Dana Greene and her service dog, Goby, on deck at 2013 Spring Nationals in Indianapolis.

Laura Hamel
Leave NO Swimmer Behind

The art of accommodating disabled swimmers at meets

BY LINDA BROWN-KUHN

Dana Greene is used to attracting attention when she attends swim meets, though the notoriety isn’t usually focused on her, but rather on Goby, her 6-pound Chihuahua sidekick. Goby’s job is to protect Greene from anything latex; Greene is severely allergic to the material. Goby knows how to dial 911 on his own iPhone and he can, and has, swum to Greene with an epinephrine pen in his mouth.

Although many of us may not know someone with such an extreme allergy to latex, it is one of a number of disabilities that Masters swimmers face that may require some accommodation so that they can swim in a meet. (Just think of all the latex caps other swimmers are wearing and handling during an average meet.) For 45-year-old Greene to be able to safely swim with the Raleigh Area Masters and to compete in 15 to 20 meets a year, her accommodation is her service dog Goby. “I literally credit him with giving me my life back,” Greene says.

Although the range of disabilities that might require modifications is quite diverse, Masters Swimming sees its share of age-related disabilities, namely hearing impairment, vision problems, balance issues, and lack of mobility. In the USMS Rule Book, article 108 outlines guidelines for officiating swimmers with a disability in a USMS meet. In that article, the term disability is defined as “a permanent physical or cognitive disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities.”

Article 108, which gives meet referees the authority to modify rules for the disabled swimmer, has been in place since 1997. A similar rule first appeared in the 1985 United States Swimming rule book; at that time Masters rules were in that rule book.
Although meet referees have the latitude to grant modifications, they cannot allow anything that aids speed or buoyancy. That means fins, webbed gloves, snorkels, and neoprene caps are out, as well as any other item that could give an unfair advantage.

**Modifying the Meet Experience**

**Article 108 lays out** several changes a meet referee can permit, beginning with a swimmer's starting position. Swimmers can start on the blocks in a kneeling position, on the deck, or in the water (with or without assistance). For in-water starts, if a swimmer can't use a hand or foot to keep contact with the wall, another body part can be used. And after a start or turn, a swimmer who cannot push off with his or her legs is allowed one asymmetrical stroke to reach a prone position in the breaststroke and butterfly.

The standard rules also allow for Masters swimmers to do backstroke starts for freestyle events. "We have swimmers with shoulder issues, and for them to hang on to the wall and have a foot on the wall and face forward may be too hard on their shoulders, so we don't care what direction they face," says Kathy Casey, chair of the Rules Committee.

Swimmers can request a change in lane assignment, most often to an outside lane so they are closer to a ladder for easier egress. In Jennifer Lauren Smith's case, she asks for a middle lane. Deaf since childhood, this 34-year-old Sarasota Y Sharks Masters swimmer relies on hand signals from the starter and strobe lights to start. "I think that being in lane three is actually the best because I'm close enough to see the light without craning my neck in a strange way."

Indeed, visual starting signals in the rule book for deaf and hard-of-hearing swimmers includes a strobe light and a starter's arm signals for both the forward and backstroke starts. Starting systems use a horn and strobe light combination to start swimmers. Some high-tech blocks like those used at many major meets at the Greensboro Aquatic Center in Greensboro, N.C., have strobe lights that run along the front and back edge of each block. "These are very helpful for people because you can see the strobe as you lean down when you're holding yourself on the block," says Don Gilchrist, co-meet director of the 2012 USMS Spring National Championship meet held at the Greensboro Aquatic Center in Greensboro, N.C.

Some deaf or hearing-impaired swimmers like the hand signals, others prefer the strobe light, and some just watch for the field to go. "I rely on those hand signals more than anything," says Lauren Smith. "The light is great, but there are times when it has malfunctioned, so I always rely on human back-up."

In addition to alternative means of starting a race, deaf swimmers can request that a personal assistant interpret for them on deck. Disabled swimmers can also receive help from an assistant with maneuvering a prosthetic limb, a wheelchair, or other mobility equipment.

Assistants can help aid communication with a swimmer with a cognitive disability or help direct a blind or visually impaired swimmer. Casey recalls a blind swimmer who competed into his 100s and came to meets with his daughter. She would guide him around and help him get onto the blocks.

Personal assistants for blind swimmers may also help tappers (long poles with tennis balls on the end) to tap the swimmers on the head so they know when to turn at the wall. Similarly, a blind swimmer who is not the leadoff swimmer in a relay will need to be touched to signal when the preceding teammate has finished and the relay exchange should be made.

**Finishing Touches**

Swimmers with physical disabilities are judged for their finishes, turns, strokes, and kicks based on the body parts they have and can use. For example, if a breaststroker has one leg that is shorter than the other, her stroke may not be symmetrical. But if her legs move in unison, her stroke would comply with the rules. Likewise, for a person with arms of unequal length, only the longer arm must touch the wall for a legal finish but both arms must simultaneously reach for the wall. Those without arms or those whose upper limbs cannot reach above the head may touch the wall with any part of the upper body. Swimmers with no leg function when swimming butterfly are allowed to take a partial stroke with the arm(s) recovering under the water to touch the wall for a turn or finish.

**Officially Speaking**

**The aim of these rules** and guidelines is inclusion. "We are all about including swimmers with disabilities—anyone—within our regular rules," Casey says. The critical job of putting these rules and guidelines into practice falls to the meet officials.

Right now, USMS does not yet have a certification process to train officials and instead relies on USA Swimming, the YMCA, the NCAA, or the National Federation of State High School Associations to certify officials. "Each of those organizations has extensive certification training processes," says Ed Saltzman, USMS Officials Committee chair. He explains that USA Swimming certification starts with a clinic where all the rules and protocols are covered. Participants must pass a test and then apprentice at a certain number of meets to become stroke and turn judges. With more experience, they can become starters and eventually meet referees.

The amount of apprenticing required varies by Local Swimming Committee. "We at USMS are attempting to start our own certification process so that we don't have to rely on these other governing bodies in the future," he says.

So how are officials faring when it comes to accommodating swimmers with disabilities at meets? Saltzman says, "As far as I can tell, at Nationals we're doing great. At local meets, it varies between Local Masters..."
Swimming Committees and from official to official how they operate the meet, how inclusive they are, and how disability-swimmer friendly they are."

Lauren Smith rates her contact with officials highly. "They really have gone out of their way," she says. "In fact at the Pan-American Masters Championship last year, the meet official knew my schedule of events for the next day before I did."

**Just Ask**

*If you have a disability that will require modifications and would like to participate in a meet, all you have to do is let the officials know before the meet starts. Acting ahead of time gives officials the opportunity to prepare for your needs and, if necessary, juggle lanes before the heat sheets come out. "If you have a disability and need some assistance, let us know so we can make that experience a whole lot better for you," says Saltzman. "And it will also help us to make the meet run smoothly."

The referee is the person who you'll deal with during the meet, but the meet director may be your first point of contact, since that person is listed in the meet information. Swimmers with disabilities requesting modifications may be asked to show meet officials a doctor's note; this is not required by USMS rules, but having a note on hand can make things go more smoothly in case the referee asks for verification of the disability. "The referees as a whole are very good about allowing modifications unless it violates a specific rule that gives a swimmer an advantage in competition," Casey says.

The referee will make a decision about the modifications you have requested for that meet only. The next meet you enter, you'll have to repeat the process if you still need modifications. Part of the reason for that is that some disabilities can change over time. "I've got rheumatoid arthritis that causes balance difficulties at some times in my life but not always," says Gail Dummer, chair of Michigan Masters and Professor Emeritus of Physical Activity and Disability at Michigan State University. "The same thing is true in that hearing and vision loss can be variable."

Also, keep in mind that some actions don't require special permission. For in-water starts, you can enter the pool after the starter blows the long whistle and while the swimmers get on the blocks. Swimmers with balance issues can ask their timers if they can hold the timer's shoulder to steady themselves as they climb on the blocks.

**Changing Guidelines?**

*Article 108 sets guidelines, not mandates, because of the likelihood of unforeseen conditions or situations. Case in point. When Greene and her pint-sized protector Goby...*
arrived on the meet scene three years ago, USMS had scant experience with service dogs. So they got busy learning about all the issues. “Thanks to Dana’s contributions and to a lot of research that was done by the Championship Committee, the Sports Medicine and Science Committee, and the Rules Committee, there is now a USMS championship policy for service animals at Nationals,” Saltzman says.

For her part, Greene always contacts the meet director about Goby before she even enters a meet. And the day of the event she takes the extra step. “Once I get on the deck, I know the officials have been briefed about Goby and many of them have already met him. But in case they haven’t, I go around and introduce him to every single official,” she says. As USMS continues to grow and the range of disabilities in our midst changes and expands, new adaptations and modifications may be on the horizon. Dummer says she would like to see the visual start arm signals for deaf and hard-of-hearing swimmers used for every event at meets. “If that happened, the swimmers would learn the signals and it would benefit many swimmers who are gradually losing hearing as well as those who are totally deaf,” she says.

The bottom line for all swimmers is that when they go to a meet they want to have a good experience no matter who they are. “I think the culture of USMS is such that we’re very accommodating and we want to put on the best meets possible for all of us,” says Greensboro Aquatic Center’s Gilchrist. “We’re all there to compete, do a good job, stay in shape, and enjoy the event. And that’s what USMS is all about.”

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