

Swimming Tired

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One aspect of competitive swimming that many swimmers (and parents) have a difficult time understanding and/or accepting is what coaches call “swimming tired.” This mostly applies to senior level swimmers, but can also affect younger swimmers.

To understand fatigue, and its effect on meet performances, it is important to understand the “training effect.” Improvement in swimming (or any aerobic sport) is largely a result of the body’s adaptation to the stress of regular training. Of course, technique and skills are very important for peak performance, but for our purposes in understanding this element of swimming, we will address only physical training.

The body adapts in many different ways—the muscles become stronger, the heart pumps blood more effectively, and the cardiovascular system becomes more efficient in transporting oxygen to the muscles. These all contribute to faster swimming. Progress at the beginner or novice level comes quickly and is dramatically evident in large decreases in swimming times. As a swimmer becomes more accomplished, decreases in swimming times come in smaller increments, even though the amount of training may increase. When training is increased, fatigue may affect performances at competitions. However, swimmers may still be able to swim best times, in spite of being tired. Improved stroke technique, better starts and turns, more effective race strategies, and increased conditioning and strength can offset the fatigue that they have accumulated.

Coaches always encourage swimmers to swim at 100% effort and use their skills to overcome the tiredness.

So, why not reduce the large training load just before each meet, and allow the swimmers to be a little rested to ensure better meet performances? To optimize the benefits of training, it is best not to “interrupt” the continuous stress of training at certain times of the season for the purpose of swimming faster, for example at an early-season meet compared with the championship meets at the end of the season. These meets early in the season can be considered “practice meets,” where the swimmer gains valuable race experience and tests improvements in strokes and skills. A successful swim performance is not always just a fast time. Not resting for early-season meets will result in better end-of-the-season times.

This strategy can be difficult for the swimmer and parent to accept and can be frustrating. Often, other swimmers who do not train consistently will swim faster at early season meets, because they are not as tired. It is important that under these circumstances, the swimmers keep their ultimate goal in perspective, and that the parents empathize and support their children. The hard training of the early and middle part of the season will pay off at the end of the season at the meets that really count!