

What Swimsuits to Wear, When and By Whom

BY JOHN LEONARD

The array of swimsuits now on the market is daunting to parent, athlete and coach alike. Throughout history, marketing has mixed with design to first make suits that covered less and less, and now to make suits that cover more and more of the human body, under the assumption that certain engineered fabrics move more easily through the water than human skin. And in the works since early in 2008, suits that cover large portions of the body in order to control, via resilient panels, the sort of "body line deterioration" that always results when an athlete tires.

And along the way of course, the manufacturers have raised the prices of all suits to astronomical levels, where the top suit on the market now costs more than the average age group swimmer pays to practice for the entire year.

So what is "suitable" for what athlete in what situation?

Here's a guide for coaches:

At the Novice Level... regardless of age... the emphasis in our sport should be on learning to swim the strokes correctly, which includes maintaining good body position in the water unaided by a high-tech swimsuit. The appropriate suit? The simplest competitive suit made by any of the manufacturers. Good fit is important. Snug, simple, basic. Encourage parents not to purchase suits that athletes will "grow into" ...by the time they do so,, the suit will be exhausted and in need of replacement. A good suit will last the ordinary age grouper about 3 months if worn to both practice and swim meets. More if a suit is only worn to swim meets. These should be "minimal coverage suits" ...for boys, knee to navel, or less, females, shoulder straps to hips. (Not over the shoulder suits.)

Many boys, especially those new to the sport, will balk at using the old style small "Speedo." They want the Jammers to the knee. This is about modesty and societal associations... good to go with the Jammers, mon.

At the elite age group level, coaches should still ENCOURAGE athletes to wear "normal suits" with a good fit, with the same coverage rules as above. The longer into their careers that the athlete can improve without the "silver bullet" of "suit enhancement," the better. At certain zone level competitions, it's possible that coaches will begin seeing a majority of "technical suits" of various types. Some actually work, some are just placebo effect improvements from the hype of putting on a new suit. At this level, the coach has to make a choice as to the effect of having their athlete wear their "normal suit" while the competition is in something exotic. This is a tough area. Remember that chances are, once the suit comes off in the next meet, times may slip back to where they were previous to the "super suit swim." This can be tough to handle for the athlete, the parent and thus, the coach. The temptation will be for Mom or Dad to say "little Susie is sooo disappointed in her time... why don't we let her wear the super-doooper suit all the time?"

What Mom may not realize is that that \$300-\$500 dollar swimsuit may only be effective for 6-12 swims. Then it becomes a very expensive bag of water. And now Susie needs a new suit even two meets... or maybe that means twice a month. Gee, the sport suddenly got very expensive!

Coaches, keep the children out of the "super suits" as long as possible! And when they do wear it, remind them that there is a difference in their performance levels and once it comes off, their times may not be the same as with it on.

So where is it appropriate to wear that Super Suit? Well, Olympic Trials sounds good. Senior and Junior Nationals sounds likely. If the times at Seniors set the qualifying times for Seniors, the athlete may have to use the suit at the Regional Meet to Qualify for Nationals. Maybe not.

The ordinary club meet, Junior Olympics for accomplished swimmers? Ordinary high school meet? I'd recommend you stay in your "normal" suit. High School State Championships? If you're a senior, you probably are going to wear the best thing you have, which may be the super suit. If you're a junior, can you live with wearing your "normal suit?"

The key to remember here is that once you put on the Super Suit, you are likely to now establish two standards for yourself... your best time WITH the suit and your best time WITHOUT the suit.

These suits work well. Most of us, including this writer, would like to see them banned from all competition, so the emphasis in our sport stays on the athlete and their hard work, dedication and attention to learning. But while they are still legal, you, whether a new age group coach or an experienced professional, have a lot of challenges to face and decisions to make. Choose wisely.