

CASE STUDY:



“Kids leave sports because it costs too much and takes too long. Block Party fixes that.”

— MIKE ASHMORE, SANTA MARIA SWIM CLUB

The Power of Creative Flexibility

OVERVIEW

Located on the outskirts of Southern California’s swimming landscape, Santa Maria Swim Club serves a geographically isolated and financially diverse community. Under Head Coach Mike Ashmore’s leadership, SMSC has transformed its engagement strategy by embracing the flexibility of the Block Party pilot program. The result: a revitalized sense of purpose, expanded competition access, and measurable growth across all athlete levels—especially novices and late starters.

THE CHALLENGES

1

A high percentage of “free or reduced lunch” families, making traditional meet costs a major barrier

2

A lack of nearby swim meets, with the closest teams 25–30 minutes away

3

Shortages of available officials and high meet sanctioning costs

4

A growing population of late-start athletes, including 12–14-year-olds new to swimming

5

An outdated competitive model that failed to meet families’ needs for affordability, convenience, and fun

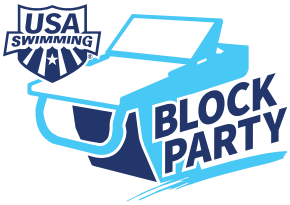
THE SOLUTION ►

Rather than treating Block Party as just another meet type, SMSC used it as a flexible platform for innovation.

Key adaptations:

- **Hosting Block Parties during regular practice times** to avoid rental fees
- **Using assistant coaches as officials** to reduce staffing costs and accelerate coach development
- **Zero meet fees** to remove cost as a barrier
- **Creative community-building events** like festive holiday meets and dual-meet-style Blue vs. Gold showdowns
- **Running multiple short meets** tailored to different populations, including:
 - Long course “first-timer” meets for middle-tier age groupers
 - Pop-up meets for late-start teens
 - Mini-meets for novice swimmers—three in a single day!





CASE STUDY:



"If you haven't read USA Swimming's best practices retention report for 10 & unders, read it. Then ask yourself why we're still doing the same thing. Kids leave sports because it costs too much and takes too long. Block Party fixes that."

— MIKE ASHMORE
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THE RESULTS

1. RAPID GROWTH IN PARTICIPATION

- Added over 100 unique competitors to their roster in Fall alone
- Saw growing demand from families asking when the next Block Party would be held
- Created summer programming where each team runs local meets, culminating in a community-wide championship

2. INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY

- No entry fees and minimal travel opened the door for all families
- Athletes new to swimming were able to compete immediately in low-stress environments
- Late-start 13-year-olds found a path to swim at high school and even junior college levels

3. ELEVATED STAFF ENGAGEMENT

- Assistant coaches gained confidence and new skills by officiating
- Senior swimmers led meet setup and mentorship
- Coaching staff used Block Party meets to drive development and tailor training cycles

4. CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARD FUN AND BELONGING

- Meets were short (often under 90 minutes), festive, and fun-focused
- Younger swimmers watched senior athletes race in the same backyard, building inspiration
- Events built community, trust, and a deeper sense of belonging among families

5. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH BROADER GOALS

- Increased participation in sanctioned travel meets
- Expanded visibility into time standards and performance benchmarks
- Built retention through engagement, not obligation

