Aretas

Heats or waves: which competition schedule fits?

There are many ways to schedule your competition; here, we'll focus on the two most common ways to run a fitness competition day. **Heats** put every athlete through each workout in small groups, one workout after another. **Waves** send the whole field through one race in start-time groups. Which fits depends mostly on how many workouts you have, and the numbers decide it faster than any rule of thumb.

This guide runs the same competition both ways, with the worked example every Team Aretas resource uses: **120 athletes, 8 lanes, one day**.

By Steven Batchelor · Last updated 27 October 2026 · 6 min read

The short answer

- **Several workouts, and everyone does all of them:** heats.
- **One race or one long workout**, such as a hybrid race or an erg race: waves.
- **A heats schedule that does not fit the day:** add lanes or drop a workout. Squeezing the changeovers saves less than you think.

The worked example

120 athletes, 8 lanes, doors at 08:00 and the first heat at 08:30. Every slot on the floor is the workout's time cap plus a **changeover**: the minutes it takes to clear the lanes, reset the kit and get the next heat in. Leave the changeover out and the day runs late from the second heat.

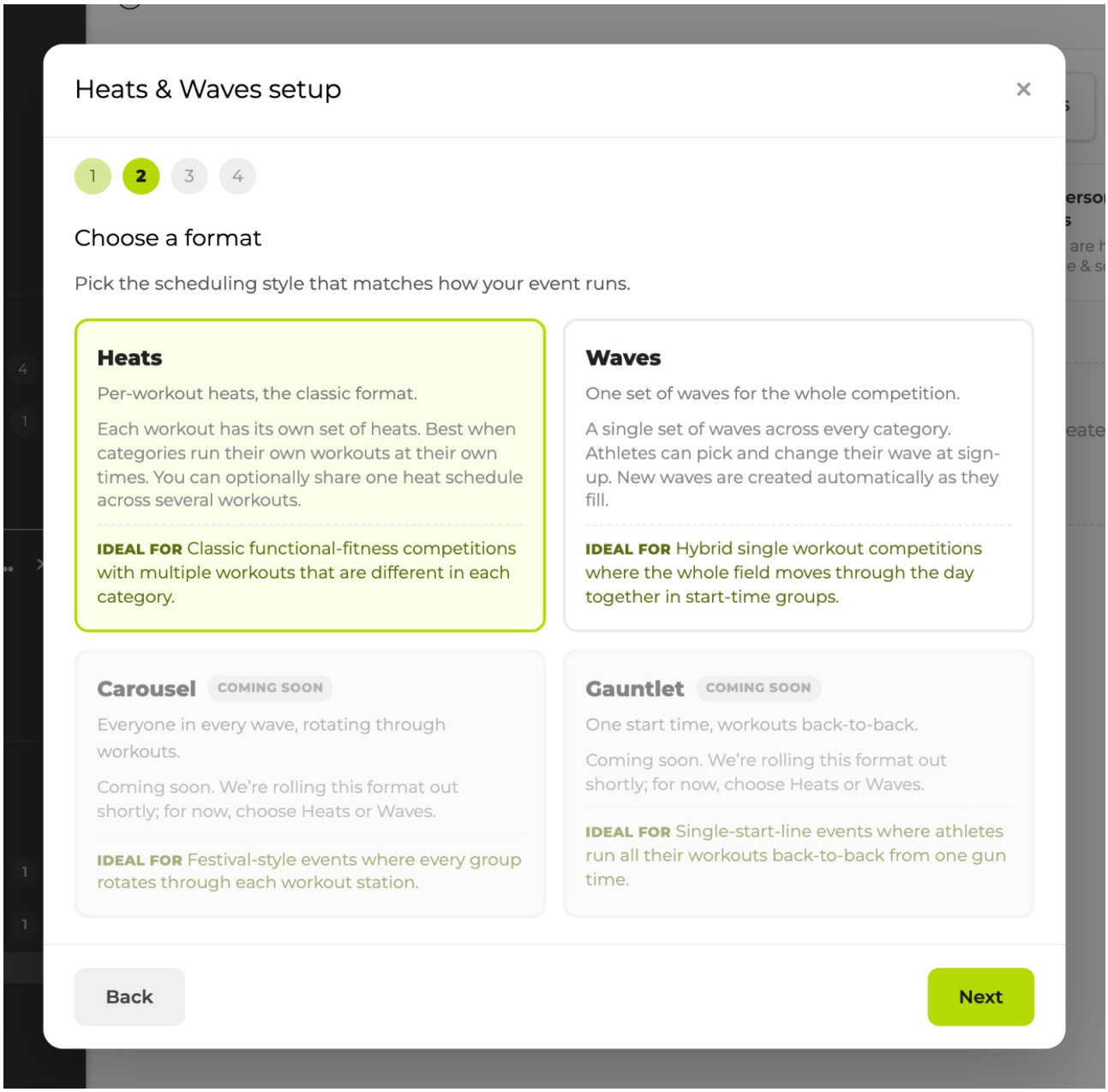
How a heats day runs

Every workout runs all of its heats before the next workout starts. With 8 lanes, 120 athletes is **15 heats per workout**.

Workout	Time cap	Changeover	Slot	Heats	On the floor
Workout 1	10 min	4 min	14 min	15	3 h 30 min
Workout 2	12 min	4 min	16 min	15	4 h
Workout 3	8 min	4 min	12 min	15	3 h

That is 10 hours 30 minutes of heats. Add a 20-minute reset between workouts to re-rig the floor and brief the judges, and the day looks like this:

	Starts	Finishes
Workout 1	08:30	12:00
Workout 2	12:20	16:20
Workout 3	16:40	19:40



What that means on the day

- **It is a long day.** A last heat at 19:40 is past what most venues and most judges will agree to. This is the most common problem with heats, and it is a maths problem, not a running problem: it was decided the moment the caps and lanes were set.
- **Athletes wait.** Each athlete competes for about half an hour in total. An athlete in the first heat of every workout goes at 08:30, 12:20 and 16:40, with around four hours between each.
- **Every lane needs a judge all day.** That is 8 judges and a head judge, from the first heat to the last.

How to make it fit

Change	Heats per workout	Last heat finishes	What it costs
As planned	15	19:40	
A second floor, 16 lanes	8	14:46	Twice the kit and 16 judges
Drop workout 3	15	16:20	One less test of the athletes
Changeovers of 3 minutes, not 4	15	18:55	45 minutes saved, and every heat is rushed

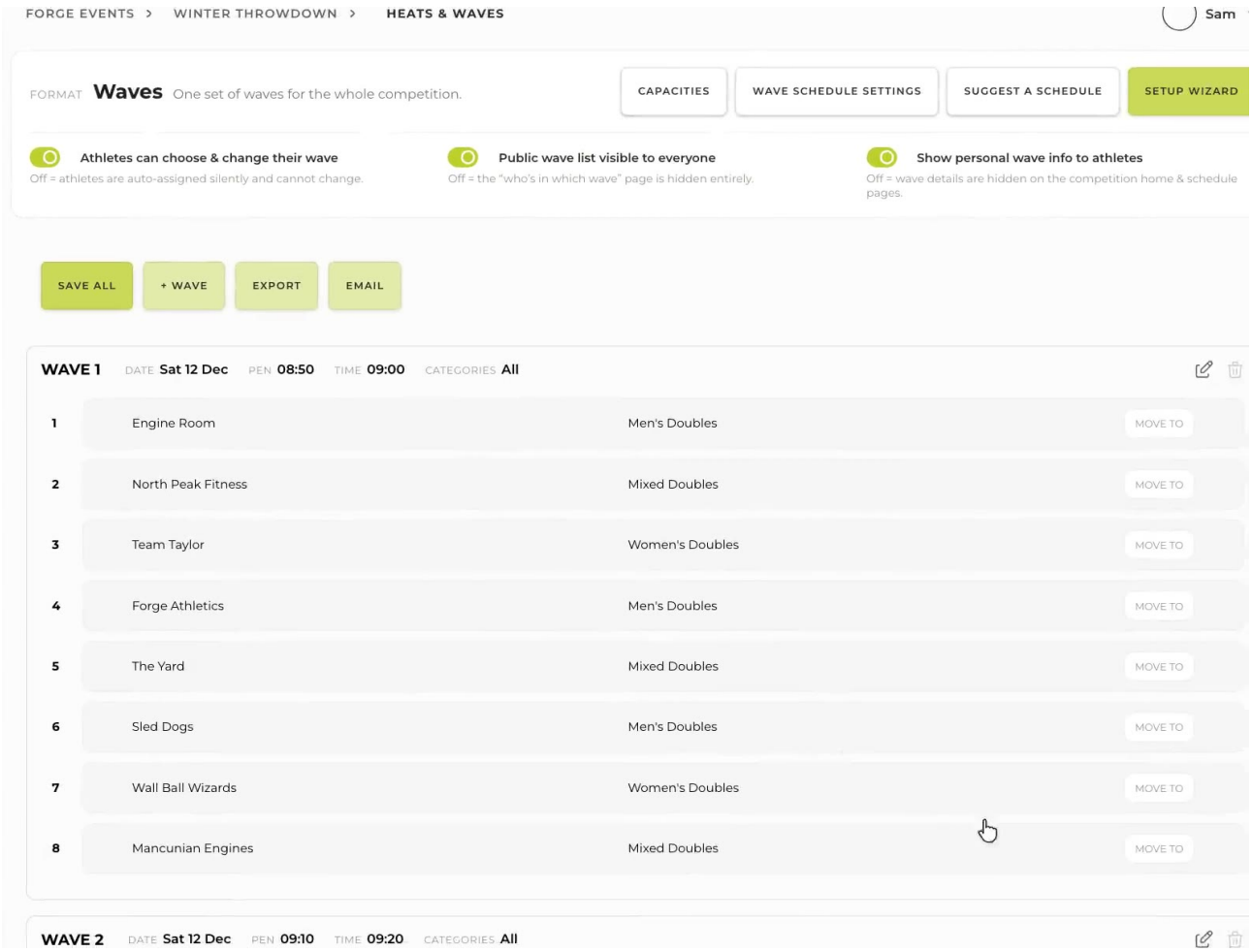
With 16 lanes the last heat is half full, so it is 8 heats, not 7.5. The changeover row is the one to notice: shaving a minute off every changeover saves 45 minutes over the day, because there are 45 heats, and it is the minute your judges use to reset the floor safely.

How a waves day runs

Everyone does one race, and the field sets off in groups. The group size is your number of lanes or stations: 8 rowers and 8 ski ergs means **waves of 8**, so 120 athletes is **15 waves**.

A new wave can start as soon as the slowest station has room for it. That gap, the **wave interval**, decides the length of the day. Assume the race takes up to 90 minutes from start to finish:

New wave every	Last wave starts	Last athlete finishes
10 minutes	10:50	12:20
15 minutes	12:00	13:30
20 minutes	13:10	14:40



What that means on the day

- **The day is short and continuous.** Even with 20 minutes between waves, the floor is clear by mid-afternoon, and something is always happening for spectators.
- **Athletes come for their wave, not for the doors.** They can be on site for a couple of hours rather than a whole day, and if you let them choose their own start time, friends can race together and people travelling far can start later.
- **Judges stay at their stations** rather than following a lane all day.
- **The catch is that everyone does one workout.** That is right for a race and wrong for a throwdown, where you want athletes ranked on several different tests.

Side by side

	Heats	Waves
Best for	Several workouts, ranked on each	One race or one long workout
Group size	Lanes per heat	Lanes or stations per wave
The worked example	45 heats, 08:30 to 19:40	15 waves, done by 12:20 to 14:40
Athletes on site	Most of the day	Around their wave
Judges	One per lane, all day	At the stations
What sets the length of the day	Time caps, changeovers and the number of workouts	The wave interval and the race time

Common mistakes

- **No changeover in the slot.** Ten-minute heats in ten-minute slots, with four minutes lost to every changeover, put the fifteenth heat of a workout an hour behind.
- **Counting lanes you do not have kit for.** Eight lanes but six rowers is a six-lane workout: 120 athletes becomes 20 heats, not 15.
- **Fixing heats before entries close.** Heats follow the numbers. A category of 9 athletes on 8 lanes is two heats, one of them nearly empty, unless you combine categories in a heat.
- **Waves closer together than the slowest station.** If the sled push is the bottleneck, it sets the interval, however quickly the rest of the race moves.

Run it on Team Aretas

Team Aretas builds either schedule from these same numbers. Choose heats or waves, enter your lanes, time caps and changeovers, and it lays out every heat or wave. You can move any heat, lane or athlete afterwards, let athletes choose their own wave where you allow it, and everyone affected is told when something changes.

- How Team Aretas builds the competition-day schedule
- Running a HYROX Sim or hybrid race with start waves
- Running a functional fitness throwdown in heats