

When to “Care” About Swim Times by Annie Moore

It is so difficult as a parent and a coach to not fall into the trap of caring about times every swim meet. However, this can be detrimental to a swimmer's development both physically and psychologically. If the focus for every meet is solely on time, then the swimmer's priorities become skewed. It also becomes increasingly difficult to improve on times the faster a swimmer gets. Obviously if every swimmer improved on their times at every meet we would have Olympians going a 0 second 50-meter freestyle.

Elite swimmers understand that certain meets are to obtain goals such as cut times, while other meets are to hone their skills and refine their racing strategies. It is not a failure to add time. It is a learning experience. A swimmer can have a poor race with no dolphin kicks and big breaths off the wall and go a best time, while another swimmer could have a great race and add a little time. It all goes back to where we are in the season plan. I find that focusing on time drops for 3 big meets per year is the perfect balance. A mid-season championship in December, a short course championship in March, and a long course championship in July are the three meets I base our groups season plan on. The other meets are to work on racing skills and gain experience. This is why I do not dwell on times at meets like the Gobbler or Spring Splash.

It is really important to understand that swimmers will evidently go through a plateau in their career. Most swimmers will go through multiple plateaus. This goes back to the logic that no swimmer can continually drop time at every meet. Plateaus are not always a sign that something is wrong with the coach or the athlete. It is just a fact of life. The onset of puberty, stress at school, experimenting with different technique, etc. can all be factors to a plateau. It is important to use these plateaus to grow and learn, not to get frustrated and in despair. Plateaus usually catapult a swimmer into focusing on her technique which can help her improve dramatically later on. For example, Natalie Coughlin, the only woman to qualify for the Olympic Trials in every single event, had a 9-month period where she could only kick due to a shoulder injury. It took a few years to make a comeback, but those 9 months of kicking produced her legendary 8 beat kick that helped her clinch many Olympic medals!

In summary, swimmers should focus their attention on improving their technique, lowering their stroke counts, and bettering their starts/turns/finishes etc. By doing so, time drops are bound to happen. Just dwelling on times is not going to push your swimmer to become faster. Plateaus are a part of every sport and a part of life. Use them to grow and learn, not to get frustrated and blame others. Focus on the fun and remember your swimmers are very young. The best swimmers in the world don't peak until 26-28 years old and beyond. Let your child develop steadily and don't try to make them Olympians at 8. **None of the top 18 year olds in the country were top in the country at 10.** None. Most of the top 10 year olds in the country are genetic freaks or over trained and will eventually burn out or quit. I've seen it happen hundreds of times.