

News For

SWIM PARENTS

Published by The American Club Swimming Association
2101 North Andrews Ave., Suite 107
Fort Lauderdale FL 33311

When A Swimmer "Plateau's" -- Rachel's Story

A father of a 14 year old girl recently called the ASCA office in search of a new team because his daughter, Rachel, has stopped improving with her present team.

Rachel had started swimming at age 12 in a program that has a history of excellence at age group, national, and international swimming. She was part of a crowd of novice swimmers that received good stroke work, excellent aerobic conditioning work, and constant encouragement, but never special attention. Her parents were novice swimming parents and quietly enjoyed their daughter's enthusiasm and appreciated the great physical benefits she was receiving. She rapidly improved but as she turned thirteen she was not yet ready for the senior team and was informed by the age group coach that she would need to remain with the age group team (mostly 12 and unders) until ready for the senior team. The girl was happy with this arrangement but the father thought his daughter should be with the older swimmers.

The father pulled his girl from the program and took her to a neighboring team that had an excellent age group team but only had a few seniors. The girl received much more attention than she had with the previous program and was one of the team's senior stars. In the new program, her training was also very different. She was only doing

about half of the yardage she had with the previous age group team and much of her new yardage was sprint oriented. She made an immediate and substantial improvement much to the delight of her father. According to the father, her best chance at making the 1992 Olympics would be in the 50 free.

However, the improvement was short lived and she soon "plateaued". The father decided to pull her from the team and called our office for advice.

Here are our thoughts about this situation.

1. A swimmer is said to "plateau" when his or her times no longer continue to improve. Younger age group swimmers (12 and unders) rarely plateau simply because they are growing rapidly and their increased strength generally results in faster times. If a boy plateaus it generally happens in the late teens when most of his growth and strength gains have been made.

If there is a typical "plateaued" swimmer it is a girl between the ages of 13 and 15. Girls grow and improve fast as 12 and unders. Oftentimes girls are faster than boys in the same age group. But as girls physically mature, gain weight on their hips and breasts, and sometimes become more interested in activities other than

competitive swimming their rate of improvement slows and may stop altogether.

2. It is important for swimmers to have a variety of events to work on when one or more events aren't improving. Very often, changing the focus takes pressure off the swimmer to improve in their "best event" and after a time of redirected interest a swimmer can often come back and improve. It is a mistake for developing swimmers of any age to concentrate on one or two events.

3. Being the center of attention might seem to be an ideal arrangement for a swimmer to improve but often times it has the opposite effect. When a swimmer receives extraordinary attention they are under subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) attention to perform well. When they cannot perform well, which will happen from time to time with every swimmer, they fall under even greater pressure. It is ok for a swimmer to fade into the workout group for a while and just be part of the crowd.

4. Avoid the "grass is greener" syndrome. It is common to hear of swimmers who make dramatic improvements over several years, then appear to stall, and jump to another club. When a swimmer plateaus, communicate with the coach and take a careful look at the program before deciding to move to another club. Often times there are factors beyond the immediate control of the coach and program that are contributing to stalled performance and might be resolved with good communication.

In addition ask yourself "How did the child improve to this point in the first place?" Perhaps this is the best program for the swimmer to be in. The act itself of moving to a new club means, "Now that you're with this new team it is expected that you will again improve", thus adding additional pressure.