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FITNESS

USA Swimming Flips for Multisport Youth Athletes

Fighting declining numbers, the swimming governing body offers more flexible options for children who want to do other sports

By Hilary Potkewitz

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Watching his teenagers compete in a championship swim meet in early June, Polo Trejo was surprised to see USA Swimming ads on large-screen TVs showing kids doing other sports.

The video clips of young swimmers playing baseball, soccer, lacrosse and track-and-field and marching in the school band caught Mr. Trejo's attention because most of the competitive swimmers he knows in California's Central Valley—including his daughter Alyssa, 18 years old, and son Matthew, 16—have time only to swim. Other activities fell off once they joined a year-round club swim team at age 10.



Matthew Trejo, now 16, and his sister, Alyssa, now 18, have been swimming competitively year-round since each was about 10 years old. The siblings pose during a swim meet at the University of California, Davis in 2017. PHOTO: POLO TREJO

"The tone was, if you're going to be a serious swimmer, swimming is all you can do," recalls Mr. Trejo, 45. "It was a foreign concept to me, because growing up I wrestled, I played baseball, I rode my bike—and I didn't do any of it year-round. Swimming is a different world."

His youngest, 11-year-old Amelia, didn't follow her siblings onto the club team starting blocks. She says she enjoys soccer, basketball and track too much to give them up. "She likes swimming, she just doesn't want to do it all year," Mr. Trejo says.

It's become a common refrain as more American tweens opt out of swim team. From 2013 to 2016, the number of competitive swimmers in the 10-year-old age group dropped by almost 10%, according to USA Swimming, the sport's governing body. While sports leagues nationwide are facing overall declines in youth participation, nearly half of the swimmers who quit said they left swimming to play other sports. More than 40% said swim team was too much of a time commitment.

"We know that swimming can be perceived as an all-or-nothing type of sport, and we know that today's families are busier than ever with activities," says Matt Farrell, USA Swimming's chief marketing officer. "So we were facing a choice: Do we want to fight that culture, or decide to own it?"

In early June, USA Swimming launched its new ad campaign showing young swimmers doing other sports, in a move to position itself as a home for multisport athletes and gain back some of the kids it has been losing. It is rolling out a new, entry-level membership program called FlexSwim for young swimmers ages 5-18 who want to try competitive swimming but can commit to only a few days of training a week and two swim meets a year. In contrast, traditional training for competitive swimmers often means practice every day—before school, after school or both, depending on the age group—plus swim meets many weekends.

With its new campaign, USA Swimming is choosing sides in a national debate about overspecialization in youth sports and mounting concerns over subjecting growing bodies to year-round stress on the same muscle groups.

Mr. Farrell acknowledges the campaign carries risks. "We're telling people it's OK to do other sports. We know that even within our own sport, not everyone is going to agree with that," he says. "But it's a real philosophical shift, and we think it's the best long-term view."

From its headquarters at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, USA Swimming steers the nation's competitive youth swim programs. It provides educational materials for coaches and athletes, organizes fundraising events and runs swimming competitions. It also selects the U.S. Olympic swimming team.

Nationwide, about 2,900 swim clubs belong to USA Swimming. Individuals pay an annual membership fee of \$60 and teams pay a separate club fee of about \$150 to \$200. Benefits include liability insurance coverage, subscriptions to swimming publications and access to competitions. FlexSwim has a lower membership fee of \$20 a swimmer, including the insurance and other offerings.

Kathleen Hughes, 46, of Providence, R.I., grew up as an all-or-nothing swimmer and has some regrets. "I felt I had to quit every other sport by sixth grade to focus exclusively on swimming," she says. Ms. Hughes swam for a Division I college program, but was determined that her children not specialize too early. As a pediatric nurse practitioner, she's been following research showing that focusing on just one sport from an early age can lead to overuse injuries and burnout in young children.

Ms. Hughes searched for a local swim club with the "least crazy" practice schedule and coaches that shared her philosophy. Now, her daughter Ruby, 14, swims on a year-round club team but also plays on her school's soccer, swim and lacrosse teams. Her son George, 11, swims on the year-round club team and plays club soccer and baseball. Occasionally, events overlap and they skip something.



George Groves, 11, competes at the regional USA Swimming meet in Providence. He also plays club soccer and baseball. Occasionally events overlap, and he has to skip something. PHOTO: SIMON SIMARD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“We chose our teams very carefully and have made swimming work for us,” Ms. Hughes says.

Next season George will advance to a higher-level soccer team with a more demanding schedule, and Ms. Hughes isn’t sure how the family’s juggling act will go.



George’s mother, Kathleen Hughes, grew up as an all-or-nothing swimmer and was determined that her kids not specialize too early. ‘I felt I had to quit every other sport by sixth grade to focus exclusively on swimming,’ she says. PHOTO: SIMON SIMARD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“I actually think swimming is the one sport that hasn’t gotten more intense since I was a kid,” she says. “It’s soccer and baseball that will suck up your life now—they’re the ones that have really changed.”

It’s too early to tell if USA Swimming’s gambit will work, but it is drawing interest from some coaches. Brandon Stallings, 37, who recently formed a new swim club in Jonesboro, Ga., learned about the FlexSwim program last month and is considering signing his team up to join USA Swimming’s Georgia regional chapter.

Mr. Stallings, who grew up in nearby Decatur, was on his high-school swim team and played in the marching band. In his day job, he teaches piano, voice and drum lessons, but he’s spent years teaching swim classes at community pools on nights and weekends. His new team, the North Henry County Dolphins, includes 45 kids ranging in age from 4 to 14, and most, like him, are African-American.

“I’m trying to develop the love of swimming here,” Mr. Stallings says.

It hasn’t been easy. Most of the parents didn’t consider swimming “a real sport,” he says, until they saw their kids compete in their first swim meet. Most of his swimmers play other sports, including basketball, soccer, lacrosse, track and football.

“This is what I sell them on: Swimming protects the body,” Mr. Stallings says. “It may not be



Coach Brandon Stallings and members of the North Henry County Dolphins, a newly formed swim team, at practice in Jonesboro, Ga., in June. PHOTO: TERRENCE BOWEN

your first sport, but it can propel you to be better at your first sport.”

He says it is unlikely that his team would join USA Swimming if they had to maintain an elite club’s practice or competition schedule, considering that the families only recently agreed to increase practices to three times a week.

“They’ll get to see the progression as they gradually get better at swimming, and as swimming makes them better at their other sports,” Mr. Stallings says. “It’s a joyful thing.”

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