

# Beijingers take to the water in droves

Lethal capital city storm prompts rise in number of people seeking swimming lessons from experts

By LIU JIE  
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Zhao Xuan found the number of her swimming classmates increased to eight from six recently. She complained to her coach Zhang Jianming, who works for Beijing Yuanmeng Swimming Training Center.

"You have promised to only train four to six people in a class. If more trainees are added, the time I can receive training is reduced, so how will you compensate for it?" demanded Zhao, a 28-year-old civil servant.

Zhang said he was really sorry but felt helpless. "You know, after the rainstorm in Beijing, the number of people asking for swimming lessons is increasing. Our center is trying to find more coaches but cannot recruit enough overnight. Our working hours have been prolonged," he said.

That's the kind of argument that may be happening in many swimming training facilities in Beijing now, insiders say, after a 61-year record rainstorm in the capital city on July 21, resulting in at least 77 deaths.

More people, especially young adults, want to master swimming skills, while the training capacity in terms of venues and coach resources is limited. In addition, the summer holiday is a traditional peak season for swimming.

"More people inquired about our services recently," said a manager at Yuanmeng surnamed Zheng.

A Chinese media report said that the number of people taking lessons is estimated to have increased by 40 percent. However, Zheng said that in his center the rise is not so high,



The summer holiday is a traditional peak season for swimming. After the flooding disaster in Beijing on July 21, the number of people asking for swimming lessons is increasing, something that is challenging the capital's limited venues and number of coaches.

maybe 20 percent year-on-year so far.

According to Liu Jing, a manager at Yongjin Swimming Club, compared with the same period last year, the number of people taking part in swimming classes jumped more than 20 percent.

"The growth of 40 percent may be based on a comparison with the last few months. Swimming training is a seasonal business in Beijing, hot in summer and flat in other seasons," he said.

Both the managers said that although the number of applicants is increasing, no price rises are planned.

From website research, a six-course, small-class — four to six people — basic training course costs between 350 yuan (\$54.87) and 1,000 yuan, which should guarantee the trainees can master breast stroke or freestyle and swim 25 meters in a swimming pool. The price of VIP classes for these types of lessons is more than 1,600 yuan.

The majority of people applying for swimming lessons after the rainstorm want a basic class. A large number of them are women aged between 20 and 45 without any swimming ability at all, both the managers said.

Although it seems to be good news for operators of swimming training institutes in Beijing, they said they face a series of challenges.

The first one is a shortage of coaches. In general, many of the coaches are contracted on a temporary basis

or are part-time staff. "It's difficult to find qualified people in a short period of time if you have not booked them in advance," said Zheng.

Under government regulations, to guarantee the quality of lessons and ensure the coaches' health, their maximum working time is six hours a day. Every coach in public training centers should have a specific certificate and take part in an examination every three to four years.

A venue manager at Yingdong



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MANAGER, YONGJIN SWIMMING CLUB,  
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Swimming Hall, who declined to be named, said that faced with surging demand for swimming lessons, there might be problems concerning safety, hygiene and the quality of lessons.

Statistics from the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Sports show there were 446 swimming venues, of which 377 were indoor, in the city at the end of 2010. Although more have been opened over the last 18 months, the supply is still inadequate, especially in summer, given the city's current population of more than 20 million.

Yingdong Swimming Hall is the appointed training venue for a group of swimming training centers, including Yuanmeng and Haoxin Swimming Clubs. "Although Yingdong is one of the biggest indoor swimming facilities in Beijing, it gets rather full in summer. Too many swimmers may result in hygiene issues and a reduction in the quality of training," Yingdong's manager said.

Sun Jingting, who decided to take lessons after the rainstorm, said that she wants to grasp basic swimming skills to increase her chances of survival when facing with possible dangers in the future.

"Another consideration is the physical exercise, which I have been planning to undertake but reluctant to practice," said Sun. "The rainstorm was a stimulus to me to really take action."

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