



Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Officials

The mission of the Disability Swimming Committee is the full inclusion of swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming programs

Swimmers with a disability participate at all levels of the USA Swimming program, creating new challenges and opportunities for officials. Officials are encouraged to help USA Swimming in providing fair competitions for these swimmers. All it takes is some common sense and flexibility.

What Constitutes a Disability?

The USA Swimming rules permit disability accommodations and rule exceptions for swimmers who have “a permanent physical or cognitive impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” The athlete (or the athlete’s coach) is responsible for notifying the Referee, prior to the competition, of the swimmer’s disability and of the requested modification. Special accommodations are often appropriate for swimmers who are deaf and hard of hearing; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.

Swimmers with temporary injuries or minor impairments do not qualify for special considerations. For example, accommodations to the technical rules usually are inappropriate for swimmers with musculo-skeletal injuries such as tendonitis and broken bones, or individual differences to range of motion in the shoulder, knee, or ankle that make it impossible or difficult for the swimmer to perform a legal breaststroke or butterfly. These swimmers might be advised to avoid competing in strokes that they cannot perform legally, much as a short person might be advised to choose a sport other than basketball.

In most cases, rule-related disability accommodations are also unnecessary for swimmers with health impairments such as asthma, cystic fibrosis, or transplants. Although swimmers with health impairments might have permanent conditions that affect some major life activities, most of these swimmers have the capability to perform the strokes legally. They might need to choose event distances that match their stamina and capabilities, but they should be expected to follow the technical rules in those events.

Disability Accommodations and Rule Exceptions

If a swimmer satisfies the criteria for disability under Article 105 in the rulebook, the Referee should consider the request for accommodations or rule modifications. Make accommodations only when there is a genuine need – when the swimmer’s

disability prevents him/her from complying with meet procedures or from physically performing a start, stroke, turn or finish according to the rules.

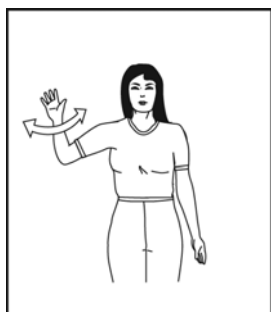
The accommodations that the Referee considers should be appropriate for the *individual* swimmer. The Referee should instruct the Stroke & Turn officials as to the accommodations to be made for the swimmer. Article 105 and the suggestions which follow can be used as guidelines; however, be prepared to use common sense when you face unique situations – it is impossible to legislate solutions for all of the possible permutations of ability and disability that officials might encounter at meets.

Remember that the purpose of disability accommodations and rule exceptions is to provide fair conditions for competition, not to relax standards for performance. Swimmers with a disability should be officiated according to the technical rules. Officials should not be afraid to make calls.

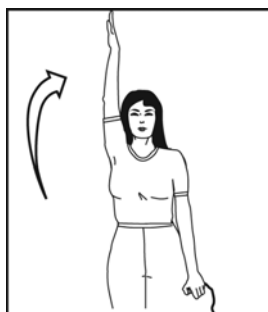
Swimmers who are Deaf

Personal Assistants. Some deaf swimmers may ask to have an interpreter (personal assistant) with them on the deck so that they have access to announcements and verbal directions from officials.

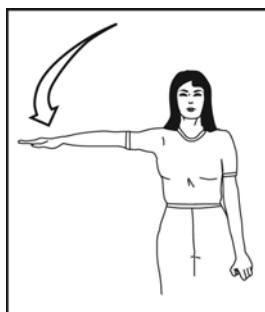
Start. Unless requested otherwise by the swimmer, the starter should use the hand signals described in Article 105. The strobe light should be placed where the athlete can see it, and the starter should stand where the deaf swimmer can see him/her. The Referee may reassign lanes within the swimmer's heat so that the strobe light or the arm signals by the Starter can be more readily seen by the swimmer.



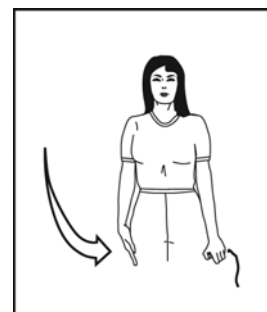
1. Twist hand at chin level: short whistle



2. Arm overhead: swimmer steps onto starting block



3. Arm moves to shoulder level: signal to "take your mark"



4. Arm moves to side of body: starting signal

Stroke, Turns, & Finish. Rule exceptions are unnecessary.

Communication:

- In distance freestyle races, a visual cue may be substituted for the bell signal.
- Important announcements should be communicated in writing or through an interpreter.

- Disqualifications should be conveyed to the swimmer with help from the coach or interpreter. Providing a copy of the DQ slip might be an effective means of making certain the swimmer understands the violation.
- A non-auditory recall signal is needed for swimmers who are deaf.

Swimmers who are Blind

Personal Assistants. Some swimmers who are blind need assistance from another person to locate and step onto the starting block. Blind swimmers may also require personal assistants who use a soft-tipped long pole to tap the swimmer's body as notification of an impending turn or finish.

Start:

- Swimmers might need assistance and a little extra time in getting set and oriented at the block.
- Blind swimmers sometimes surface in the wrong lane after the start and should be directed by the tapper to return to the correct lane.

Stroke. Swimmers are expected to perform strokes and turns legally.

Turns & Finish:

- Swimmers might need tappers (the athlete must provide the tapping device and the personnel) at the turns and finish.
- Blind swimmers sometimes surface in the wrong lane after the turn and should be directed by the tapper to return to the correct lane.

Communication:

- An auditory signal may be substituted for lap counters.
- A blind relay swimmer may receive an auditory command or tap on the leg as a signal to start.

Swimmers with Cognitive Disabilities

Personal Assistants. A personal assistant or buddy may help the swimmer with on-deck procedures and to facilitate communication with other swimmers, coaches, officials, and meet workers.

Start. A little patience while the swimmer reacts to whistles and commands might be needed. Starters should be prepared for unorthodox starts, such as not bending down when the "take your mark" command is given and/or slow reaction times.

Stroke, Turns, & Finish. Swimmers with cognitive disabilities must perform all starts, strokes, turns, and finishes in accordance with the technical rules.

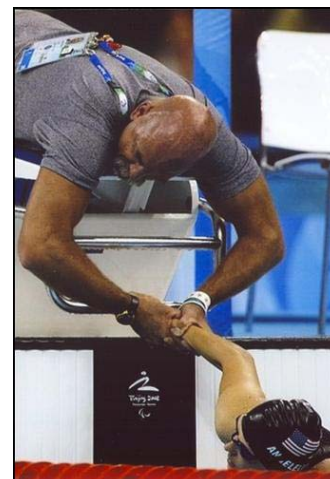
Communication. Officials should use vocabulary that the athlete can understand when explaining a disqualification.

Swimmers with Physical Disabilities

Personal Assistants. Athletes might need help from a personal assistant with tasks such as personal care, entry and exit from the water, and moving any prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs, or other mobility equipment from the start end of the pool to the finish end.

Start:

- It might be necessary to have someone holding the swimmer steady on the block or in the water. This person must not provide any propulsive movement to the swimmer.
- Swimmers who start in the water may have help from a personal assistant who holds the swimmer's wrists or feet until the starting signal is given. Swimmers doing a forward start must be facing the course, and swimmers doing a backstroke start must face away from the course.
- A towel on the starting block or a mat on the deck should be permitted.
- Gripping the block or gutter with two hands on the backstroke start should be modified for swimmers with only one arm or hand or with one arm much shorter than the other.



Stroke. Common-sense adjustments to the stroke rules are often necessary.

- If the athlete has no leg function, the breaststroke cycle obviously will not include a kick; however, if the swimmer uses his/ her legs, then the kick and stroke cycle must be judged in accordance with the technical rules.
- No swimmer, including those who have physical disabilities, may wear or use any device or substance to help his/her speed, pace, or buoyancy during a race (Article 102.10.10).
- All judgments should be made based on the actual rule, not the swimmer's technique. The goal is to officiate the ability the swimmer has.
- Swimmers with severe physical disabilities are eligible to compete in the 150 yard/meter individual medley in some disability-specific meets and may need

qualifying times for entry into those meets. The order of strokes is backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle.

Turns & Finish:

- An athlete with only one arm/hand cannot do a two handed touch, but must move whatever limbs she/he has simultaneously toward the wall at the turns and finish.
- A swimmer unable to push off with his leg(s) may perform one asymmetrical stroke to attain the on-the-breast position in breaststroke and butterfly.
- In relays, the swimmer may stay in the lane until the last swimmer has completed the race, as long as he/she does not interfere with the other swimmers or timing.

Communication. It is polite to sit or kneel when speaking to a wheelchair user or someone of short stature so that the swimmer doesn't need to look up to see you.

Hints for Officials

- Be aware of the types of rule exceptions or accommodations that may be considered per Article 105 and LSC policies (Article 202.2.13).
- Apply common sense when determining whether to uphold or overrule disqualifications called by deck officials.
- Be aware that swimmers with a disability sometimes need a personal assistant(s) on the deck. It is perfectly reasonable to allow this. Personal assistants: (a) are not required to be members of USA Swimming; (b) do not have the benefit of USA Swimming general liability or excess accident insurance unless they are members of USA Swimming; (c) may not coach unless registered as coach members; and (d) must not interfere with meet operations.
- Be aware of the hazard that prosthetic devices, wheelchairs, or other mobility equipment can pose when left at the start. It is wise to make certain that someone moves them out of the way during the race. Personal equipment should be returned to the swimmer at the end of the race.
- Be cognizant that swimmers might need official times for the 50's in strokes and the 150 I.M. for entry into disability-specific competitions.
- Ignore any and all references to classification. Ability/disability classifications are a means of leveling the playing field at disability-specific meets, but have no relevance at LSC competitions.
- Recognize that there will be times when officials will need to educate athletes, coaches, or parents who are not familiar with Article 105 or meet procedures. Facilitate the goal of inclusion by using a friendly, educational approach.

- Review the brochure for meet and safety directors on inclusion of swimmers with a disability.

Remember ...

- There is no substitute for common sense!
- Pay attention to the individual – do not over-generalize.
- Know Article 105!

Resources

Article 105 of the *USA Swimming Rulebook*.

Article 105 Case Studies: Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities at USA Swimming Competitions. Document posted on the disability swimming page of the USA Swimming web site.