

As an ASCA Fellows team, our comprehensive study on swimmer retention and attrition in USA Swimming and other National Governing Bodies (NGBs) yielded several significant findings and recommendations. Our research combined quantitative surveys of swim coaches with qualitative focus groups of swim parents to capture a holistic picture of the factors influencing long-term athlete participation in competitive swimming.

Key Findings:

1. **Coaching Quality:** This emerged as the most significant factor influencing swimmer retention. Coaches are crucial in shaping athletes' experiences and long-term engagement with the sport.
2. **Critical Age Range:** The 13-16 age group was identified as the period of highest attrition risk, coinciding with significant physical, emotional, and social changes in adolescents' lives.
3. **Team Culture:** A positive, supportive team environment was a key factor in keeping swimmers engaged, emphasizing the importance of social connections in sports participation.
4. **Parental Influence:** Parents play a pivotal role in swimmer retention, with their support and understanding of the sport significantly impacting their children's continued participation.
5. **Intrinsic Motivation:** Athletes who develop a genuine love for the sport and intrinsic motivation to improve are more likely to persist through challenges and remain in swimming long-term.
6. **Retention Tracking:** There is a wide range of practices in tracking retention rates across different swimming organizations, with some using sophisticated systems and others lacking formal tracking mechanisms.
7. **Exit Surveys:** While there is strong interest in implementing exit surveys to understand reasons for attrition, current usage of such tools could be higher across organizations in order to understand the trends of swimmers leaving the sport.

Recommendations:

1. **Enhance Coach Education and Development Programs:** Expand coach training beyond technical skills to include youth psychology, communication, and creating positive team cultures.
2. **Implement Comprehensive, Standardized Exit Survey Systems:** Develop and standardize exit survey tools for NGBs, swim clubs, and other organizations to gather consistent data on swimmer attrition.
3. **Develop Parent Education and Engagement Initiatives:** Create resources and programs to help parents support their children's swimming journey without adding undue pressure.

4. Implement Targeted Support Programs for Critical Age Groups: Design specific retention strategies for the 13-16 age range, addressing adolescent swimmers' unique challenges.

5. Foster Positive Team Cultures: Encourage clubs to prioritize team-building activities and create inclusive environments that support swimmers' social and emotional needs.

6. Enhance Data Tracking and Analysis: Improve systems for monitoring retention rates and analyzing trends to inform evidence-based decision-making.

7. Emphasize Long-Term Athlete Development: Shift focus from early specialization and performance to a model prioritizing sustained engagement and enjoyment of the sport.

Our research also highlighted the need for USA Swimming to implement a systematic process to directly reach out to families who do not renew their membership after a year. By sending personalized emails or conducting surveys with these families, USA Swimming can gain invaluable insights into why they choose not to return or where they are taking their participation instead.

As a forward-thinking class of fellows, we propose developing an intuitive survey tool that empowers coaches to solicit direct feedback from athletes or families who choose not to re-register for the next season. We recommend that the American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA) provide this survey tool as a customizable framework directly to their membership.

In conclusion, our study has provided valuable insights into the complex factors influencing swimmer retention and attrition. By implementing these recommendations and focusing on creating a more supportive, engaging, and sustainable environment for young swimmers, USA Swimming and other NGBs can work towards improving athlete retention rates and fostering lifelong participation in the sport. The proposed exit survey tool and systematic feedback process can provide crucial data to inform ongoing improvements and adaptations to meet the evolving needs of swimmers and their families.