

Working Together to Navigate the 4-Hour Rule (205.3.1F)

Managing the 4-hour rule at full meets can sometimes be a bit of a challenge — especially when sessions fill quickly and the pressure is on to make everything fit. This note is meant to serve as a helpful resource and gentle reminder of how we, as Referees, can approach this rule thoughtfully and collaboratively, especially in partnership with the person taking the entries. This could be an AO or the Meet Director. The Meet Referee is responsible for ensuring the compliance to this rule like other rules in the rulebook.

Why the 4-Hour Rule Exists

The intent behind the 4-hour rule is simple but important: to keep age group swimming sessions reasonable in length for young athletes and their families. Youth sports are competing for time and attention, and we want to make sure that swimming remains both accessible and enjoyable — not just for swimmers, but for parents, coaches, and officials, too.

What the Rule Says – 205.3.1F

*With the exception of championship and open water meets, the program in all other age group competition shall be **planned to allow the events** for swimmers twelve (12) years and younger to be completed in four (4) hours or less per session (prelims, finals, timed finals). Events for the same 12 & under swimmers shall be **limited to one session per day**, except for prelim/final meets where events for 12 & under swimmers may be offered in both prelims and finals.*

[2013 4 hour rule interpretation](#)

So how do we best support that rule — especially when meet timelines are tight? Below are a few practical tips and shared approaches.

Ideas and Best Practices for Meet Referees

Before the Meet Is Sanctioned

- During the meet announcement review, it's worth checking that the 4-hour rule is clearly mentioned and cited. Oregon Swimming [Policies and Procedures](#) (Section: II.B Meet Preparation) requires including the 4 hour rule.
- Some language you might consider suggesting:
“This session will comply with the 4-hour rule (205.3.1F).”
- Work with the person that is taking entries about what the 4 hour rule is and why it is important to monitor seeded session reports. Ask them to keep in touch with you as the meet fills up and provide you seeded session reports. It can also be helpful to talk with the person taking entries about how entries would be adjusted if the timeline goes over. Some options could include:

- Not accepting entries once 4 hours is reached
- Removing longer-distance events should be a last resort or limiting the number of entries in longer-distance events
- Prioritizing teams that provide officials for the meet
- Including that plan in the meet announcement helps avoid confusion and sets clear expectations for teams entering the meet. Example language, *“We reserve the right to accept entries not only based on when they are received, but also on how many officials your team can provide.”*
- If no method is called out and entries are accepted that exceed the 4 hour limit by the person taking entries, the best practice would be to have the sponsoring team remove their swimmers to meet the 4 hour rule.

Once Entries Start Coming In

The person taking entries is responsible for monitoring the length of the session which is subject to the 4 hour rule. As they receive entries the following tools should be utilized so as not to exceed the 4 hour session length..

- Seeded session reports offer a more realistic picture (they're usually 15–20 minutes longer than unseeded ones), so they're the best tool once entries are underway.
- As the entry cap approaches, encourage the person taking entries to re-run seeded session reports before each new batch of entries is accepted into the meet — that extra step can make a big difference in preventing last-minute scrambles.

Heat Interval Planning

- Referencing similar meets with a similar athlete base can be a helpful guide for setting a realistic heat interval.
- A best practice is to start with a slightly generous heat interval (5 to 10 seconds extra), then if the meet slightly exceeds the 4 hour limit, you will have some flexibility to reduce the heat interval and still stay within your heat interval target. Do not go below your realistic heat interval number but use one of the strategies developed with the person taking entries to reduce the session length. A good starting point for 10&U sessions may be 40-45 seconds and for 12&O sessions 30-40 seconds, depending on the level of the meet.

During the Meet

- If a session is close to the limit, a quick reminder to Deck Referees to stay mindful of heat pacing can help keep the meet moving efficiently and on a tight timeline.

- Having that conversation early in the meet or during warm-ups helps set a tone without adding pressure later on.
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Additional Things to Keep in Mind

12 & Unders: One Session Per Day

- Swimmers aged 12 & under are only permitted to compete in **one session per day**. This can happen when there are both AM and PM sessions that allow for 12&U swimmers. If the meet does have such a situation, the only way to confirm that a 12&U swimmer has not participated in both sessions is to manually check. If a swimmer does swim in both, their results from the second session must be removed from SWIMS. A best practice would be to remove such possibilities from the meet by not allowing 12&U swimmers in both sessions.
- Consider suggesting to include a note in the meet announcement, such as:
"Please note: 12 & Unders may only swim in one session per day."

What Counts Toward the 4 Hours?

- The timeline begins with the published start time of the session and ends with the final event that includes 12 & Under swimmers or open events that score or award 12 & Under swimmers separately. 4 hours is only 4 hours and no more.
- One useful strategy is to place open events without 12 & Under awards or 13&O events at the end of the session — this can buy a little flexibility if you're brushing up against the 4-hour mark.

A Collaborative Effort

At the end of the day, enforcing the 4-hour rule isn't just about checking a box — it's about creating a well-paced, positive meet experience for swimmers, coaches, officials, and families alike. It's also a team effort. The Meet Referee plays a key role in working with the person taking entries and others to plan ahead and make adjustments where needed.

If you ever find yourself in a tricky spot or want to talk through ideas, please feel free to reach out to me or your Area Officials Chair. Sharing experiences and strategies with each other is one of the best ways we continue to grow as officials and leaders in the swimming community.

Thank you for all you do on deck and behind the scenes — your work makes a difference.

Warmly,

Bill Shreeve

Oregon Officials Chair

5/18/25

Summary Steps:

1. During Meet Information Review (Pre-Sanction)

- ☐ Contact the person processing entries early in the planning process.
- ☐ Discuss the importance of complying with the 4-hour rule.
- ☐ Collaborate with the person processing entries and meet director on a compliance plan.
- ☐ Ensure the Meet Announcement includes:
 - ☐ A statement on the 4-hour rule.
 - ☐ A plan for managing entries and timelines if the session nears or exceeds 4 hours.

♦ 2. After Meet is Sanctioned (Pre-Meet Setup)

- ☐ Establish a reasonable heat interval (pad slightly for early timeline estimates).
- ☐ Remind the person processing entries to regularly run seeded session reports.
- ☐ The person processing entries monitors the timeline as entries come in:
 - ☐ If projected timelines approach 4 hours, **pause** accepting entries.
 - ☐ Run a seeded timeline to confirm compliance before accepting more entries.
- ☐ Check in regularly with the person processing entries to track progress.

♦ 3. If Session Approaches or Exceeds 4 Hours

- ☐ Immediately stop accepting new entries.
- ☐ Recalculate timeline using your unpadded heat interval.
- ☐ Apply the pre-documented plan from the Meet Announcement to meet the 4 hour rule.

♦ 4. During the Meet

- ☐ Remind deck referees to maintain a steady, efficient pace.
- ☐ Monitor actual session progress vs. projected timeline.
- ☐ Be proactive if delays are observed — communicate with deck staff.