

Dear Sharks Parents,

I hope you are all looking forward to a new Shark season and are as excited as I am! We have a lot to look forward to. We return nearly all of our previous coaching staff, and they have a lot of ideas to build on last year with more fun, more team building, and even more excitement. I have spoken to all of them and they are as excited a group of coaches as I have seen in a while. They are ready to hit the ground running, or, more accurately, the water swimming!

One question that I would like to address right away is the question about moving practices from age groups to ability groups. I would like to address this early on, as I have had more than one parent express a concern that going from age practice groups to ability practice groups will divide children of the same age more than in previous years. More specifically, some parents have expressed a concern that their child will not be able to swim at practice with their friends due to not being able to meet some technical requirement of the age group. I hope that this email puts those fears to rest, and also explains the reasoning behind ability groups.

For the most part, the move from age practice groups to ability practice groups is simply a change in the titles of the groups. For example, what was the "6 and under practice" is now the "Great White Sharks practice". This is not in reality a major change. Moving swimmers between groups based on their needs for instruction, regardless of age, has always been done on our swim team. This year will be no different. The goal of this movement has always been (1) to allow the individual swimmer to be at the level they need to receive the level of instruction they need; and (2) to allow the coaches to focus on the group as a whole, as opposed to having to focus disproportionately on an individual swimmer. As an example, if a swimmer is in an age group where the group is focused on endurance, timing, and the number of laps, but this individual swimmer is struggling just to put together a correct stroke, they are not in a practice that is focused on what they need. The swimmers in the group below them are receiving this type of instruction, but this swimmer is just trying to keep his or her head above water. If we were to focus solely on age, and not move this swimmer down, the result would either be: (1) the swimmer would not receive the focus they need to put together a correct stroke, or even swim well, or (2) the attending coach would need to hyper-focus primarily on that individual swimmer to the detriment of the group. This year, as in years past, this swimmer would likely be moved to the lower group. However, this year, he or she would not be moving to "the 9-10 practice", he or she would be moving to the "Thresher Sharks practice." I think you can imagine why this title would be more palatable for this swimmer.

**The above being said, if your swimmer was swimming with swimmers their age last year, they will very likely be in the same group this year!** Also, as in years past, if your swimmer far exceeds the abilities of their group, they may be asked to move up. They may also request to stay put. The only thing a swimmer cannot request is to swim "up" both for the reasons explained above, and for safety reasons.

So, why change the titles at all? Why not just continue to have age groups and just move kids in and out of those groups based on ability? First, because the age titles are, at this point, misleading. Many of our age groups are made up of plenty of swimmers who are not that age. Second, given that age groups are made up of swimmers who are not necessarily that age, there is no reason for a swimmer to feel the stigma of swimming in a 9-10 group when he or she is 11. For these reasons, most swim teams have moved to ability practice groups.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to address any concern that our graduation to a higher division coupled with our move to ability practice groups signals a change from being the fun summer league team we all know to a team focused solely on winning. This could not be further from the truth, and, this would run counter to my philosophy and the philosophy of anyone on the board. I swam at all levels as a kid, and the one reason I always came back to my summer league team was FUN. My select teams were WORK, but summer league was FUN. I do like winning. I think it builds confidence, and builds camaraderie. And, I think we will win some meets and have fun doing it. But the emphasis on FUN on this team will never change.

Thank you all for taking the time to read this (assuming you got to the end :)), and see you all soon!

Sincerely yours,  
Scott Milner