

VSI Officiating Update

No. 15

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Officiating Champs Meets

Shortly after the excitement of the Olympic Trials dies down, the excitement of our championship meets will begin to build. We begin with Summer Awards (MAC and GMU-Fairfax, 11-13 July), follow those meets with Senior Champs (Cary, NC, 17-20 July), and finish with Age Group Champs (MAC, 24-27 July). And for those who haven't had their fill, VSI and PVS are co-hosting the Eastern Zone Long Course Age Group Champs in Rockville, MD (6-9 August).

There is, of course, a need for officials at all these meets. This is especially true for Senior Champs and Age Group Champs, where we typically have fewer officials than we would like to have. Two factors may make staffing these meets more challenging than usual.

First, the high price of gasoline is leading to more car pooling and more team travel. These are great ideas from both financial and environmental perspectives, but they may result in fewer officials at our meets. Suffice it to say that if you're at the meet and can help we'd love to have you.

Second, Senior Champs will be held in Cary, NC, which means that we won't have any of our own local officials. We're hoping to have some help from NC officials, but this is a VSI meet and we'd still like to see VSI officials well represented on deck. Joel Black, James Newberry, and Nancy and Dick Nelson will be present as national evaluators. Because mentoring is an integral part of evaluating, this should be a wonderful opportunity to learn from some of the best.

Applications to officiate the Age Group Champs, Senior Champs, and Eastern Zone Champs meets are available [on-line](#).

Thoughts on National Certification

Frequently heard comments with regard to national certification run along the following lines-

"I'm never going to attend a national meet so why should I bother with national certification?"

"Why do we place an emphasis on national certification when so few officials attend national level meets? Shouldn't we focus our resources on those who work our local meets?"

Good questions, but before answering them let's step back and see if can't frame national certification in a broader context.

We've all heard it before, we should encourage our children to swim to their potential. For some, that means being the best B/C level swimmer they can be, for others it means qualifying for finals in Regional Champs, and for a limited few it means placing first in multiple events at Senior Champs. There are over 6,000 registered athletes in VSI, but only 28 of them qualified for Olympic Trials. Just because our children won't compete at the highest levels of competition doesn't mean that we don't encourage them to do their best. If that were the case we'd have very few athletes competing.

What happens when we apply this same philosophy to officiating? Hopefully we all want to be the best possible official that we can be. Remember that feeling you had when you first stepped on deck as a newly certified official? Chances are that as you've gained experience you've also gained a more nuanced understanding of the rules and a more thorough understanding of rules interpretations. Stroke & Turn officials learn to see more, Starters learn patience and the ability to steady a jumpy heat, and Referees learn how to manage multiple tasks while keeping a meet moving forward.

Evaluation for national certification can serve two purposes in this context. First, it can serve as an external validation of your skill set. Most everyone has individual strengths and weaknesses and the same holds true in officiating. Being evaluated against defined criteria allows you to find out where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Maybe you have superb command of the rules but don't recognize the fact that you lose focus on swimmers within your jurisdiction once your hand has been raised for a disqualification. Maybe you have excellent positioning on the end of the deck but are frequently out of position when walking the sides. Receiving feedback from an evaluator in these cases should help you focus on those areas in which you need improvement, which in turn should help you to raise the level of officiating that you can provide.

This brings us to the second purpose that evaluation should serve and that is mentorship. National evaluation is not meant to just provide you with a scorecard of what you should work on for

next time, but rather when done right, should provide you with real time suggestions on how to improve your officiating skills. Drawing from the previous example, if you're coached on how to walk the sides when it becomes evident that this is an area of weakness, then you'll be walking the sides correctly for the remainder of the meet and into the future.

Looked at in yet another context, obtaining national certification is similar to obtaining higher levels of certification in our professions. How many of you have progressed in your professional life from Level I to Level II to Level III certification, or from Programmer I to Programmer II, or something similar? No one questions these professional progression levels. Should officiating be any different?

Many, if not most, also tend to view progression in officiating as progressing from Stroke & Turn Judge certification to Starter certification to Referee certification, but this need not be the case. An equally valid progression is to progress from LSC-level certification through N3 certification at Stroke & Turn and to never aspire to Starter or Referee certification. While most individuals certified as N3 Stroke and Turn Judges will never work a national championship level meet, doesn't it say something about your level of expertise and professionalism that you've been judged as having the knowledge and skills need to work at that level? How many volunteers in any sport can say that? (*Apologies to our dry deck officials who do not have a national certification program, but the same holds true with the LSC progressions that we have created for Timing Equipment Operator, Timing Judge, and Recorder.*)

The higher we set the bar, the more knowledge we bring to officiating, and stronger our skill sets, the better will be the level of officiating that we provide to all our athletes. National caliber officials don't just benefit national caliber athletes, they benefit swimmers of all abilities.

Swimposium is Coming - Save the Date

The Officials Swimposium will be held in Richmond on 4 October 2008. This year we will have two national level facilitators provided by USA Swimming. Once we've confirmed who is coming we'll let you know, but the Swimposium promises to be an informative one.

Recruiting Officials

In the last newsletter we mentioned the ongoing need for recruiting new officials and suggested that summer swim leagues are a natural place to conduct the search. Now that you've found one or two individuals, what do you do next?

One key to effective volunteer recruitment is follow-up. Once you've set the hook you need to reel them in! Here's a few ideas-

- Give them a copy (or provide a link) of the VSI Officials handbook.
- Let them know of available officials clinics when they are scheduled.
- Follow-up to make sure they attend a clinic.
- Follow-up after the clinic to see if they have any questions.
- Introduce them to their Club Officials Chair.
- Find out what meets they will be attending and help them get signed up for training.
- Attend the meets with them and introduce them to other officials.
- Continue to encourage and mentor them.

Recruitment and Retention of Officials Challenge

The recruitment and retention of officials is an ongoing effort and to a large degree reflects the fact that most individuals volunteer only when they have active swimmers in the sport. Our ability recruit individuals early and retain them for longer periods of time contributes to our ability to maintain a large pool of qualified officials.

We're always looking for new suggestions on how to improve the recruitment and retention of officials. If you've got ideas we want to hear from you. Please contact Kevin Hogan or your district co-chairs (contact information is below).

Questions?

Do you have a question about officiating or a tip you'd like to share? Is there a rule that you'd like to have clarified? Is there something that you'd like to see the Officials Committee do? Do you have a suggestion for a future item in this newsletter?

If so, please send your questions/comments to Kevin Hogan (Chair, VSI Officials Committee, swim@embarqmail.com) .

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