

# Discussion Forum Task Force: Preliminary Report

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July 6, 2013

The task force was formed in late May with the broad purpose to review the purpose and function of the USMS discussion forums. The task force members are **Chris Colburn, Mike Heather, Jim Matysek, Michael Moore, and Chris Stevenson** (chair). The task force held two conference calls (June 2 and 30, minutes appended) and also communicated electronically via email and a private forum.

At the first meeting the task force decided to focus on the following four areas:

1. How do the USMS forums, particularly the public “unrestricted” forums, contribute to the USMS mission and objectives?
2. How should the forums be moderated?
3. Review/suggest policies for posting on public forums by USMS staff and key volunteers.
4. Review the current forum rules, and suggest revisions – and a timeline for future reviews and revisions – if necessary.

## Importance of the Discussion Forums to USMS

As stated in the Rule Book, the mission of USMS is to promote health, wellness, fitness and competition for adults through swimming, while the core objectives of USMS are to *service, educate and build* the membership. ***It is the opinion of the task force members that the discussion forums provide significant help in accomplishing these objectives by providing an interactive venue to discuss matters related to masters swimming and by helping to build and maintain a vibrant masters swimming community.***

The forums are fairly busy but for technical reasons it is difficult quantify exactly the volume of traffic. Almost 20% of USMS members have a discussion forum account but many of them do not view or post on the forums because an account is also required to use some other member services. Many parts of the forum are also open to non-members for viewing and posting. Two of the top five “referrers” to usms.org are from forum areas, account for about 130,000 referrals per month. A website (<http://topworldforums.com/>) that ranks forum traffic stated that the USMS forums receive about 25,000 unique visitors per month; it is not clear how this number was calculated and it should be viewed with caution, but it is roughly consistent with the number of referrals.

It is helpful to divide the discussion forums into different areas according to purpose and access.

- Restricted *administrative forums* where various committee and other bodies may conduct their business. Although not all administrative bodies make equal use of the forums, these forums can provide a useful venue for collaboration and discussion. They also can provide a useful historical record of an administrative body’s business.
- The *blogs* (<http://forums.usms.org/blog.php>) are areas where USMS members can keep a web log of their training and other visitors can comment on them.

- The *workout forums* (<http://forums.usms.org/forumdisplay.php?95-Workouts>) are areas where viewers can post and comment on workouts. There is a sub-forum in this area containing themed workouts – eg, Stroke/IM, distance, sprint, triathlete-focused – written by coaches paid by USMS. This sub-forum is restricted to USMS members, but there is also a public area where anyone can post and discuss workouts. There are some long-running threads in this area that receive regular updates, such as “Betsy’s 1-Hr Workouts” written by Betsy Durrant.
- The *public* (unrestricted) *forums* consist of all the other forums; USMS membership is not required to view and post on these forums. The most popular forum by far is the General Swimming-Related (GSR) Discussions, the Non-Swimming Related (NSR) Discussions, and the Open Water Swimming forum.

The value of the first three forums to USMS is self-evident, and most questions about value and management of the discussion forums tend to be about the last category, the unrestricted forums that are completely open to the public. The task force limited much of its discussions to that portion of the USMS forums.

The forums consist of over 20,000 discussion “threads” (topics) with about 280,000 posts. At more than 10,000 threads and over 200,000 posts, by far the most popular area of the forums is the General Swimming Related (GSR) forum in the “unrestricted” forum area. On June 6 the following were the titles of the 25 GSR discussion threads with the most recent posts, arranged thematically; parenthetical editorial comments were added as needed to explain the thread topic. The task force felt that this collection of threads is pretty representative of the topics discussed in the GSR forum.

#### **Technique/training threads**

- Ask Ande (*long-running advice column*)
- Tips (*seeking place to find technique advice beyond on-deck coach*)
- The Butterfly Lane
- The Backstroke Lane
- Favorite Freestyle Drills?
- Poll: Do you (need to) do drills at all?
- Stuck in reverse or my kick sucks

#### **Other swimming-related advice**

- Thinking about doing my first meet in 2 years...but worried!
- Advice for a teen club swimmer (*seeking advice for granddaughter who swims*)
- Crossfit, Paleo, Yoga
- Swimming with bronchitis?
- Why do I have neck pain?
- Diet

#### **News and discussions of swimming events**

- 2013 Pan American Masters Swimming Championships
- Arena Grand Prix at Santa Clara

#### **Seeking places to swim**

- Swimming in China
- Masters Workouts in Uppsala, Sweden?

### General kvetching/bantering about swimming issues

- Hot Water -- Whining about the Whiners
- The "eeew" factor...sharing a pool with a kids' team
- Is your pool too hot !
- People who are already over 100 and 200 miles for the year?!

### Discussion of swimming products

- Cool Underwater Speakers
- Swim watches/computers

### Other Topics

- Swim Coaches in Trouble (*about Rick Curl and others of his ilk*)
- Don't Fence Me In Bro! (*invitation to share OW experiences*)

There was general agreement among the task force that the “unrestricted” forums are valuable in building and maintaining a masters swimming community. The fact that USMS runs the forums (as opposed to some other party hosting them) provides name recognition and a sense of unity as well as giving visitors more confidence in the information they receive via the forums, particularly when the topic concerns USMS events and procedures. There have been many cases of people meeting first in the forums and then seeking each other out in person at swim meets. USMS members are not the only ones who participate, for example there are posts from high school swimmers and from swimming parents, both groups that are potential future USMS members. The task force members did not think this community building would be as effective if the forums were hosted elsewhere, nor did they think the USMS Facebook page provided the same level of interaction between participants.

## Moderating the Discussion Forums

One or more people who enforce forum rules must moderate the discussion forums; they may issue warnings, delete posts and sometimes even block users from accessing the forums on a temporary or permanent basis. ***The task force recommends that there be at least three moderators (ideally 5 or more) appointed by the president to moderate the forums. The moderators should be experienced participants of one or more discussion forums, and the group should reach a consensus effectively and promptly on borderline rules violations.***

There is currently a single moderator for the discussion forums, a volunteer; the staff rarely gets involved in moderation any more unless there is something time-critical. The need for moderation is fairly light and consists of removing spam, unsolicited ads and offensive posts. Spam is also controlled by several automated methods. It was reported that the blog area is not formally moderated at present; Jim reports that there have been only two or three complaints about posts or comments since the blogs started in Sept 2008.

Concerning “offensive” posts, Jim reported the following activity over the past 12 months:

*We had one thread diversion in December that got off onto a political tangent, with all of those posts removed after a warning from Rob, and 3 random politically themed posts removed in October leading up to the election. We had one ethnic slur removed in August.*

The experience of the task force is that the vast majority of posts on the forum are appropriate. However, we note that even a few “bad actors” can have an outsized influence and sour the forum experience for members and visitors. It is important that uncivil and offensive posts are dealt with promptly and objectively in a way that reassures visitors that their experience on the forums will be positive and they may post questions or observations without fear of ridicule. If the discussion forums are not moderated well then this will reflect poorly on USMS.

Despite the low volume of moderation required, the task force recommends against having a single moderator in charge of policing the forums. For one thing, having multiple moderators who are geographically dispersed (ie, in different time zones) will make it more likely to catch posts that need to be deleted as soon as possible. Also, a group will be able to decide borderline cases in an objective manner. The task force suggests three as an absolute minimum of size – an odd number would allow for a tiebreaking decision – but recommends at least five moderators. We believe that all moderators should be experienced users of a discussion forum.

Communication between moderators is important. Unilateral actions (such as deleting a post) should only be taken in straightforward and obvious cases; decisions that are possibly controversial should be discussed promptly since time may be an issue. The moderator group may wish to use a private forum or a similar venue so that a record of previous actions – possibly by previous moderators – and discussions can be consulted when necessary.

## Posting by USMS Staff and Key Volunteers

The BOD published an Electronic Media Policy on March 25, 2013 (<http://www.usms.org/admin/minutes/bod-2013-3-25-2.pdf>). There is a portion on transparency that the task force reviewed. ***The task force endorses the current policy on transparency of posting by members of the Board of Directors.***

One issue that was identified by the task force was posting by USMS staff and key volunteers, such as board members and committee chairs. The relevant section of the BOD Electronic Media Policy has the following passage:

***Transparency*** – Board members who use Electronic Media should clearly state whether they are speaking on behalf of themselves or the USMS organization. Generally, unless granted specific authorization, only the President and Executive Director should speak on behalf of USMS. When speaking on behalf of oneself on Electronic Media, Board members should state that any opinions they express are their own and not necessarily those of USMS. While some commenters on Electronic Media have the option of remaining anonymous publicly, USMS Board members should disclose who they are and should not use anonymous aliases.

The task force had no recommendation for improvement of this policy but there was some discussion about whether it, or some version of it, should apply to USMS staff and other volunteers such as committee members or chairs. In the end the task force had no recommendation for a formal policy but thought that staff and volunteers should be cautioned, as Board members are, to make sure their posts are accurate when they are speaking to their area of expertise and to

separate clearly fact from opinion. They should also identify their position when appropriate. When discussing USMS policies and decisions, volunteers and staff should feel free to present both sides of a controversial matter but should not otherwise undermine or disrespect the work of their peers by publicly denigrating such policies or decisions.

## Forum Rules

The task force reviewed the current rules (terms of service) governing the discussion forums. ***The task force endorses the current set of rules and has no specific recommendations for improving them. The task force recommends that the rules be reviewed annually, at which times improvements may be recommended to the Board for approval. The task force recommends that forum users agree to abide by the rules on an annual basis as a condition for continued use of the forums.***

Activity on the forum is governed by a set of forum rules outlined here:

<http://forums.usms.org/faq.php?faq=rulestitle>. The following topics are covered by the rules at present:

- No Unsolicited Advertising
- Keep it Civil
- Offensive Posts, Links, and Images
- Personal Information
- Posting of Articles
- Off-Topic Posts
- Cross-Posting / Spamming
- Libelous Posts
- Duplicate Posts
- Misrepresentation
- Playing the Role of a Moderator

The task force was satisfied with the rules as long as they are enforced effectively. We recommend that some group – perhaps the moderators – review the rules annually and suggest improvements when they are warranted.

It was noted that most participants on the forum are probably not aware of the rules or where they reside. The task force thought that once a year forum users could be presented with a pop-up window with the rules, or a summary of them with a link to a more detailed description, and check a box as a condition for continued use of the forums. The task force views this process mostly as a way to improve knowledge of the forum rules and where to find them among forum users.