



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

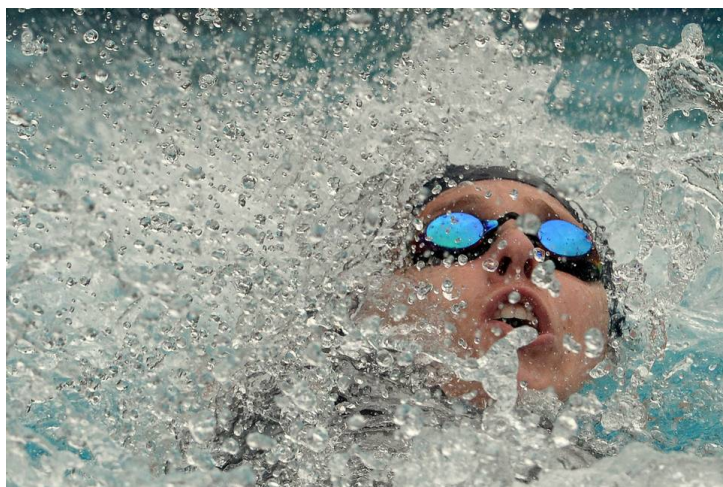
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-race-between-high-school-and-club-swimming-1432053345>

LIFE | SPORTS

Does High-School Swimming Matter?

As California finally holds a statewide high-school swim meet, elite swimmers face a dilemma: whether to compete for their school or focus on bigger things



Abbey Weitzeil, seen here in a 200-yard medley relay last weekend, is among the handful of elite California swimmers who are passing on this weekend's state swim meet. *PHOTO: KEITH BIRMINGHAM/PASADENA STAR-NEWS/ZUMA PRESS*

By **FREDERICK DREIER**

May 19, 2015 12:35 p.m. ET

California is to high-school swimming as Texas is to high-school football. The Golden State is the sport's scholastic epicenter.

Northern California produced Mark Spitz, Summer Sanders and Matt Biondi, Olympic champions all. Southern California gave us Janet Evans, Amanda Beard and Aaron Peirsol, among others.

But until now, the two sides of the state never battled it out. There was no such thing as a California statewide swim meet.

MORE ON SWIMMING

- Adult Swim: Olympic-Level Coaches at the Hotel Pool (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/adult-swim-olympic-level-coaches-at-the-hotel-pool-1431987571>)

“In my day you never knew how you stacked up against a lot of those guys from Southern California,” said Spitz, a nine-time Olympic champion and 1968 graduate of Santa Clara High School. “There was no way to know who was really great.”

This weekend, the California Interscholastic Federation will hold its inaugural boys and girls swimming and diving state championships in Fresno. “I can’t imagine another state meet having the caliber and quality of swimmers as California,” said CIF executive director Roger Blake. California previously held 10 regional contests because of its tangle of incongruent school calendars.

Find your new home now ...

But while the state is beating its chest about the powerhouse new event, the swimmers themselves aren’t all thrilled.

The state championship meet has created a dilemma for California’s high-school swimmers who are also aspiring Olympians. The meet falls during a crucial training period for summertime club swimming meets, such as the junior national championships in San Antonio in July, as well as international events in Russia, Australia and Canada. All are steppingstone meets for the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

“If I want to really train for [Olympic] trials seriously, I’m going to have miss it,” said Aidan Burns, a senior at Bellarmine Preparatory High School and a member of the U.S. Junior National team.

The situation highlights a long-standing rift in the swimming world between club and high-school teams. Club swimming spans the entire year, while

‘It’s a hobby; it’s not serious.’

—Coley Stickels of the Canyons Aquatic Club on high-school swimming

high-school swimming is relegated to just a part of it. Club swim meets are often held in Olympic-size 50-meter pools. High-school meets are held in shorter 25-yard pools, which means that finishing times can’t qualify a swimmer for Olympic trials or other high-level meets.

And while high-school teams often allow casual swimmers to join, club teams generally attract more serious athletes.

“I’m not a huge fan of high-school swimming, and I get tons of backlash because of it,” said Coley Stickels, who oversees the Canyons Aquatic Club in the Los Angeles area. “It’s a hobby; it’s not serious.”



Another top swimmer who won't compete at the state meet is Grant Shoults, right, of Santa Margarita High School. PHOTO: KEITH BIRMINGHAM/PASADENA STAR-NEWS/ZUMA PRESS

Top-level swimmers plan their annual training schedules around a handful of peak competitions. A swimmer may spend several months preparing for a single meet with weeks of endurance-building volume, followed by subsequent periods of strength workouts and lung-bursting sprint intervals.

Like marathon runners, swimmers then taper their workload in the weeks before a peak meet. The goal is to arrive with rested, strong muscles. After the competition, the monthslong training process starts anew.

A swimmer peaking for the California state meet faces a short turnaround time for summertime club competitions. Next year, the scheduling is worse. The 2016

U.S. Olympic Trials will be held in June, leaving no window for a full taper.

“I understand that it would be cool to be the California state champion,” said John Bitter, coach of the Santa Clara Swim Club and vice president of development for USA Swimming. “When it comes to Olympic sports, sometimes [athletes] need to choose the path that gives them the best opportunity to be successful.”

A handful of the state’s fastest teenagers, including Burns, have decided to skip the state meet. Saugus High School senior Abbey Weitzeil, the current American junior record holder in the 50- and 100-yard freestyle, will take a pass, said Stickels, her club coach. Cole Cogswell, the 2014 100 freestyle champion at the Southern Sectional Championship meet, will also sit out, Stickels said. According to Mission Viejo Nadadores club team coach Bill Rose, five of his best high-school swimmers will pass, including Grant Shoults of Santa Margarita High School.

Blake said that the CIF wouldn’t change the meet’s schedule to attract the faster swimmers, and expressed confidence that the meet would eventually gain greater prominence.

“Kids will always want to compete alongside their friends,” Blake said. “They want to say, ‘I was state champion.’ ”

Michael Phelps famously bypassed high-school swimming to compete for his club team, North Baltimore Aquatics, but other Olympians have chosen to compete for both club and high school. The choice requires a balancing act of obligations.

‘Some of my best memories are from high-school swimming.’

—Olympic champion Janet Evans

“I never
rested for
[high-
school
sectional

championships] but I still took it very seriously,” said Beard, a two-time Olympic champion who attended Irvine High School. “It was the only chance my friends got to see me race.”

Beard and Evans said they were glad that they competed in high school and attended the regional championship meets. High-school swimming exposed them to greater social opportunities, they said, and provided a break from the pressures of competing at national and international events. An Olympian at

just 14 years old, Beard said she fondly remembers high-school swimming parties, where she socialized with “regular kids” who weren’t training for the Olympics.

“You need to have a balance so these kids don’t get burned out by the pressure to make the Olympics,” Evans said. “Some of my best memories are from high-school swimming.”

The departure of some of California’s fastest high school swimmers from the state meet also could allow other athletes to win. Liam McCloskey, a senior at La Costa Canyon High School just north of San Diego, said he is tapering specifically for the state meet. Even if the fastest kids aren’t there, McCloskey said, a top result would bring bragging rights.

“There’s something about swimming for your school—you get to represent where you come from,” McCloskey said. “I just want to go fast.”

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.