



Managing Swim-Offs

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Originally published: October 2020 USA Swimming Officials' Newsletter
Reviewed and revised: November 2025

What is a swim-off?

The rule provides that a swim-off is necessary when swimmers tie or it is determined there is a tie. Specifically, rule 102.5.2 states the following:

"A swim-off is considered to be part of the total preliminary process of qualifying for finals. In no case may a swimmer with a faster time displace another who placed ahead of him within a heat as the result of a decision by the Referee or Place Judges in accordance with Section 102.23. If this situation results in disputed qualifications, all swimmers having times tied or within the disputed times shall swim-off to qualify for the disputed place or places in the final unless the swimmers, coaches, and Referee mutually agree to resolve the tie in an alternative manner, such as a coin toss or racing a different distance/event."

Most often, swim-offs occur in prelims/finals meets where a tie needs to be resolved in a prelims event to determine if a swimmer will swim in a faster or slower heat in finals. To provide some practical guidance, let us consider a finals session with A, B, and C heats swum in an eight-lane pool. Ties need to be resolved for the following places: 8, 9, 16, 17, 24, 25, 26, [27].

- The need to resolve ties for places 8, 16, and 24 is obvious as the outcome will be that someone swims in the faster heat and someone swims in the slower heat.
- The need to resolve ties for places 9, 17, 25 (first alternate), 26 (second alternate), and [27 (third alternate)] might be less obvious, but just as necessary. Unforeseen circumstances, such as illness or an injury, may result in a swimmer withdrawing from finals after the event has been seeded. If these ties have been resolved beforehand, it is then simple to reseed after scratching the missing swimmer. Out of an abundance of caution, some, but not all administrative referees, want ties for the third alternate resolved.
- The referee should also monitor any scratches taking place as these scratches may resolve the need for a swim-off or create the need for a swim-off.

When should a swim-off be conducted?

Rule 102.5.2 states the following: *"This elimination may be held at any time set by the Referee, but not more than 45 minutes after the last heat of any event in which any one of these swimmers is competing in that session."* Agreeing to have a swim-off "a few hours from now and just before finals" is not an appropriate resolution.

What happens if all the swimmers tie during the swim-off?

The swimmers must still resolve the disputed places, either by swimming another swim-off or by another mutually agreed to alternative method.

What happens if all swimmers are disqualified during the swim-off?

Certainly not something commonly seen, but if it does occur, the rule provides that you continue to conduct swim-offs until there is a winner.

What happens if one or more but not all of the swimmers is disqualified?

In the case of a disqualification in a swim-off, the swimmer so disqualified is relegated to the lowest qualifying position for which they are competing. If disqualifications leave a vacancy for the full complement of finalists, swim-offs are continued among the disqualified swimmers until a full complement of finalists is assured.

Can the swimmer who is disqualified still compete in finals?

Disqualification in a swim-off for a qualifying position does not eliminate a swimmer from eligibility to compete in the accompanying finals or as an alternate.

Can the swimmers choose to swim a different distance or stroke in the swim-off than the one swum in the preliminaries?

Yes. The rule allows the swimmers “. . . to resolve the tie in an alternative manner, such as a coin toss or racing a different distance/event.” Thus, a tie in the 400 M Individual Medley might be resolved by swimming a 100 M Freestyle or a tie in the 200 M Freestyle might be resolved by swimming a 50 M Freestyle.

One creative choice I know of occurred when the coaches noticed that their swimmers, who needed to swim-off to resolve a tie in the 200 Freestyle, were both entered in the last event of the session, a 400 Freestyle Relay. The coaches agreed to each put their swimmer in the lead-off spot and use that split to resolve the swim-off. The involved swimmers and coaches were happy and the meet staff didn't have to wait around for up to 45 minutes after the session.

Can the swimmers resolve a tie by something other than a swim-off?

Yes. The rule allows the swimmers “. . . to resolve the tie in an alternative manner, such as a coin toss . . .” Both coin tosses and “rock, scissors, paper” are popular choices for resolving ties.

These methods of resolution are also popular when both of the tied swimmers would prefer to swim in the middle lane of the slower heat than in an outside lane of the faster heat. This is especially true when no points are awarded in the faster heat.

A swimmer may also concede the swim-off and accept the lower place. When this happens, do not assume that the other swimmer does not also want to concede. It sometimes happens that both swimmers want to concede as they both would like to swim in the middle lane of the slower heat. When this occurs, a coin toss or “rock, scissors, paper” can be used to determine the “winner” who then goes on to request the lower place.

Which time is used for the swimmer that advances to finals—the time achieved in the preliminary or semi-final heat or the time achieved in the swim-off?

Swim-off times do not replace the times swum in the preliminary or semi-final heat.

Who is responsible for being aware of the information regarding swim-offs?

It is the swimmer's responsibility to become acquainted with information pertaining to swim-offs, final events, and the participants therein.