

Swimming & Diving - stuck on a plateau

Expert: Eric Shangle - 6/30/2007

Question

I've been swimming competitive for quite a while- eight years, and I'm almost fourteen years old. My progress has slowed down a lot, the height of my swimming was when i was 10... but now, I'm always tired at practice and I feel my love for swimming slowly going away. At meets I have NO energy, and am achieving the same times over and over. Also, I haven't grown much, and am pretty short/small for my age. I'm wondering if you have any advice or motivation for me on how to improve? I don't agree with the way my coach runs our group, he basically makes us do endless yards with barely any time to think over technique. On the weekends I take technique lessons that would be so much more useful if I could have enough time to practice instead of always have to sprint to make the intervals.

Answer

Alice,

You are NOT happy! That is exactly what the problem is. I hate to say it, but your mental attitude can directly affect your physical aptitude. You are definitely stuck on a plateau. That doesn't mean you can't still improve.

I was/am smaller for my age when I was swimming. I had the desire though. You have to want to improve. I don't mean you just have to "want" it. You have to be willing to sacrifice for it. Once you hit puberty, it's not as easy to achieve huge gains in any sport...specifically swimming. Each practice needs to be something you look forward to. You need to want to attack each set.

From my background, I am someone who would be terrible during mid-season. I broke down quickly. The more yardage we did, the more tired I became. My body just didn't recover as quickly as other swimmers. This was not the way I swam when I tapered though. At the end of the season, we would taper off our yardage and rest MUCH more. I required a bit more time during our taper, but I would swim amazing at that time. It really sucked for me to swim so slow during mid-season. I had faith in my coaches though. I also had some faith in myself. I knew that I would be able to kick-butt once I tapered at the end of the season.

I too had a huge plateau from 13-16. I was sick for a year and just didn't improve. I kept missing my Junior National cuts for three years. I was less than a tenth of a second off my 500 free cut and less than 2 seconds off my 1000 free cut. It was very frustrating to keep missing it for over 2 years. I never wanted to give up (maybe I should have). I just wanted to go to nationals. I knew I was capable of it. I had the support of my friends and coaches too. I did eventually make Junior Nationals. It was a GREAT feeling when I did. I then went on to Senior Nationals. I just never gave up.

Ok, so let me recap.

1. You need to have the right attitude. This is probably the hardest thing to hear right now. You might have even been told this by other people. It's truly the first step though.
2. What do you want out of swimming? Once you answer this, you will be able to truly know what to do. Be honest with yourself. I assume you really want to swim since you took the time to write me!
3. You might be broken down during mid-season. Ask your coach about his/her plans are for your taper.

4. Realize that it's not a permanent plateau. The only difference between you and someone who is improving right now is a spark! :-)

I hope that this helps. I have been there. I have seen others in your situation. It's NOT an easy thing to deal with. I wish you the best of luck. Swim hard.
Eric

From Ben Greenfield, a tri-athlete (Advice for plateau-ed DISTANCE SWIMMERS)

3. Dry Land Strength Training

Muscles rarely produce forces during the swim stroke that parallel the forces produced during resistance training. So why train on the weights? Because the muscle fiber utilization, neuromuscular adaptations, lean muscle tissue growth, and resistance to fatigue that occurs in the weightroom result in an energy sparing effect in the water. Basically, your muscular and nervous systems “learn” how to contract more efficiently, and produce more power per contraction, while also sparing the amount of carbohydrate used, which is important for distance swimmers. There’s no doubt about it: there is a strong cross-over training effect from weight training to swimming. Additional advantages of dry land strength training include: 1) the development of core musculature, which can enhance balance while practicing “downhill” swimming and create a stronger kinetic chain between the hips and the upper back muscles; and 2) more powerful hips, thighs, and calves, which are strengthened during “triple-extension” movements like the squat and the lunge - very useful for any kick that involves a powerful whipping motion, as well as push-offs from the wall.

4. Rest and Recovery

Often, a plateau simply occurs because the body’s energy systems are never given an opportunity to absorb the effects of all those hours and meters in the pool. True training adaptations actually occur while the body is resting, not during the actual swim session. If your current program includes a hard training session nearly every day of the week, week after week, then you should: 1) begin to include recovery swims at an easy pace at least 1-2 days a week and 2) include a recovery week every 3-5 weeks. You will experience a stepwise effect in fitness that prevents the body from hitting a wall, and ultimately, your potential intensity and volume will become much greater.

1. Plateaus can occur in every swimmer’s career at the training level and the competitive level. A plateau signifies the

swimmer has mastered lower-order skills, but those skills are not yet sufficiently automatic to leave the attention free to attack newer, higher-order skills. It is important to explain to the athlete that plateaus occur in all fields of physical learning and in all sports. The more successful athletes are those who work through this momentary improvement delay and go on to achieve greater performance and approach their personal potential.