Swim Bag: Swim Bags

BY LAURA HAMEL

This issue’s Swim Bag is dedicated to those of us who can easily kill half a day in the Eagle Creek aisle at REI, zipping and unzipping all the bags and imagining what we could put in each of the compartments. There’s something about “a place for everything and everything in its place” when you’re on the go, whether you’re headed to Worlds or just commuting to swim practice.

We divided the bags up into several categories. We also asked duffel people to try backpacks and vice versa. We rated the bags on appearance, comfort, durability, and versatility, as well as the number and adaptability of pockets and compartments. We also asked testers what features they would like to see added.

Backpacks

Swim backpacks are comfortable to wear and easy to carry, either slung over one shoulder or worn on both. They make great carry-on bags when traveling to swim meets (golden rule of swim travel—never check your swim gear!). The shoulder straps and hip belts are critical for walking long distances in airports or from hotel to pool at travel meets. Backpacks also take up less space on benches, in lockers, and in the backs of cars.

Backpacks do have their disadvantages, however. It’s hard to get a nicely folded set of office attire into a backpack, and since backpacks are deeper than they are wide, you have to paw through your stuff to find things. And if you only walk a few short steps from the car to the pool, do you really need a shoulder harness, hip belt, and sternum strap? A duffel or tote may be a better choice for someone who doesn’t need to drag gear over long distances.

All the backpacks we tested have reinforced bottoms and divider pockets for wet or dirty items. Only Finis and Kiefer have the old-style true wet pockets with vinyl liners. The taffeta liners used in the other brands aren’t truly waterproof, so an extra plastic bag is needed for wet stuff. Our guess is that because those vinyl liners crack and wear out sooner than the rest of the bag, most manufacturers have moved toward the taffeta liners.

Speedo | speedousa.com

1. LARGE PRO BACKPACK | $64

This great-looking, extremely versatile bag has undergone quite a few changes over the years. The updated fabric is much improved—softer and more pliable—and the color choices are stunning. The gray liner makes contents easier to find. The padded shoulder harness/carry handle is comfortable and sturdy. Testers loved the plain, yet versatile, nylon straps around the outside of the bag that replace the older D-ring straps. Suits can be looped through so that they hang securely on the outside of the bag, and carabiners can be added to attach goggles, keys, etc. The compression straps on the sides make it easy to secure a towel or jacket to the outside or just make the bag smaller when it isn’t full.

The easy-access, soft-lined media pocket near the top of the bag includes a headphone port and is perfect for keeping electronics safe and out of the way of other items. The half-moon pocket in front now includes a small inner pouch and pen loops, but what it really needs is side gussets to keep small items from falling out when the pocket is fully opened.

Some testers didn’t like the smaller side pockets, and favor the old-style large pockets that were better for water and post-workout shake bottles. The side pockets also have only one zipper pull, and when completely unzipped, items can fall out. The mesh pockets on the outside of the side pockets are too small for large bottles but fine for goggles, caps, or snacks.

2. MEDIUM PRO BACKPACK | $64

The Medium Pro—25 liters instead of 35—is packed with the same features as the Large Pro. One additional feature in the medium pack is a fully padded laptop sleeve with a strap closure. This makes it perfect for use as a briefcase or travel bag. Lunch or a purse can fit inside the bag along with the laptop. There’s a small pocket hidden inside one of the side pockets, perfect for a cash stash, pocket knife, or snack. This is a great bag for someone who doesn’t need to carry a lot of swim gear and clothing.

3. SMALL PRO BACKPACK | $48

This tiny replica of the Large Pro is quite cute, but only useful if you don’t need to put much in it. Some testers used it for open water swims on the weekends, when all they needed was cap, goggles, suit, sunblock, water bottle, chamois towel, and a light changes of clothes. This pack is too small for heavy clothing or gear.

4. DAY BREAK BACKPACK | $55

The Day Break is the same size as the Small Pro, but comes with a choice of colorful southwest-style patterns in a durable cloth exterior. The two testers who used the Day Break packs loved them in spite of their small size and found ways to use them instead of a traditional large bag. One tester, who brings her office clothes on a hanger to the locker room, uses the Day Break as a toiletry kit. It’s perfect for full-size shampoo and cosmetic bottles and vials, hair dryer, straightening iron, brush, makeup, and clean undergarments. Another tester used it in place of her regular large backpack, creatively utilizing the exterior straps for some items, except when winter clothes were needed.

Sporti | swimoutlet.com/Sporti

5. SPORTI PERFORMANCE BACKPACK II | $30

Testers loved this large, versatile pack. One of the great extra features is an extra pocket on the inside flap that includes a headphone port, and will accommodate small electronics,oggles, or glasses. There’s another soft, lined pocket inside the center half-moon pocket on the outside. The roomy mesh side pockets are perfect for large water or shaker bottles, a set of paddles, or even a small set of fins. Testers who cross-train regularly in other sports loved this bag because it’s roomy enough for both their swim stuff and other gear: one put tennis gear in it and another secured her yoga mat to the outside.

Testers liked the padded back, straps, and hip belt on this large bag. The cellphone pocket on the shoulder strap is too small for today’s smartphones, but can be used for other small items, such as gel packs or lip balm.

TYR | tyr.com

6. ALLIANCE TEAM BACKPACK II | $60

Another bag popular with testers, this large pack comes in a variety of color combinations. Features include a comfortable harness and carry handle and built-in suit carabiners on the outside. What testers loved most about this bag were the large, deep side pockets, which feature crescent-shaped top zippers rather than vertical ones. This ensured that smaller items were secure even when the pockets were unzipped. These side pockets accommodate large shaker bottles, full-size shampoo bottles, or smaller items. Testers also noticed that the liner of the wet pocket is a little thicker than the other packs’, and wet items did not soak through as easily as with some of the other liners.

Although the carabiners are handy for suits, goggles, or other small items, a large towel or sweatshirt cannot be secured to the outside of the bag, as there are no compression or towel straps. The
fuzzy pocket on the inside of the half-moon pocket on the front is nice, but doesn’t really serve as an easily accessible media pocket and the pocket, on the shoulder straps is too small for a phone. The insides of the pockets are black, which can make finding things more difficult.

**Finis | finisinc.com**

7. TEAM BACKPACK | $54

This pack got good reviews. The fabric was a little stiff at first, and the straps didn’t seem padded enough, but they loosened up and became comfortable. The plastic buckles on the straps made it easy to secure a towel or sweatshirt on the outside of the back. Testers loved the expandable wet pocket with drain hole. This was one of only two bags with a padded laptop sleeve; perfect for swimmers who work in the swimming business, or those who just need to carry their laptops with them. The sleeve includes pen and other small-item organizer pockets.

Testers noticed that the small pocket on the shoulder strap is too narrow for today’s cellphones, but it is great for other small necessities. One flaw was the lack of a waist strap. Laptop computers are heavy, and without a hip belt, all the weight is on the shoulders.

**Kiefer | kiefer.com**

8. TEAM BACKPACK | $45

The Kiefer pack has some nice features, including a detachable key fob and a comfortable rubber grip on the carry handle, instead of just the nylon strap as on other bags. The wet-pocket liner in one of the bags tore during testing, but the tester simply cut it out and continued to use the bag with an enlarged main compartment. The zippered side pockets are bigger than the Speedo and Mao bags, and include mesh pockets on the outsides. There are fewer features here than on some of the other bags—the media pocket is unlined—but testers found it to be a fine bag for everyday use.

**The Swim Team Store | theswimteamstore.com**

9. MAO TEAM BACKPACK | $39

This roomy pack is very similar to the Speedo Pro Backpack, and features lots of pockets, compression straps, and nylon webbing loops for carabiners and suits. Testers who had not used a backpack before were pleasantly surprised at how much they could fit into this bag.

As with the Speedo bag, testers wanted the side pockets to be bigger, and wanted double zipper pulls instead of single. This is a great economical alternative to the standard-setting Speedo Pro, but it’s only available in black. The insides of the pockets are dark, making items harder to see.
**Duffels**

Swim duffels are great for the laid-back swimmer who doesn’t obsess over pockets. The main compartments of many duffels can house anything from a nicely folded stack of dress clothing, including shoes, to a gigantic jumbled mess of clothing and gear, if you are so inclined. If your duffel is a mess, pawing through it is easy because you can see everything.

Duffels are generally not as comfortable to carry as backpacks are because the weight is not held as close and high on the body. A large duffel, even with a padded strap, puts a lot of weight on the shoulder and can pull you off balance. It’s also harder to get through doors.

**Speedo | speedousa.com**

**10. MEDIUM PRO DUFFEL | $30**

Although it appears smaller than a standard backpack, this medium duffel has a slightly larger capacity than the large backpack—great for everyday use or swim meets. Like the Speedo backpack, it has updated fabrics, comes in a variety of great colors, and has a lighter interior so stuff is easier to see. It features an organizer inside the side pocket, ventilated end pockets, and a comfortable shoulder strap. One of the end pockets extends into the main compartment for shoes or dirty items and, according to one tester, will easily hold a suit, towel, and fins. The other side pocket will easily accommodate water bottles, full-size shampoo bottles, or swim gear.

**Sporti | swimoutlet.com/Sporti**

**11. SPORTI PERFORMANCE DUFFEL | $30**

The Sporti duffel manages to strike a nice balance between large and small compartments. It has a roomy main compartment, but also includes multiple zippered pockets of varying sizes on the outside. It is longer and thinner than other duffels, making items inside easier to find, and distributing weight nicely. There is a dedicated shoe or dirty-items pocket on one end, and mesh pockets that will accommodate water bottles on top of the other end pocket. A long zipped compartment on one side and two smaller ones on the other offer a variety of storage options.

**Agon | www.agonswim.com**

**12. SPORT BAG | $50 ($40 TEAM/BULK DISCOUNT)**

The Agon duffel is a simple three-pocket affair with few features—a ventilated end pocket and side pocket. Its main attraction is that it can be customized. As with all Agon products, you can work with their designer and get the bag with your club’s logo or whatever your imagination desires. The USMS pattern shown here (courtesy of Colorado Masters swimmer and graphic designer Doug Garcia) is only one example of what Agon can do.

The only complaint testers had about the bag was the zippers, which are too slight for a bag of this size and usage. The pull tabs are tiny and difficult to find and operate. A larger zipper all around would be best, but at least extenders for the tabs should be added. The duffel is available in three sizes.

**TYR | tyr.com**

**13. ALLIANCE TEAM DUFFEL II | $44**

This cavernous duffel would almost accommodate a sleeping bag if you needed to carry one. The main compartment has a small soft pocket hanging just inside, for valuables or keys, but other than that, it’s wide open. The end pockets, neither of which is a true shoe or dirty-items pocket, are large enough for a pair of average-size shoes. The long, ventilated front pocket can accommodate damp gear or smaller items. The Alliance also comes in several nice color combinations. It’s a simple but sturdy bag, with padded carry handles and shoulder strap.

**Totes**

Testers were initially skeptical about the totes. Swimmers from the animal lane weren’t so sure a fashion item could be used as a swim bag. But the two we tested got great reviews.

The tote seems to be a great everyday bag. It’s more comfortable to carry than a duffel as the weight is higher and closer to the body. Office clothes don’t fold quite as nicely in a tote as in the boxier duffel, but the simplicity and stuffability of the totes appealed to the testers.

**Speedo | speedousa.com**

**14. PERFORMANCE TOTE | $40**

This tote can replace a swim backpack or duffel for everyday use. It’s easy to sling over your shoulder for the trip from the car to the pool, and will accommodate clothing and gear nicely. The large metallic zipper is easy to operate and adds bling to the bag. The two mesh end pockets are huge—plenty big enough for large bottles or gear. Inside the tote are three more large mesh pockets for compartmentalizing toiletries, gear, etc., a smaller zip pocket for valuables, and a key clip. The small inside pocket is difficult to access when the bag is full, so testers wanted an additional zippered pocket on the outside of the bag.
for keys and phone. Testers also would have preferred a lightly colored interior like the insides of the other Speedo bags.

**Sporti | swimoutlet.com/Sporti**

15. SPORTI CABANA MESH TOTE | $20

This large tote is perfect for a ton of wet towels and gear. Any items that need to stay dry would need to be bagged separately inside. There are three large pockets around the outside of the bag, making easy access for caps, goggles, paddles, shampoo bottles, etc. There’s another pocket on the inside, and a snap hook for keys. The sturdy, padded carry handles hook together and can be held or slung over the shoulder. This bag is perfect for the person who doesn’t want to be bothered with zippers and small pockets. Just stuff everything and go. The bag does need to be kept upright, as bottles and gear can tumble out if it falls over.

Open water testers who wanted to spend some time at the beach after their swims loved this bag for its simplicity and because it doesn’t retain water or sand and is easily cleaned. Full wetsuits and sandy dirty gear all fit inside.

**Specialty Bags**

**Blueseventy | blueseventy.com**

16. TRANSITION BAG | $100

Designed for triathletes, this bag is loaded with amazing features. The true bag aficionado could spend hours deciding how to organize things in the plethora of pockets—it’s the ultimate swim travel bag if you need a lot of room and love compartmentalization. The large outside pocket (made for a bike helmet) is great for stuffing bottles, suits, toiletry kits, gear—really anything—into it. The cylindrical main compartment has a top-down entry flap with a zippered pocket on top and four different pockets on the inside: a mesh back pocket that can hold a water bladder (there is a hose port), a roomy pouch on the underside of the top flap, and soft-lined hidden pockets for valuables. The roomy bottom compartment is designed for a full-size wetsuit, but can be used for wet clothing, towels, or gear. There’s even a pocket on the substantial hip belt, which is removable for use when the pack is not loaded up. All the zippers are durable and have large, easy-to-use pulls.

One tester wanted to see a bit more padding on the shoulder straps. And the top-down entry flap has a stress point at the closure that can weaken if you have a tendency to pick the bag up by grabbing the cloth instead of the carry handle or straps.

**Blueseventy | blueseventy.com**

17. BRICK BAG | $45

Our triathlete testers liked this cute little bag—it’s just the right size for a pair of shoes, water bottle, or gel packs, and it has a helmet sling that zips inside when not in use. Extra hooks are inside the main compartment for keys, etc. It can also accommodate a water bladder and hose. This would not replace a regular swim bag, but works for a half-day athletic adventure when you need a few supplies.

**Finis | www.finisinc.com**

18. PERFORMANCE BACKPACK | $60

This roomy bag has some features that make it a great swim bag for travel meets or open water swims. The drawstring pouch opening allows for easy access to the main compartment. There are four pockets inside to accommodate goggles, keys, wallet, etc. These small pockets are all attached near the drawstring rim, which makes the top opening collapse when the pockets are full. The large mesh pockets on the outside of the bag are perfect for stuffing in large bottles or wet caps, suits, etc.

The coolest thing about this bag is its detachable mini backpack, which is expandable and lined to accommodate a wetsuit. This would make a great travel accessory for those open water vacations when you need to take just a few things on a boat trip or down to the beach.

**Speedo | speedousa.com**

19. SMALL WHEELED BAG | $90

This compact bag is a great travel bag for swimmers who don’t want to lug anything on their shoulders. The clamshell design includes zippered mesh compartments for suits, goggles, clothing, etc. Testers found that they had to put towels, sweatshirts, and other larger items between the clamshell halves, and thought it would be nice to have a few straps to secure them to one side or the other, but once the outer zipper and buckles were fastened, the contents were secure.

The two long waterproof pockets in front can take a pair of shoes, water or shaker bottles, or wet gear. The top pocket is convenient for stashing on-the-go travel items. Although billed as small, this bag will easily accommodate a weekend trip for the light to moderate packer. Inline skate wheels and retractable handle make it easy to drag over most surfaces, and there are two sturdy carry handles for lifting the bag.