



# **Use of Tech Suits by Age Group Swimmers**

## **White Paper**

### **REPORT & ACTION SUMMARY PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**September 15, 2018**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Beginning in 2016 several LSCs have discussed, developed, and rolled out age and event based restrictions on the use of High Performance Technical Swim Suits (simply referred to as “Tech Suits” in this report) by age groups swimmers twelve years and under. Many more LSCs are reviewing the issue and the use of tech suits by age groupers is a hot topic of discussion among coaches throughout the country. The variances in the wording, approach, definitions, age and meet level, and enforcement methodology among LSCs with restrictions are significant. It is clear that USA Swimming needs to address this issue on a national level, eliminating the variances and inconsistency and establishing a national policy, rules or guidelines.

In August, 2017 USA Swimming retained ISG President Stu Isaac to review the issue, analyze the wide range of factors affecting the issue, and develop scenarios and options for USA Swimming to address the issue. His draft report was submitted to the Age Group Development Committee in January 2018. The Report was reviewed by the Committee at a special meeting in Colorado January 24-25, 2018. At this meeting the Committee approved the concept and intent of restriction of tech suit use by age group swimmers twelve years and under and began the process of developing the rules proposal to submit to Rules and Regulations.

In February through April the suit definition and rule language were further developed and refined resulting in the proposed legislation submitted by the Age Group Development Committee to the Rules and Regulations Committee at their May, 2018 meeting. The proposed legislation is included in the Rules and Regulations packet submitted by the Rules and Regulations Committee for action at the USA Swimming Convention in September. A final version of the Isaac Report was submitted to USA Swimming Age Group Development Committee dated March 1, 2018.

Following the development of the Tech Suit definition and proposed rule Stu Isaac has worked with Tom Avischious and swimwear manufacturers to develop a process to easily identify restricted and approved suits on the pool deck. During this time Tom Avischious worked closely with Rules and Regulations and the Officials Committee in the development of the logistics of enforcement if the rule is approved. A meeting of swimwear manufacturers (nine manufacturers attended) was hosted by USA Swimming at Nationals in Irvine in July to review the identification, approval and enforcement process as well as the timeline for approval and implementation. A final report on the Identification, Approval, and Enforcement Procedures was submitted to the Age Group Development Committee on September 13, 2018. The report and summary is available through the Age Group Development Committee.

## **ISSUES**

Following are the main issues initially driving the development and implementation of restrictions:

- The high cost of tech suits
  - Creating an uneven playing field based on ability to afford the high cost of tech suits
  - Raising the overall cost of participation in the sport and contributing to driving people out of the sport
- Impact on swimmer development
  - Drawing focus away from key skill development, practice and coaching and puts the emphasis on the suit as a quick path to improvement and success

- Impact on clubs and coaches with different approaches to the use of suits in their programs and long term swimmer development
- Protection of young swimmers from the overzealous parent pushing tech suits as one aspect of overall parental pressure to succeed
  - NOTE: Several parents and coaches summed this up as “protect the parents and coaches from themselves (ourselves).”

These issues are not unique to swimming. The issues surrounding the use of high cost tech suits by age groupers is one more symptom of the overall trend of parents doing whatever they can to provide the resources for their children to achieve at a higher performance level at younger and younger ages. As a leader in youth sports, USA Swimming is committed to tackling these issues in a reasonable, positive and cost effective development model that still provides the excellent coaching, strong clubs, and access to resources to grow the participant base and achieve competitive excellence.

These issues were addressed in the Age Group Tech Suit Study Report and in the deliberations of the Age Group Development Committee. The Tech Suit Study attempted to provide insight and options to address the issue for the Age Group Development Committee’s consideration.

To achieve these goals, the Tech Suit Report and the AG Development Committee efforts focused on the following components of the issue:

- Review of tech suit technology and definitions
- Cost of tech suits, analysis of the market, and financial considerations
- Role and impact of use of tech suits in swimmer development
- Education and communication
- Role of Clubs and Coaches
- Input from Meets
- Review of current LSC rules, restrictions, and enforcement
- Input, impact and role of suit manufacturers
- Legal considerations
- Scenarios and options to consider in addressing the issue
- Unintended consequences and ramifications

## **METHODOLOGY**

The following methodology was used in the research and development of the Tech Suit Study and Report:

- Engagement with USA Swimming Leadership, Management, Committees, Athlete Reps, Zone Consultants, Officials through interviews, meets, meetings and conferences
- Engagement with USA Swimming Coaches and Teams at meets, conventions, clinics, and in interviews
- Engagement with age group parents and swimmers at meets and in interviews
- Review and Engage LSC’s with current Tech Suit rules or pending rules in discussion
- Engagement with suit manufacturers and team dealers
- Explore any relevant equipment limitations in other sports and NGBs

- Discussion of hypothetical scenarios and ramifications with sport and coaching leaders, manufacturers and constituents

## **SUIT TECHNOLOGY**

When using the term tech suits in meetings, discussions, interviews, and daily use, the meaning of the term is fairly well understood. It is when you get into the details of the features and components and ultimately the definition of a tech suit for purposes of specific restrictions and enforcement some variances and even confusion occur. The differentiation of these features creates issues based on their varying abilities to be easily recognized by just looking at the suit from any distance, even by trained officials. This is especially true for boys' jammers.

The three main differentiating performance and cost features and components of tech suits are the following. Each of these improves the performance of the suits and increases the cost of the suits.

- Woven versus knit fabric
- Bonded versus sewn seams
- Use of water repellent or anti-absorption treatments or coatings to the fabric or fibers

The Study and Report provided an in depth analysis of these key features to provide the AG Development Committee the information necessary to evaluate Tech Suits and develop a definition to be used in any use restrictions.

The fit and performance of Tech Suits on age group swimmers also was considered in the report. Although small sizes are available from several swimwear brands tech suits have been designed to fit older swimmers and the inappropriate fit of most tech suits on young age groups swimmers minimizes the performance advantage of the suits. Only one manufacturer currently has designed Tech Suits to fit the young age group swimmer body.

The lifespan of suits was also taken into account in the study, showing that Tech Suits actually last much longer than the public perception of the short effective lifespan of the suits.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT OF TECH SUITS**

### Suit Pricing and Purchase Price

The main point made in virtually all discussions about the tech suit issues is that “Ten Year olds should not be wearing \$500 tech suits.” While most people realize that this is an oversimplification of the issue, it does underscore the concerns of many stakeholders in the sport. While there is no doubt that there are parents of 10 and unders and 11-12 age groupers that have purchased the highest cost tech suits the majority of young age groupers purchase entry level Tech Suits ranging from \$125 to \$200 for women and \$80 to \$150 for men when considering team discounts, promo programs, and sale suits. There is also a significant hand-me-down, trading, and secondary sales market in tech suits within clubs and overall. Backing up these observations is the growth of sales of lower priced or entry level tech suits.

### Overall Cost of Participation in the Sport

Discussions about the cost of the suits also address the cost of the suit as a significant factor in the overall cost of participation in the sport of swimming. Swimming is usually perceived as being in the mid-range of youth sport cost of participation. It is difficult to determine how big a

factor a tech suit is in the overall cost of participation. USA Swimming has no research on the average cost of participation at different levels of USA Swimming. In a wide range of interviews with parents and coaches there were very few comments that even mentioned concerns about the impact of tech suits on the overall cost of participation in the sport. Many coaches did mention concerns about the cost of the sport but virtually all said that the cost of tech suits was not a major factor in their overall concerns about the cost of participation. Cost of participation in USA Swimming is an issue that should be considered as the long term strategic development and future of the sport is discussed and planned.

### Impact on Membership and Retention

Some comments and anecdotal examples have been offered about the costs of tech suits driving swimmers out of the sport at young ages. The Study reviewed USA Swimming membership statistics going back to 2004 through 2016. At the time of this analysis, the final membership demographic report from 2017 was not yet available. The analysis found no statistically significant impact or even trends that support the conclusion that the increasing use of tech suits by young swimmers is driving young age groupers out of the sport.

### Conclusions About Suit Cost Factors

Based on all of these factors, we find that very few young swimmers are paying anywhere near the top pricing of \$500+ for female suits or \$350 for male suits. As our discussions with stakeholders about the financial impact of the suits increased in depth and detail it became apparent that the financial cost of the suit is not as big a factor as often portrayed and is not the main concern of professional coaches and many leaders in the sport when considering retention in the sport.

## **IMPACT OF TECH SUITS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG SWIMMERS**

Early in the Study it became very evident that the most significant concerns about the use of tech suits by age groupers revolve around the potential negative impact on swimmer and parent attitudes and perceptions of the tech suit and their impact on the appropriate steps in swimmer development. This truly seems to be the crux of the issue for most coaches and leaders in the sport, including coaches, leaders, and to an important extent, parents. The following perceptions were reported:

- Putting on a Tech Suit to go fast reduces the focus on the importance of skill development
- Short cut to success
- Belief that you cannot swim fast without a tech suit
- Peer pressure and stress generated by seeing other competitors in Tech Suits

It is clear that these attitudes and perceptions do exist and are very legitimate concerns. Many parents interviewed expressed that they did not want their child to think they needed the suit to swim fast but recognized that the potential psychological impact of having one existed, especially as their child notices how “everyone else has one.”

The approaches to these issues varied by the quality of club and the experience of the coaches. Experienced professional coaches often were also more successful in mitigating these issues, particularly based on their credibility with club parents and swimmers. Many top clubs established clear suit guidelines and club restrictions and were able to keep development priorities from being compromised by the use of tech suits. As mentioned by many coaches, the

use of tech suits and the commitment and focus on the key elements of swimming success are not mutually exclusive, but often do end up in conflicting messages or prioritized use of resources. Examples of specific club suit restrictions were included in the Study Report.

### The American Development Model (ADM)

The ADM developed by USA Swimming is an excellent analysis and guideline to the development of swimmers in USA Swimming. Based on how some clubs have developed their own guidelines, it is clear that logical tech suits guidelines can fit into the ADM development matrix. As tech suit educational materials and guideline are developed they can be very logically integrated into this ADM matrix to further reinforce the logical progression of tech suit use and its relationship with health long term development of swimmers through their swimming career.

### **EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION**

If there is one thing everyone agrees on is that there is a significant need for greater education of parents and all swimmers about the function, impact, and role tech suits play in the performance of swimmers and the key features, suit options, and cost appropriate suits for different levels of swimming. This need exists for all levels of swimming and is recommended whether national suit use restrictions are put in place or not. In the case of restrictions, this information will be critical in explaining and justifying the restrictions and if restrictions are not put in place education will be a critical component of changing behavior and addressing the tech suit age group issues through recommendations and guidance. There is also a need for greater coach education on the technology and use of Tech Suits.

### **REVIEW OF CURRENT AND PENDING LSC RULES, REGULATIONS, AND ENFORCEMENT**

The LSCs that have established use restrictions have developed several different approaches to the restrictions. As of winter 2018, USA Swimming identifies the following LSCs that have put restrictions in place or have restrictions pending.

#### Restrictions or guidelines in Place

- Arkansas (delayed enactment pending potential action by USA Swimming)
- Iowa
- Maine
- New England
- New Jersey
- Oregon (established guidelines for 10 & Under swimmers, not actual restrictions)
- South Carolina
- Southern California

#### Pending Restrictions

- Georgia
- Ohio
- Pacific

#### Concerns and Challenges with Enforcement

In virtually all of these LSC policies using a restricted suit list and a definition of suits with bonded and meshed seams and kinetic tape language the final onus of enforcement rests on the meet referee and the officials behind each block, usually timers, to identify a suit. A meet

referee is not physically able to look at each swimmer as closely as needed to differentiate suits, especially in a fast moving age group meet with fly-over starts and other rapid fire meet procedures. The current enforcement ultimately relies on the coaches and parents to adhere to the rules in advance with the hope that the officiating team may identify a restricted suit if it does appear on the block. This is a challenge that even the most experienced suit experts and officials find challenging at best.

## **SUIT MANUFACTURER IMPACT AND INPUT**

Suit manufacturers obviously have a vested interest in the evaluation and progress of potential tech suit restrictions. They also have a strong interest in the continuing growth of the sport. Our discussions with the manufacturers found a very cooperative group of manufacturers in dealing with this issue. Virtually all the manufacturers agree that the high end/highest cost tech suits are not appropriate for use by younger swimmers. Most do not directly market the highest end tech suits to this age group market and the size range offered in the high end suits usually does not fit the youngest swimmers. Manufacturers are comfortable with restrictions if they are included in the process of defining tech suits and have a reasonable lead-up time to adjust their design, development and inventories. These considerations helped drive the engagement process with manufacturers over the course of the Study and the development of the identification and approval process.

## **OPTIONS & SCENARIOS ON RESTRICTIONS & POLICY**

Based on the Study several options were reviewed by the AG Development Committee.

### OPTION #1: DO NOTHING!

Allow LSCs to continue to independently develop suit restrictions that best meet their concerns and the needs of their members. From the start and throughout the entire length of this study, we heard from virtually everyone that some consistency and national policy must be put in place. Doing nothing was not a viable option.

### OPTION #2 No Restrictions on Suit Use and No Guidelines

Enact legislation prohibiting LSCs to restrict the use of tech suits by any age or competition categories.

This option eliminates the ability of LSCs to create their own rules and leaves all suit use decisions in the hands of the coaches, swimmers, parents and clubs. It would allow Clubs to set their own policies if they so choose for their swimmers. This option would appear to provide no value in addressing the issue and driving any change in the current tech suit culture and use.

### OPTION #3 No Restrictions on Suit Use with Strong Guidelines & Recommendations

Enact legislation prohibiting LSCs to restrict the use of tech suits by any age or competition categories in conjunction with national multi-party education campaign including guidelines and recommendations.

This option would include a framework of guidelines and recommendations on suit use (tech and non-tech suits) for all ages and levels of swimming to help coaches, swimmers, and especially parents make informed educated decisions relying on strong recommendations. LSCs would not be able to enact their own suit use restrictions.

#### OPTION #4            National Tech Suit Restrictions

Establish national rules limiting the use of tech suits swimmers by age, event category or other criteria and eliminating the ability of LSCs to impose their own different rules.

This option represents a national USA Swimming restriction of tech suit use similar to what some LSCs are currently doing and would eliminate the option of LSCs having their own and different guidelines. Any rollout of national restrictions would still need strong educational information.

#### **PROPOSED RULE**

The Age Group Development Committee reviewed all options and combinations options to come up with the following proposed Rule. The Definition of Tech Suits is included in the proposed Rule.

#### 102.8 SWIMWEAR

##### .1 Design

- F. No Technical Suit may be worn by any 12 & Under USA Swimming athlete member in competition at any Sanctioned, Approved or Observed meet.
  - 1) Exceptions to the foregoing restriction are only for meet in USA Swimming's Championship Series (i.e. Sectionals, Futures, Junior Nationals, Pro Swim Series, US Open, National Championships, and Olympic Trials) or YMCA National Championships.
  - 2) A Technical Suit is one that has the following components:
    - a. Any male or female suit with any bonded or taped seams is defined as a technical suit regardless of its fabric or silhouette; or
    - b. Any male or female suit with woven fabric extending to the knee or mid-thigh is defined as a technical suit regardless of the type seams: bonded, taped or sewn. (Note: A woven suit with sewn seams and in a male brief or regular cut not to the knees is not defined as a technical suit and is not restricted.)

The timeline calls for the suit restrictions to begin in September, 2020. This allows an adequate lead time for the manufacturers to update current suit styles, develop any relevant new styles, and manage existing inventory and currently planned production. It also provides ample time for the education of stakeholders.

Some suggested that the events designated in the USA Swimming's Championship Series would be better included in the Policy Manual and not in the Rule to allow for quicker and timely action if Championship Series events are modified. The AG Development Committee decided to keep the exempt event listing in the actual rule for clarity and consistency.

It was also suggested that the Tech Suit definition be placed in the Policy Manual to allow timely updates based on new technology innovations, new suit introductions or any changing FINA rules. Once again the Committee decided to keep the definition in the actual rule to insure transparency in the process and a clear understanding by all constituents of the rule, the process, and the intent.



## **IDENTIFICATION, APPROVAL & ENFORCEMENT**

The Age Group Development Committee understands that the intent to restrict use of Tech Suits will not work without an effective means to approve and identify suits that fall into the restricted category of Tech Suits. Following submission of the proposed legislation the focus of the Committee and the process has been on developing a procedure and means to identify restricted suits to make the officiating of the rule simple, quick and fair without interfering in the fast, efficient and safe management of age group swim meets.

The most logical and efficient means of identification would be to utilize the FINA approval sticker/logo current on FINA approved suits. Based on the much higher volume of Age Group legal suits the identification of the restricted suits seems to be more practical than providing an identification mark for approved suits. Suit manufacturers are supportive of this process. There are three technical suit scenarios that play into the use of the FINA sticker as part of the identification process.

### Scenarios

1. The suit falls under the Tech Suit definition and has been submitted to and approved by FINA and bears the FINA approval sticker
  - a. Virtually all of the Tech Suits currently identified fall into this category
  - b. In this scenario the FINA logo would easily work as the identifying mark of suits banned for use by 12 and unders
2. Any suit that has been approved by FINA and carries the FINA approval sticker but does not fall under the Age Group Tech Suit Definition and is therefore legal for use by 12 and unders in age group competition
  - a. These suits would require some secondary additional marking to positively identify the legality of the suit and approval for 12 & under age group use.
    - i. Specific USA Swimming Approved secondary logo (to be designed)
  - b. The suit would require review by USA Swimming
  - c. NOTE: Based on initial review of the market and the submission of tech suit databases from manufacturers only two manufacturers and a total of three suits styles currently fall within this scenario and would require the additional secondary approval logo.
3. Any suit that falls under the Tech Suit Age Group definition that does not have FINA approval and does not carry the FINA approval sticker
  - a. It is important to keep in mind that the FINA rules still govern all suits used in USA Swimming Competition at all levels. Suit that would not meet FINA requirements still would not be allowed in any USA Swimming Competition.
  - b. These suits would require a secondary logo or identification indicating their use is restricted in age group swimming
  - c. The suit would require review by USA Swimming (see section below on review process)
  - d. Currently, no suits in this scenario have been currently identified in the market

## **USA SWIMMING TECH SUIT DATABASE**

A Database of restricted Tech Suits is being finalized by USA Swimming. This database will keep a current list of all suits falling under the Tech Suit Age Group definition in all three scenarios. The USA Swimming Tech Suit Database will be a critical tool in monitoring this

overall process and will provide a tool for all stakeholders in the process, including manufacturers, team dealers, parents, swimmers and coaches.

### **USA SWIMMING REVIEW & APPROVAL PROCESS**

USA Swimming will still need to be proactive in the review of the different brand tech suit styles to oversee the Tech Suit database and to review any suits that may fall into scenarios #2 and #3. We also feel that the manufactures will self police this, keeping a close eye on all competitors in the market, especially in Scenario #3.

The USA Swimming Review & Approval process is an important element of oversight and implementation of the new rules, if approved. The USA Swimming representatives handling this process are still to be determined. We would recommend a small USA Swimming Ad Hoc review committee made up of the following:

- Member of Age Group Development Committee
- Member of Rules & Legislation Committee
- Member of USA Swimming staff
- Independent expert from swimwear industry

There should be no cost to manufacturers involved in this process, except to the providing of suit samples to USA Swimming for review as needed and any FINA type lab testing for questionable suits in Scenario #3. USA Swimming would not incur any costs for lab testing of Scenario #3 suits if any are submitted in the approval process.

### **EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY AND FINA GUIDELINES**

All stakeholders in this process recognize that suit technology will continue to evolve.

We all anticipate that some ongoing monitoring and tweaking of the Age Group Tech Suit definition may be necessary based on any suit technology evolution or updates. Based on the lead time for FINA approval the USA Swimming Age Group Development Committee and Suit Approval Committee should be able to keep up with these changes in a timely fashion. Any changes needed in future Age Group Tech Suit definitions and suits in any of the three scenarios should be able to be addressed on an annual basis through the existing Rules and Regulations timeline. Since any new technology creating the needs for changes in the definition of Tech Suits would be in new suits in the developmental pipeline changes in the definition could be put in place with the normal rule update timeline not requiring the long lead time needed for the initial implementation of the rule to take into account existing suit inventories. The USA Swimming Suit Review Committee will need to monitor any changes in FINA rules and any new technology introductions or innovations.

### **ON DECK & EVENT ENFORCEMENT**

The actual enforcement logistics of this rule on the pool deck will be further discussed with the Officials Committee and the Rules and Regulations Committee. Precedent based on current enforcement of the FINA suit restrictions may serve as a guideline.

## **DEALING WITH CURRENT LSC SUIT RULES**

### LSC Rules in September 2020

If the new Tech Suit Age Group restrictions are approved it is critical that by the implementation of the new rules in September 2020 that all rules nationally are consistent. This requires the following:

- The USA Swimming Rule would supersede all current existing LSC suit restriction rules as of September, 2020
- LSCs would eliminate their own rules by September, 2020
- No LSC would be able to pass a more restrictive or more lenient rule for use within the LSC
- No LSC would be able to expand the age range of the restrictions

### LSC Rules prior to September 2020

- Prior to September 2020 LSCs can still retain and enforce their current or any new age group suit restrictions passed and effective prior to September 2020
- USA Swimming would strongly encourage LSC with rules to adopt the Tech Suit definition in the proposed USA Swimming Rules
- USA Swimming would suggest that LSCs with their own rules should modify them to match the proposed USA Swimming rules