series:** We have been collaborating with USA Swimming's Creative Team to create a series of themed Block Party meets for pilot teams to embrace, featuring marketing collateral and a national leaderboard. November will feature the inaugural event, The Turkey Classic, inspired by one of our Block Party pilot club members: the Pompano Beach Piranhas, highlighting one of the greatest powers of USA Swimming: sharing resources amongst members in the swim community.

Conclusion

Phase 2 represents an opportunity to scale the Block Party initiative to 300 participating teams and solidify its role in driving growth and retention within USA Swimming. By addressing the challenges of Phase 1 and building on its early successes, the program is poised for a long-term positive impact on the sport, benefiting athletes, clubs, coaches, officials, LSCs, and swim families.