

# Forest Hollow's

## Mini Gator



## Guide

The Forest Hollow Swim Team (FHST; also known as the Gators) serves the community members of the Forest Hollow Swim Club (FHSC). To be a member of the Gator swim team, your family must be a member of FHSC. Many swim teams in the Northern Virginia area do not have developmental programs in place for those swimmers that cannot yet swim laps and compete in swim meets. We at Forest Hollow feel differently! At Forest Hollow we devote significant resources to our Mini Gator program – because this is our future! We want our children to catch the spirit and joy of summer swimming – developing lifelong skills and fun-filled memories!

The FHST is open to swimmers, ages 4 – 18, determined by their age as of June 1 (note: for Mini Gators Forest Hollow's date of eligibility is determined by the first day of Mini Gator practice, versus the NVSL standard of June 1). Because that age span has very different skill sets, at Forest Hollow we distinguish between Gators and Mini Gators. We understand that the future of our team is grounded in capturing the enthusiasm and spirit of swimmers at the youngest age possible. But, we also know that each child learns at their own pace; and for each child's safety and the efficiency of practices, we must make some distinctions regarding skills.

This guide is designed to articulate and enhance past practices that have been part of our fabulous Gator history. This guide is also designed to explain some of our nuances about the Mini Gator program, as well as outline minimum criteria for moving into the Gator swim program.

## **What is a Gator and what is a Mini Gator?**

Simply put, **Gators** are FHST members that have mastered certain skills; the most basic of which is to have comfort, ability, and emotional readiness to swim laps in practice. At a minimum, Gators are swimmers that must be able to swim at least 50 meters (2 pool lengths) continuously, without assistance. Gators will work on stroke technique, starts, turns and endurance during practice and participate in swim meets. Minimum criteria for moving from the Mini Gator program into the Gator program are outlined below.

**Mini Gators** are team members that, at a minimum, must be comfortable in the water. If this is the first time you are registering your child, we must rely on your judgment that they are ready to join a group practice that is held in the water! Some things you should consider before enrolling your child:

- Can your child leave the parent and get into the water, working with a coach and other Mini Gators, willingly?
- Can your child fully submerge their head for 5 seconds in the water?
- Can your child stand on their own in the water without holding onto someone else's hand?
- Can your child propel themselves for a short distance in the pool?
- Can your child follow directions?
- Is your child willing to work well in a group?

If you **cannot** answer **yes** to the large majority of the questions above, it may be best for you to wait another summer before joining the swim program. Maybe a summer of private lessons or simply time in the water with the parent is the right thing. Remember – each child develops at his/her own pace and not all of our “Gator Greats” began swimming at the age of 4! Don’t force your child, but encourage them to join when they are ready! This is a group practice, thus for safety reasons we encourage you to help us by making sure your child is ready to be a member of the Mini Gator program.

## **Why Does Forest Hollow Have a Mini Gator Program?**

The goal of the Mini Gator program is to provide young swimmers with the basic swimming skills necessary for the continued involvement in competitive swimming. We want them to catch the spirit and fun of swimming, so they look forward to this summer ritual year after year!

From a financial perspective, we devote more coach time to this group than any other group. We devote these resources to ensure the safety of the Mini Gators – allowing you as a parent to sit back and relax during their practice time.

## **When do Mini Gators Practice?**

Mini Gators will practice from the first day following Fairfax County school closing) through the last Friday in July, Monday through Friday in the mornings. We begin Mini Gator practice at 10:00 am and end approximately 10:45.

Tuesday and Thursday evenings are available for Mini Gators unable to attend the morning practice. While we do not discourage attendance at practices in

the evening, we share the pool with other pool patrons at this time, making it more difficult to manage a large number of Mini Gators and achieve the same developmental pace as morning practices. Evening practices will generally also not follow the breakdown described below due to space and coach staffing issues.

We are often asked why practices for Mini Gators must wait until school is out when the Gators begin practice before that time? The reasoning is fairly simple. Before we are able to begin morning practices, we must share the swimming pool with other pool patrons. This provides more chaos and less of an ability to organize and control the Mini Gator practice. It is hard to distinguish who is enrolled in the program and who is not enrolled in the program, also impacting our assurance of safety for our Mini Gators. That said, if your Mini Gator is anxious to get a head start on the summer, we do offer – at an additional cost – Mini Gator Lessons before school is out. See the description below and register separately on the website if you are interested.

## **How Are Practices Organized for Mini Gators?**

During morning practices, Forest Hollow has had an informal practice of separating our Mini Gators by skills to make the instruction more effective and encourage development into the Gator program. We formally break out the skills of our Mini Gators to enhance and encourage their development. There is no guarantee that your swimmer will progress to all categories in one summer or two – remember each swimmer develops at their own pace. Our program, however, is expanding our “categories” to help foster your child’s transition stages through the Mini Gator program into being a full-fledged Gator!

Evening practices on Tuesday and Thursdays are offered for those that cannot make mornings. The Assistant Coaches will work with the group they have to determine the best breakouts, etc. Normally, the evening practices will be conducted as one group session.

## **What are the Different Categories of Mini Gator?**

- A. The **Mini Gator “A” group**, our newest category, is comprised of swimmers who are comfortable in the water, including the deep end, and are gaining in their mastery of swimming freestyle and backstroke in the form of laps. These swimmers will be coached and monitored on when

they are meeting the minimum criteria for moving to the Gator lap swimming program outlined below.

- B. The **Mini Gator “B” group**, is comfortable in the water, including being able to swim without touching the bottom. This group spends some time in the deep end of the swimming pool, jumping off the side and boards, swimming to the side, and learning freestyle and backstroke techniques. Emotionally they may not have the desire or inclination to perfect those strokes or focus on swimming a full 25 meter laps.
- C. The **Mini Gator “C” group** is comprised of our beginning swimmers. This group is just beginning to gain comfort in the water, submerge for longer periods of time, and learn basic floatation, balancing, and swim techniques.

Please note, while these groups exist, there may be times during any practice where the groups are combined based on training plans or for other reasons. They are all still Mini Gators!

### **Transitioning from One Mini Group to Another**

This will depend upon your child and the assessment of your child's progress by the coaches. We'll normally have different coaches working with each group. So transitioning to the next level will also be a sign of their readiness to be a Gator as they "let go" of that favorite coach and move on to their next (and likely new) favorite. In the end, we only hire great coaches – so there will be tons of "favorites" throughout your child's Gator career.

### **When Does a Mini Gator Become a Gator?**

Forest Hollow has had varying practices throughout our history of when it is time to move a Mini Gator into the Gator lap swimming process. The movement can occur at the beginning of a season, during the season, or at the end of a season. It is a measure of "readiness."

After discussions with parents and coaches, Forest Hollow is formally articulating several key standards for this transition. Forest Hollow goes to great lengths to make sure our Mini Gators feel part of the team – all of our swimmers from age 4 up are Gators. Our Mini Gator transition to Gator status is one of **readiness**, concentrated on the following, in priority order:

- The individual Mini Gator's safety. If they aren't able to be in deeper water with less coach oversight, they are not ready to transition.
- The individual Mini Gator's swimming ability – Gators swim laps. Is your child ready to swim laps in practice?
- Once moving to a Gator lap practice, your swimmer becomes more of "member of a team" than an individual swimmer. Our coach/swimmer ratio is greatly reduced. If they aren't ready to be part of a larger group with minimal individual attention – some faster, some slower swimmers – they are not ready to be a Gator swimmer.

### **Minimum Criteria for Movement from Mini Gator to Gator Status**

Physical Swimming Capability:

- Ability to swim 25 meter freestyle without stopping, standing, or needing assistance.

- Ability to immediately follow the 25 meter freestyle with a 25 meter backstroke, again without standing, stopping or needing other assistance.
- Ability to practice for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour in various activities including lap swimming, drylands, group activities, or other activities to enhance swimming performance.

### Emotional Capability:

- Ability to listen to a coach and then do that activity, exhibiting both good listening skills and the ability to follow those instructions.
- Ability to work in a larger team environment (ratio 1 coach to approximately 15 swimmers) with no one-on-one attention and using proper manners to ask the coach for further clarification.
- Desire and commitment to want to swim for approximately 45 minutes in organized activities, including lap swimming, dry land exercises, breathing techniques, and other developmental activities assigned by the coach.

### **What is the Parent Role?**

Just like when your child attends preschool for the first time, we understand that this can be a challenging transition for parents. In addition to letting your child go with other Mini Gators and coaches, we understand your anxiety over letting them make this transition in water. Rest assured – we take the safety of your child seriously. In addition to a fully trained and certified Head Coach, we have a coaching staff that possesses a skilled background in swimming, lifeguarding, and water safety.

We encourage you to watch the practices. But we would like you to do this in the comfort of either the pavilion or under a pool umbrella. Don't sit at the side of the pool – this may distract your child. If the assistant coach needs you, they will seek you out and ask your help in working through the day or issue. Keep in mind that we are in this developmental stage together!

Feel free to ask questions to the Assistant Coaches – but not during practice. Our Head Coach or Assistant Head Coach are also there overseeing the entire program and can answer questions for you. And, the Team Rep is available to discuss any issues, questions, or concerns you may have.

### **What if my Child Refuses to Get in the Water? Are there Refunds?**



While the FHST does not typically offer refunds, individual situations will be taken into consideration. Please keep in mind that our fees are low and once we allocate our costs based upon our registrations. The Team Rep has sole discretion, in consultation with the Head or Assistant Head Coach, to assess your particular situation. In general, if your child swims for a few sessions then tires of it, a refund will not be offered. In these cases, we again ask you to consider your child's readiness prior to enrolling. If, on the other hand, your child, the coaches and the parent work to get the child in the water and that does not occur for whatever reason, the Team Rep may agree to a full or partial refund. Keep in mind also, that outside of our coaching staff, the swim team is run by volunteers. So be kind and courteous in your correspondence.

### **Mini Gator Pre-Season Swim Lessons**

Over the past several summers, the Gators have offered our Mini Gator swimmers a pre-season opportunity to get in the water before Mini swimming begins. These lessons are offered for a two week period – Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday for 30 minutes each over a two week period. Each registered swimmer gets FOUR pre-season sessions.

Registration is on our website. We must have a minimum **of** 4 swimmers registered for each session; and we can take no more than 6 swimmers for each session. The cost remains at \$39 for the series of 4 sessions; there are no partial sessions offered.

Remember – this is pre-season and the weather can at times be challenging. We do list some makeup days and we will communicate with you to make every effort to make up weather related cancellations. Should we not be able to hold either the regular or makeup sessions, we would refund on a pro-rata basis. Should you miss the makeup or regular session, refunds are not given. Also, we will only issue full session refunds prior to the start of the sessions if we have a waiting list with another swimmer to fill the position. The refund rate is based on \$36 or \$9 per session and the \$3 registration fee is not refundable.

### **Forest Hollow Mini Meet:**

Forest Hollow hosts a Mini Gator Meet at Forest Hollow. This is a meet designed to give a special opportunity for our Mini Gators to participate in a meet environment with a smaller and Gator-friendly only crowd. The meet this

year will be held on a Sunday in July. Check the website for the date and additional information and details as the season progresses.

## **End of Season Trophies**

Forest Hollow recognizes our youngest swimmers love trophies and recognition to encourage their ongoing participation. Similar to our generous B meet ribbon policy, any Mini Gator who participates in a B meet or the Mini Gator meet is eligible for a trophy at season end.

## **Feedback**

We are always looking to improve our swim programs and our communication. If there are other ways we can help de-mystify the swim team process, please let us know! Send comments to the Team Rep please!