

United States Masters Swimming

**Open Water  
Referee  
Training Module**

Presented by the USMS Open Water Committee

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# How to Use this Training Module

- Note the learning objectives for this training module, found on the next slide (slide 3).
- Proceed through the slide show at a comfortable pace for you.
- Meet the learning objectives—review slides as necessary.
- Then go to [http://www.usms.org/gto/gto\\_longdist](http://www.usms.org/gto/gto_longdist), download the test, take it, and submit it.
- You will be notified of your result shortly after you submit the test.

Prospective USMS Open Water Referees must successfully complete the course & test (80% correct answers) before being certified to serve as a Referee at a USMS-sanctioned open water swim.

# Referee Training Objectives

After completing this short training module, the prospective open water Referee should know & understand...

- USMS requirements & recommended procedures for running an open water event that is fair & safe for all swimmers;
- The qualifications, powers, & responsibilities of the Referee;
- The major topics about which the Referee must know;
- Best practices to help the Referee to be great; and
- What resources support the Referee, and where to find these resources.

# Part 1: The Position

In this section, the position of USMS Open Water Referee is defined in terms of ...

- Appointment;
- Qualifications;
- Powers; and
- Responsibilities.

# Event Leadership: the Big Picture

- “There shall be an Event Director, Safety Director, and Referee.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1C]
- The responsibilities of these three main positions are listed in this rule.
- A Referee cannot serve simultaneously as Safety Director. “The position of Safety Director shall not be combined with the duties of any other staff member or official.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1B]
- The positions of Event Director and Referee may be combined for smaller swims (fewer than 100 swimmers), but is not recommended for larger swims.

# Appointment of the Referee

- The Referee for an event is appointed by the Event Host, usually the Event Director.
- The Referee is approved by the USMS Open Water Compliance Officer only when certified, i.e. upon successful completion of this course & test.
- A USMS-certified Open Water Referee is required at all USMS-sanctioned open water events.

# Qualifications of the Referee

Required qualification: Referee certification through successful completion of this educational module & test

Desirable qualifications:

- Experience as an official, either pool or open water
- Experience as an open water swimmer
- Prior work with an event host or LMSC
- Basic knowledge of water safety

Main Responsibility of the Referee

**The Referee is responsible  
for the fair conduct  
of the swim!**

[USMS Rule 303.3.1C]

# Referee Responsibility #1

“The Referee shall have authority over all officials, instruct & assign officials, enforce all applicable rules, decide all questions related to the conduct of the swim, and adjudicate protests.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1C (1)]

# Officials – Who are they?

Officials—over whom the Referee has authority—usually include...

- Assistant or administrative referee
- Starter
- Turn judge(s)
- Feed station judge(s)
- Finish judge(s)
- Timers
- Other officials as needed

The Referee may perform the duties of one or more of these officials as needed in addition to Referee duties.

# Other Event Staff – Who are they?

- Other event staff—over whom the Event Director usually has authority, but which may vary—include...
  - Clerk of Course/Registration & Check-in staff
  - Recorder
  - Announcer
- Other event staff—over whom the Safety Director has authority—include all staff recruited specifically to provide safety for all participants, such as...
  - Craft operators
  - Spotters, rescuers, and first responders
  - On-shore staff such as EMTs

# Pre-swim Meeting for Officials

- Conducted by the Referee or designee
- Mandatory for all officials
- Topics should include...
  - Safety procedures for all participants, including the evacuation plan for the course & event site
  - Role of officials before, during, & after the swim
  - Communication & teamwork
  - Other pertinent information
- Set high expectations.

# Referee Responsibility #2

“The Referee shall ensure that all swimmers are briefed about safety procedures, the course, site-specific rules, and other necessary information about the conduct of the swim.”  
[USMS Rule 303.3.1C (2)]

# Pre-swim Meeting for Swimmers

- Conducted by the Referee or designee
- Mandatory for all swimmers
- Topics must include...
  - Safety procedures, including emergency evacuation of the course & event site
  - Course (start, direction, turns, finish)—use the course map
  - Site-specific or event-specific rules
  - Conditions (water & potential hazards)
  - Marshaling procedures
  - Other pertinent information

# Referee Responsibility #3

“The referee has the authority to bar, remove, or take other appropriate action with any swimmer who acts in an unsporting or unsafe manner within the swimming venue.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1C (3)]

Act privately, firmly, and kindly.

# Referee Responsibility #4

“The Referee has the authority to disqualify any swimmer violating event or USMS rules or safety procedures.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1C (4)]

Act privately, firmly, and kindly.

# Referee Responsibility #5

“The referee has the authority to modify the manner in which the swim is conducted, change the course or distance, delay the start, or stop a swim if circumstances warrant.” [USMS Rule 303.3.1C (5)]

# Modifying a Swim – “If Conditions Warrant”

- Unusual circumstances or conditions may suggest modifying the conduct of the swim or changing the course or distance. This is usually (but not always) done for safety reasons, which include unexpected cool/warm water temperatures, rough conditions, immovable hazards, or dangerous weather.
- Such a decision cannot be made lightly, as many event details may need to be re-coordinated. Therefore, the Referee must coordinate any such decision with the Event Director & Safety Director.

## Delaying the Start – “If Conditions Warrant”

- The Referee may delay the start if there is an unusual condition that appears temporary. Such conditions usually (but not always) include fog, a passing storm, or insufficient safety personnel present.
- The Referee must coordinate the decision to delay the start with the Event Director & Safety Director.

# Stopping a Swim – “If Conditions Warrant”

- The Referee may stop a swim in progress if a condition arises that is seen to be dangerous to participants. Note that the Safety Director also has this authority.
- Such conditions usually (but not always) include incoming thick fog, sudden severe weather, rough wind & water conditions, or outside craft which cannot be stopped or diverted encroaching on the course.
- Stopping a swim in progress will trigger the course evacuation plan (part of the required event safety plan), which must be explained at the pre-swim meetings for officials and for swimmers.

# Part 2: Important Topics

This section introduces several important topics. USMS Open Water Referees must be familiar with the details of these topics...

- Safety
- Swimwear
- Swimmers with Disabilities
- Individual Escorts
- Disqualification
- Incomplete swims
- Protests

# Topic #1: Safety

- Although the Safety Director's main role is to oversee event safety, the Referee also plays a key role in ensuring safety for swimmers & officials.
- Before the event each day, the Referee should inspect the course with the Safety Director, including...
  - The course, especially start & finish areas.
  - Feeding stations, if applicable.
  - Warm-up & warm-down areas.
- The Referee must address swimmer safety as the first item at the pre-swim meeting for swimmers.

# Topic #2: Swimwear

- Enforcement of USMS swimwear rules is a key role of the Open Water Referee.
- Categories are defined in USMS Rule 303.4. Also, see Summary at [http://www.usms.org/admin/lmschb/owgto\\_swimwear.pdf](http://www.usms.org/admin/lmschb/owgto_swimwear.pdf)
- USMS swimwear definitions & categories are different than those of other swimming governing bodies, although the Category I swimwear definition matches that of FINA.
- Open Water Referees must be familiar with how the categories are defined and what is permitted in each category.
- All USMS open water national championships require Category I swimwear, which excludes wetsuits and other non-conforming swimwear.
- Only USMS may grant exemptions for Category I swimwear rules for medical or religious reasons. Exemptions are granted before the day of the event through a well-defined process; exempted swimmers carry letters with explicit instructions, and must present that letter and confer with the Referee before participating in a swim.

# Topic #3: Swimmers with Disabilities

- USMS rule 303.10 & guideline OW-201.8 [found at: [http://www.usms.org/admin/lmschb/owgto\\_safety.pdf](http://www.usms.org/admin/lmschb/owgto_safety.pdf) ] define disability and govern participation of swimmers with disabilities.
- Both swimmer and Referee/Event Director have specific responsibilities before the swimmer may participate, listed in USMS Rule 303.10.3.
- The Referee may modify any rule and the Event Director may modify any swim management procedure for a swimmer who has a disability, without setting precedent for future events.
- Modifications may not give a swimmer a competitive advantage.
- The Referee must notify the Safety Director of modifications.

# Topic #4: Individual Escorts

- The rules governing swims in which an escort craft will accompany each swimmer are found in USMS Rule 303.9.
- When individual escort craft are used, managing safety becomes more complicated with many more craft than usual otherwise. The Referee & Safety Director must instruct escort craft boaters in safe procedures.
- Escort craft rules cover...
  - Assistance that swimmers may or may not receive from their craft.
  - Procedures for when escort craft become disabled.
- Drafting rules with individual escorts...
  - Swimmers may never draft from any craft under any circumstance.
  - Drafting from other swimmers is not allowed when individual escorts are required & motorized escorts are allowed.
  - Event hosts have the option to allow or prohibit drafting from other swimmers (which should appear in the entry information) when only non-motorized escorts are allowed.

# Topic #5: Disqualification

- A disqualification can only be made by the Referee, the Starter, or a Judge within whose jurisdiction the infraction has been committed. The Referee must be informed of the disqualification as soon as practical.
- The Referee should make a reasonable effort to explain the disqualification to the swimmer, in a private, firm, & kind manner.
- Disqualifying offenses are listed in USMS Rule 303.8 and in the next two slides. Every referee must know them.

# “Swimmers should be disqualified if they:

1. Or their personal escort intentionally delay the progress of another swimmer. Accidental contact, especially at the start, shall not be considered a disqualification. However, flagrant disregard of another swimmer’s rights shall result in disqualification.
2. Fail to complete the prescribed course.
3. Fail to complete the prescribed course within the preannounced time.
4. Fail to follow race rules.
5. Receive assistance by pulling, pushing, or resting on physical features on or near the course other than the bottom. Incidental contact shall not be a basis for disqualification.” Event Directors have the option of prohibiting deliberate contact.

# “Swimmers should be disqualified if they:

6. Draft in swims in which drafting is prohibited
7. Violate rules on escorted swims as described in article 303.3.3 or receive similar assistance from any craft on the course
8. Receive unauthorized assistance at the start or finish.
9. Violate swimwear rules.
10. Swim in a manner in which personal safety is jeopardized.
11. Act in an unsporting or unsafe manner within the swimming venue.”

Reference: USMS Rule 303.8.1-11

# Topic #6: Incomplete Swim

- Who can do what? [USMS Rule 303.11]
  - The Referee & Safety Director can stop a swim in progress.
  - Only the Event Director can cancel the entire event.
- If a swim is stopped, the Referee must determine if the swim is to be...
  - Restarted. With this option, the Event Director must decide if this option is feasible.
  - Considered official. With this option, the Referee must determine a fair method of providing results.

# Topic #7: Protests

- Any protest arising from a competition shall be made to the Referee within 30 minutes after the release of results.  
[USMS Rule 303.12]
- The referee will decide a fair way to resolve the protest, bringing into account all available facts and testimony. If the referee is directly involved in the issue being protested, he/she should avoid conflict of interest by recusing the resolution role in favor of the Event Director.
- If the protest is not resolved, the protester may appeal in writing within 10 days to the governing LMSC, except in national championship events, in which the protester may appeal to the USMS Long Distance Committee chair within 10 days.

# Part 3: Becoming a Great Referee

The following slides will give you information presented as a series of proven “best practices” to help you perform the job and navigate the challenges of being a great Open Water Referee.

# Best Practice #1

## **Become familiar with the event and hosts, and review the rules, well before event day:**

- Upon appointment by the Event Host, contact the Event Director and the Safety Director.
- Review the event information & safety plan well before the event date(s). The Event Host can supply both documents.
- Review the USMS open water rules, found in Part 3 of the Rule Book. Make sure that a copy of the Rule Book is at the event.
- Review this training module.
- Ensure that the plans for finish judging & timing—including back-up—are appropriate for the swim.
- Introduce/re-introduce yourself to the Event Director and Safety Director upon arrival at the event.

# Best Practice #2

## **Evaluate the course & conditions at the venue:**

- Survey the event venue & course to familiarize yourself with the site and potential safety hazards, and complete the course safety checklist with the Safety Director.
- Assist the Safety Director in correcting course safety hazards if possible or marking them corrections are not possible.
- Survey current weather conditions.
- Hint: Other than your specified duties, avoid being “underfoot” —Safety Directors are busy on race day.

# Best Practice #3

## **Meet and Train Officials:**

- Introduce yourself
- Welcome all officials warmly & thank them for serving.
- Review safety procedures, for both swimmers and the officials themselves.
- Review details of each position, individually if necessary.
- Answer questions as needed.
- Establish & check communication procedures.
- Assign officials to their positions.
- Establish a team atmosphere.
- Set high expectations for performance.

# Best Practice #4

## **Meet and orient swimmers:**

- Introduce yourself.
- Welcome all swimmers warmly & thank them for being there.
- Hold the mandatory pre-swim meeting for swimmers [see slide #14 for the required content]. Outline your instructions & comments in writing so that you don't miss any details.
- Direct the marshaling of swimmers before the start so that all swimmers are accounted for as they enter the water.
- Help line up swimmers at the starting line if necessary.

# Best Practice #5

## **Manage the swim efficiently:**

- Oversee officials & swimmers for a fair start.
- Check immediately to see that all officials are at their posts and doing what they are supposed to be doing. Gently correct if necessary.
- Watch the swimmers as you can.
- Recheck officials periodically and adjust their positioning & performance as necessary.
- Oversee officials at the finish.
- Don't even think about swimming in any swim in which you are refereeing. Your duties preclude that.

# Best Practice #6

## **Conclude the swim thoroughly:**

- Debrief officials, asking for their comments & evaluation. Thank them again.
- Check results for accuracy as they are posted (request your own copy to make this easy).
- Be available to swimmers & answer post-swim questions as they arise.
- Stay until the 30-minute protest window has passed.
- Handle protests if necessary.
- Check out with the Event Director before leaving the venue.
- Submit a written report after the event, evaluating the event and recommending ways to improve it.

# Best Practice #7

## **Maintain professional attitude and deportment in all dealings with event host, staff, officials, & swimmers:**

- The Referee should work as a teammate with all other staff & officials at the event. Working relationships must not deteriorate into adversarial relationships at any time!
- A major key to Referee success is professional, appropriate, timely, & truthful communication with everyone with whom you connect.
- The Referee should always ask two big-picture questions...
  - “Will my decision help make this swim safe?”
  - “Will my decision help make this swim fair?”

# Resources

- USMS rules for open water events are found at [http://www.usms.org/rules/?utm\\_campaign=top\\_nav&utm\\_medium=for\\_volunteers](http://www.usms.org/rules/?utm_campaign=top_nav&utm_medium=for_volunteers). Look in Part 3 of the rule book.
- USMS policy & guidelines for open water events are found at [http://www.usms.org/gto/gto\\_longdist](http://www.usms.org/gto/gto_longdist).
- Build your personal Referee packet to include...
  - The posted information for the event;
  - The completed & approved safety plan for the event;
  - The USMS Referee Training Outline (this document);
  - The current USMS Rule Book.

# The Referee Test

You have completed the course, so now take the test.

Prospective USMS Referees must successfully complete the course & test (80% correct answers) before serving as a certified Referee at a USMS-sanctioned open water swim.

- Go to [Open Water Certification Programs](#) and download the test;
- Take the [Open Water Referee Test](#) (it's open book); and
- Submit your completed test (scan & send) to David Miner, USMS Open Water Safety Coordinator, at [openwateradvisor@usmastersswimming.org](mailto:openwateradvisor@usmastersswimming.org).

You will be notified of your result shortly after you submit the test.

**Thanks for preparing to be a USMS Open Water Referee!**