

Lap Swimming Etiquette 101 - Overview

(aka, "Don't Be a Fool at the Pool")

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The 'LSE-101'

Curriculum:

Pool Etiquette Overview

General Awareness

Entering the Pool

Passing & Being Passed

Common Sense

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Experienced drivers know that roads are safer and more efficient when everyone observes a few common courtesies and basic rules. Such things are even more important when there are no explicit signs or signals to tell everyone what to do, and when law enforcement can't be omnipresent to actively manage every traffic situation.

So too in the pool when swimming laps. Just few shared conventions - observed by everyone - can go a long way towards making lap swimming safer, more pleasant, and more efficient for all.

For pool managers, these conventions can significantly increase the capacity and safety of their facilities, and reduce costly 'churn' among members seeking an orderly swimming environment. High-level conventions include:

- **Staying constantly aware** of other swimmers' presence,
- **Explicitly informing** other swimmers of your intentions,
- **Knowing common lap-swimming etiquette,** and
- **Applying common sense** at all times

This collection of pages outlines a set of standard, well-accepted principles distilled from years of competitive and recreational lap swimming by myself and many others at dozens of pools around the world. It is informed by having swum at some *highly efficient pools* where as many as six people in a 25-yard lane were able to get a relatively pleasant and uninterrupted workout, as well as some *downright dangerous pools* where even a single swimmer alone in a lane was at risk from the actions of impolite, uninformed, erratic, and even, (in one case), *drunk (!)* swimmers competing for space.

Lap Swimming Etiquette 101 - General Awareness

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Swimmers should observe and respect the pace and workout routines of other swimmers in their lane - especially when circle swimming - avoiding actions that are likely to interfere with those routines. Examples include:

- 1) **Slower swimmers starting a set** should wait to push off the wall until faster swimmers have passed (i.e. don't push off right in front of a faster swimmer who's coming into the wall about to turn, as this blocks the faster swimmer). Slower swimmers should push off almost immediately behind a faster individual or group, thus extending the time until they are lapped again and need to stop.
- 2) **Faster swimmers starting a set** should give slower swimmers as much "running room" as possible before pushing off, (rather than jumping right behind and immediately tapping their toes to move over.)
- 3) **Allow swimmers doing faster strokes to go ahead.** For example, those swimmers doing breaststroke, stroke drills, or a using a kickboard should stay aware of the likely need to give way to swimmers doing freestyle - usually a faster stroke.
- 4) **Try to select or negotiate workout routines complementary to others in the lane.** For example, a set of short backstroke sprints may be difficult to weave in with others who are already doing a long, steady freestyle set without interfering with each other.
- 5) **Swimmers resting or otherwise waiting at the wall** should stay far to one side of the lane, (preferably at the left from the perspective of an approaching swimmer, or the right from their own perspective looking back up the pool). Resting swimmers should specifically avoid standing or floating in the middle of the lane as this interferes with swimmers "swimming through" who need to tag or flip at the wall. If the lane is crowded, other swimmers may need to rest out away from the wall along either side of the lane.
- 6) **When circle swimming, swimmers should never stop in the middle of a length** (e.g., to adjust goggles), as this may cause a trailing swimmer to run into them. Unless one is swimming in 'split' format or alone, it's best to continue to the wall and stop there. If the loss of a contact lens is at stake, it's easy enough to close one or both eyes for a few strokes and swim by 'feel' to the wall.

If the pool is busy (i.e., three or more people in most lanes), those swimming in lanes by themselves or with one other person may want to *continue circle swimming* even after a third swimmer leaves their lane (since others will likely join the lane again soon, requiring a switch back to circle swimming anyway.)

A swimmer entering an open lane, or joining one person in a lane that's designated differently from their expected pace (i.e. a faster swimmer in a "Slow" lane, or slower swimmer in a "Fast" lane), should stay aware of arriving swimmers, and *be prepared to move to a more appropriate lane* if/when other swimmers join them. That is, the lane speed designation takes precedence over the pace of incumbent swimmers who

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Swimmers arriving at a pool should do three things before getting in the water:

- 1) Make note of "Fast, Medium, and Slow" lane designations. If such signs aren't obvious at your pool, ask a lifeguard.
- 2) Spend a few minutes observing and roughly timing the per-lap pace of swimmers already in the pool.
- 3) Select a lane containing swimmers moving as closely as possible to the pace that one *realistically* expects to swim *throughout* his or her entire workout.

It is the responsibility of the swimmer entering a lane to *inform all incumbent swimmers* in that lane of their desire to change format (i.e. from 'split' to 'circle' swimming *or vice versa*). Be patient, as this may take a few minutes.

A swimmer entering a lane being 'split' by two people (each swimming up/back on their own side) should be sure *before* s/he begins to swim that s/he alerts *both* individuals to the need to change to a 'circle' format (everyone swimming counterclockwise* on the right side of the lane). This is most commonly done by sitting at/on the edge of the pool, waving a kickboard under water, or standing in the water in the *corner* of the lane.

When entering a lane with only one swimmer, the arriving swimmer should still notify that swimmer of his/her presence before starting to swim, and explicitly agree with him/her on which format to use (circle or split).

Entering swimmers should allow incumbents a few laps before expecting them to stop. Incumbent swimmers have an *initial* right-of-way, but not a right to 'own' the lane indefinitely or to insist on their own idiosyncratic rules.

***Note:** in Commonwealth countries such the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc., the 'circle' convention is often (but not always) reversed, i.e. swimmers stay to the *left* of the lane and swim *clockwise*, or 'anticlockwise' - as is true of automobile traffic and rotaries/roundabouts in those nations. For foreign drivers and swimmers, this can take some getting used-to! Adding to the variety (and making it all that more important to *observe* before starting to swim), many pools in the UK, alternate clockwise and 'anticlockwise' lanes, so that swimmers in adjacent lanes are always swimming parallel to one another rather than in opposite directions. This has the benefit of reducing the number of smashed hands, punches to the eye, and dislocated shoulders that can occur in collisions between oncoming swimmers whose wrists have the misfortune to lock together at the top of their opposing strokes.

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When passing...

An overtaking swimmer should gently but distinctly touch the feet of the swimmer being overtaken. It may take two or three touches, but overtaking swimmers should not need to repeatedly slap or grab at the legs of a slower swimmer to politely make their presence known.

Swimmers enjoying a draft behind a strong lead swimmer, but who are just barely able to hold that pace should think twice before tagging the leader's toes and requesting to move ahead. In such situations, it's highly unlikely that the (formerly) trailing swimmer will be able to hold the same pace for very long when leading without the draft. This can lead to repeated "leap-frogging" and unnecessary contact, which can be annoying and disruptive for everyone in the lane.

Drafting swimmers not wishing to pass should swim far enough back from a lead swimmer that they don't inadvertently touch the lead swimmer's toes.

Overtaking swimmers should not attempt to swim 'wide' past a slower swimmer—unless they are the only two swimmers in the lane—since in most cases this presents a hazard to other oncoming swimmer(s), forcing them to pull over to get out of the way.

In the rare case that a passing swimmer does swim wide, s/he should be confident in his/her ability to sprint into the field of vision of the lead swimmer well before s/he gets to the wall. Otherwise, this sets up for a collision at the wall as both swimmers attempt to turn on top of one another. In the case of any ambiguity at the wall, the swimmer whose head is behind should give way to the swimmer whose head is in front.

In the equally rare case that a strong swimmer finds him or herself at the back of a line of several slower swimmers in circle format, it is acceptable (after looking carefully) to move to the other side of the lane mid-length and proceed in the opposite direction, somewhat ahead of the line s/he had been trailing. This should only be done in cases where the lane is relatively crowded, where there are no other lanes moving at a more suitable pace, and where the process of tapping several swimmers in succession would be overly disruptive. For anal-retentive swimmers fond of keeping detailed training logs, this move has the unfortunate disadvantage of completely messing up one's lap counts by introducing fractions. :)

When being passed...

A lead swimmer who feels a touch on the feet from an overtaking swimmer, should *continue to the next wall, then stop in the corner of the lane* to let faster swimmer(s) past. A single light touch may be accidental and can be ignored, but two or more distinct touches should be regarded almost universally as a request to swim through.

A swimmer who has been touched on the feet should move to a corner of the lane as soon as they get to the next wall in order to make way for passing swimmers turning there. It's best if the touched/stopping swimmer moves immediately to the *far left corner* (from the perspective of an approaching swimmer), which would be the

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All swimmers should...

Keep toenails and fingernails closely trimmed and not wear a watch or protruding jewelry. These items can easily scratch other swimmers in a busy pool. Don't believe it? I'm not the only one who can show you scars to prove it. Those needing to know their splits should look at the pace clock. Those worried about the possible theft of valuable jewelry from pool lockers should leave those items at home - or pick a safer pool.

Be aware of how 'wide' stroke mechanics may impact adjacent swimmers. Some peoples' wild backstroke and butterfly arm strokes can hit swimmers in other lanes, as can an over-wide breaststroke kick.

Carefully check for the position and speed of other swimmers before diving or jumping into a lane, or entering a lane from the side (i.e. under water). At many pools, diving is absolutely prohibited, as is any crossing of active lap lanes for any reason - safety precautions that are difficult to disagree with. People routinely over-estimate their ability to see and gauge the depth and speed of objects in the water, as well as the ability of swimmers to see them. One of the most dangerous places for a lap swimmer is immediately after a flip turn, when other uninformed swimmers may assume the path is clear for them to jump in or cross the lane. In reality, this is the point when the lap swimmer is moving fastest (having just pushed off the wall), and has the least visibility of any time during his/her lap.

Don't 'water-run' or 'aqua-jog' in lap lanes—unless the pool is nearly empty. While both activities are valid forms of exercise that need to be respected and provisioned-for, they are inappropriate for lap lanes. Aqua-jogging in a lap lane effectively reduces the capacity of that lane to just two individuals (one swimming up and down one side, and one aqua-jogging on the other). This is an extremely poor use of scarce pool "real-estate". At least half a dozen aqua-joggers could easily be accommodated in a single, special lane designated for that purpose, (twice that in a 50M pool, or one with an extended deep end).

Respect the 'toys' of other swimmers. This should be self-explanatory to anyone who received a passing grade in kindergarten, but unfortunately it bears repeating with some adults. Simply put, no swimmer should ever swipe kickboards, fins, hand paddles, pull buoys or other 'devices' positioned at the end of a lap lane unless they first obtain the explicit permission of the person who brought it over to the side of the pool. (Whether the device is pool property or private property is absolutely irrelevant in this case). Just because another swimmer isn't doing something with that device at the moment doesn't mean that s/he doesn't have plans to incorporate it into his/her workout in just a few minutes - or seconds. "Borrowing" something may force a fellow swimmer to interrupt his or her routine, get out of the pool to find a replacement, and in the process lose their position in that lane. As a tactic to win better position lane position for oneself, this kind of behavior is juvenile and underhanded in the extreme.