

## Para Swimming Classification Process

### Requirements:

#### 1. Have a Qualifying Disability:

- Impaired muscle power
  - Impaired passive range of movement
  - Limb deficiency
  - Leg length difference
  - Short stature
  - Hypertonia
  - Ataxia
  - Athetosis
  - Vision impairment
  - Intellectual impairment
    1. IQ below 75
    2. Significant limits in adaptive behavior
    3. Diagnosed before age 18
- Pain that prevents movement does **not** count. So arthritic pain would not be a qualifier, despite the fact that it is debilitating. However, if contractures are present and the swimmer has a permanent loss of range of motion, that may be enough to qualify.

**\*\*\*The disability must be permanent.** It can fluctuate in severity as some conditions do, and that will lead to frequent reassessments before para meets. Diagnoses that are progressive and degenerative will also lead to reassessments.

- Note that the permanent nature of the injury must be well documented and clear. Any questionable language like “probable” in the diagnosis will lead to not being classified. A paraplegic swimmer in the UK was declassified by the International Olympic and Paralympic Committee because it was theoretically possible that with several years of intense physical therapy, she *might* be able to walk again.

#### 2. Fill out the National Medical Diagnosis Form

- Submit this form and as much supporting documentation as possible from the swimmer’s physician.
  - X Rays, EMG, MRI, genetic testing, specialist reports, etc.

#### 3. Register for a Paraswimming event that has a classification opportunity.

This is where your swimmer will:

- Undergo a Physical Assessment with a Medical Classifier
- Undergo a Technical Assessment in the water with a Technical Classifier
- Receive a provisional sport class if the swimmer qualifies in both the physical and technical assessments.
- Participate in Competition for Observation by Classifiers.

\*\*\*Note that these often require travel, including airfare and hotels. *Travel costs are the responsibility of the athlete.*

All of this information, required forms, email addresses to submit the forms to, and classification event dates and locations can be found at [www.teamusa.org/usparaswimming/classification](http://www.teamusa.org/usparaswimming/classification).

***Note that this is the national classification process and there is a very similar process for international classification once the swimmer reaches that level of competition.***

## **What are the classes and who goes in which class?**

### **SPORT CLASSES ([www.paralympic.org/swimming/classification](http://www.paralympic.org/swimming/classification))**

The sport class names in swimming consist of a prefix “S” or “SB” and a number. The prefixes stand for the strokes and the number indicates the sport classes.

The prefixes stand for:

- S: freestyle, butterfly and backstroke events
- SB: breaststroke
- SM: individual medley. The prefix “SM” is given to athletes competing in individual medley events. It is not a sports class, but an entry index indicating whether the swimmer does a 3 or 4 stroke medley.

Sport Classes S1-S10 / SB1 – SB9 / SM1- SM10 - physical impairment

1 being the most disabled to 10 being the least disabled.

Sport Classes S/SB11-13 - vision impairment

Athletes with a vision impairment compete in three sport classes from S/SB11 to S/SB13.

S14 swimmers have an intellectual impairment, which typically leads to the athletes having difficulties with regards to pattern recognition, sequencing, and memory, or having a slower reaction time, which impact on sport performance in general.

Moreover, S14 swimmers show a higher number of strokes relative to their speed than able-bodied elite swimmers.

## THINGS YOU WON'T FIND ON THE WEBSITE

### 1. **Some categories are easier to be classified in than others.**

For example, amputations and dwarfism are clear cut disabilities with clear classifications. On the other hand, neuromuscular disorders are more difficult to classify.

### 2. **There is a point system for classification.** Neither the USA Paraswimming website nor the International Para Swimming website inform coaches or swimmers about the point system for classification. ***A swimmer must lose a minimum of 15 points*** upon examination, and ***the diagnosing physician needs to state clearly what parts of the body are affected.*** My son, for example, had paperwork that said Hereditary Spastic Paraparesis, but the paperwork only mentioned his legs. HSP is a disease that affects the entire body, but it is a little known rare disease and the classifying physician for USA swimming would only assess his legs because she didn't know that it's a head to toe disease and went solely off of his paperwork rather than consulting the Rare Diseases website or the HSP Foundation website. He lost 6 points in his legs, but would have lost at least that many more if his shoulders, arms, and hands had been assessed. His physical therapist thinks he would have qualified if they had examined him head to toe.

### 3. **If a swimmer has competing diagnoses, and one may confuse the process, it is better to only present documentation of the diagnosis that clearly applies.** We did not know this and provided too much information that just clouded the whole process.

### 4. **The classification process has been updated to be very stringent due to alleged cheating at the international level. This has led to people who were previously classified being declassified in spite of clear disabilities.**

- a. Paralympian and world record holder, Andre Brasil, had polio as a child. One leg is shorter than the other and he has no feeling, strength, or balance in one leg. He was reclassified out of para swimming, under the new rules, by 1 point.
- b. A wheelchair basketball player in the UK is considering amputation after being reclassified out of his sport. He is unable to walk, but his diagnosis of regional complex pain disorder is no longer a qualifying diagnosis.

*Be aware that your disabled swimmer may not qualify depending on the diagnosis and severity of the disability. As coaches or parents, we need to be prepared to support these athletes through this potential outcome.*

**Closing Thoughts:**

Para Swimming is an essential branch of USA swimming that can exemplify the ideal of inclusivity. It is clear that those running the program have a heart for disabled athletes and want the best for them.

The updated classification process has led to disabled athletes feeling like they have no place to fairly compete because they aren't able bodied, but they are not considered disabled enough to compete. From experience, I can tell you that it is crushing to the athlete to have every avenue to excel in their sport essentially closed to them. I would encourage those of you with a voice in USA swimming to advocate for a solution for these swimmers. I don't know what that looks like, but if we are striving for inclusivity, we must remember those who fall in the gap as well.