



BY JENELYN RUSSO



## Swim for the gold

Whether your child aspires to be an Olympian or a safe, skilled swimmer, aquatic training is an invaluable tool.

As parents, we know how important it is for children to learn to be water-safe at a young age. Whether you have a pool or not, teaching your young child to swim is a top priority. Orange County offers a number of wonderful, comprehensive programs that provide great swim instruction for your child, toddler or even infant.

But what about the next step for those kids who love to swim and want to continue developing the skill? Southern California, particularly Orange County, is a hot spot for competitive swimming. O.C. has produced several Olympic swim champions in recent years, including Janet Evans, Amanda Beard, Jason Lezak and Aaron Peirsol. They all got their start here at local swim clubs in their communities.

One such club is Orange Regional Competitive Aquatics (ORCA). Based out of Villa Park and Orange, ORCA, like most swim clubs, offers learn-to-swim lessons, the opportunity to compete at the Junior Olympic level and everything in between.

If your child enjoys

swimming but isn't sure about joining a competitive team, a recreational swim program might be a good place to start. Usually offered by swim clubs through city programs, participation is limited to the summer months.

"These types of teams give kids the chance to try out the swim-team environment before committing to a year-round program," says Mark Tierney, president and CEO of ORCA.

For kids who truly love the sport and want to take it to the next level, joining a competitive swim team is their best bet. At ORCA, there is a level for all, as team placement is determined by age and skill ability.

Requirements include a year-round commitment, and practices range from three to five times a week, one to two hours a day, depending on the swimmer's level. Instruction takes place primarily in the water but can include additional calisthenics and conditioning for upper-level teams.

Competing on a swim team includes meets against other local swim clubs. ORCA is part of the Orange Section of Southern California Swimming

(SCS), so for those exceptional swimmers, there is the chance to compete annually at the Junior Olympics against other teams from SCS.

All team swimmers belong to USA Swimming Inc. (USA-S), which is the national governing body for amateur competitive swimming in the United States. USA-S provides services to more than 300,000 athletes at an estimated 2,500 swim clubs nationwide. And with participation in competitive swimming increasing steadily each year across the country, these numbers will only rise.

Even if you don't have the next gold medalist in your house, the benefits of swimming for kids are numerous. There have been extensive studies done on the physical aspects of the sport. Considered a full-body workout, swimming is an excellent form of exercise. And because less stress is placed on joints and bones, the chance of injuries and long-term damage are greatly reduced when compared to other sports.

Children also gain an understanding of how to maintain a healthy diet. Tips for keeping appropriately hydrated and fueled for competition are a standard part of the training.

The benefits can carry over to the classroom, as well.

"Swimmers are some of the smartest athletes," says Tierney. "It's a very disciplined sport. The type of training these kids get from an early age develops into great habits that carry over into academics and life choices."

With so much upside and access to top-notch programs right in our backyard, competitive swimming is a great option for kids in Southern California. Whether they swim for personal achievement or, ultimately, for their country, Tierney emphasizes that this sport provides the opportunity for these kids to go "as far as their dreams will take them."

[orca-aquatics.com](http://orca-aquatics.com) **OCF**.



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