

# A stagnant swimmer

## **What is the meaning of stagnant or plateau?**

Meaning of Stagnant

Standing still, without flow or current, stale, sluggish or dull from inaction, not growing or developing

## **Meaning of Plateau**

A relatively long period of stability or levelling off

## **How do these meanings relate to a stagnant swimmer?**

A swimmer that has not swim their best time for an extended period of time, times that are not dropping month after month or season after season.

The points that I am about to present are all dependent on the individual swimmer remembering that we as coaches need to take many things into consideration when looking at the athlete, such as

- \* Age – Age grouper, teenager, elite athlete, master swimmer
- \* Gender – Male or Female
- \* Swimming experience – how many years have they been swimming
- \* Motivation
- \* Expectation
- \* Personal circumstances

## **The causes that we see for a stagnant swimmer are,**

1. Too much training while young (7000m for a 9 year old)
2. Puberty

1) Too much training while young

“Proper athletic training should start in childhood so the athlete can progressively & systematically develop both the body & the mind to achieve long-term excellence rather than immediate success that is followed by burnout.” - Bompa & Carrera

We as coaches need to guard against pushing & expecting too much from our younger athletes as it creates high expectations that set them up for failure & drives them into hating the sport before they have started. This would also contribute to a small pool of top athletes to choose from when selecting teams to represent South Africa on international events. Athletes need to be guided along a long-term approach to specificity of training which includes a base of multi-lateral development.

We need to be looking at developing athletes according to their growing ability.

Ages 6 – 15      Multilateral development

Ages 15 – 19    Specialized training

Ages 19 – 24    High performance

#### Guideline for the Road to Specialization

Sport – Swimming	Age to begin practicing the sport (yr.)	Age to start specialization (yr.)	Age to reach high performance (yr.)
Women	7 - 9	11 - 13	18 – 22
Men	7 - 8	13 - 15	20 - 24

Bompa & Carrera

#### 2) Puberty

Especially for girls, the body changes that happen during this phase of growth & development can be career changing. Also remembering that in girls/women there is an emotional side to this change & if the performance is not what they want or are expecting the emotional side of this plateau can be far worse than the actual physical side.

For some, puberty brings the awaited growth spurt & muscle development that equalize the playing field with competitors who have always towered over them. For others however, puberty may be the end of huge time drops & easy speed.

Does anyone have other causes that they have experienced to bring about a plateau in swimming?

The question is – What do we do about the dreaded plateau?

Here are just a few points to look at,

1. Assess stroke technique
2. Vary your training & switch events
3. Focus on what you can control
4. Incorporate dryland work
5. Test sets to measure your development
6. Diet
7. Sleep patterns
8. Flexibility
9. Take a break
10. Find the FUN
11. Hard work
12. The Coach

### **1. Assess stroke technique**

From a young age we need to be developing our athletes in all their stroke technique as well as the dives, turns & streamline stroke. This isn't just a matter for the learn to swim instructor but for all level of coaches & swimmers going back to basics on the stroke techniques. What a great opportunity it is to get some time away from the mileage to do some much needed stroke correcting.

### **2. Vary the training & switch events**

There is nothing more demoralising than swimming your event gala after gala & not improving your time & then it becomes month after month & you see no improvement, its soul destroying. Why not try another event where there is no pressure on performance & it's very likely that the improvement will be seen due to swimming it so long ago. Seeing any improvement is a positive influence for the swimmer, parents & coach.

The training program can change by mixing up the practise with speed work, changing the mileage to more or less, the intensity can change & other strokes can be focused on.

What stops you from doing a month on underwater work focusing on swimming width wise in your pool? I'm lucky that I have 8 lanes, 25m training pool with a width of 15m. Perfect for that 15m dive & breakout distance. Some vertical kicking instead of the usual up & down kicking & while you are about it put a weight belt on the swimmer.

### **3. Focus on what you can control**

You have no control on what the swimmer next to you will be doing but you can control what happens in your lane, in your training sessions & how much you want to put in. The biggest problem I have in my pool at present is that I have children who think that they are coming to every training session but they aren't, the reality is they are missing a great deal of training & then are disappointed for not making the times or goals that they have.

We as coaches have the job of not only coaching but also pointing out the athlete's short falls & guiding them in the areas that they are not managing so well.

### **4. Incorporate dryland work**

This is an area of great concern that we need to incorporate into your coaching programs. The general strength of athletes/ children has diminished quite considerably over the years. Start off with the basics of planking & push ups & if possible pull ups & then incorporate more advanced exercises as the athlete gets older & even get them to join a gym with a tailor made strength program for them.

### **5. Test sets to measure the progress**

There are many test sets that can be done like the T30, 7 x 200m step test, double-distance 400m test, maximum heart-rate test, 8 x 50m efficiency test, kick test set, pull test, speed tests, individual checking speed test & push up test, pull up test, standing long jump test, vertical jump test & plank test.

The aim of these tests is so that more information can be recorded than just a swimmers race time & we can work on areas that need to be improved other than the swimming between two walls in the swimming pool. If an improvement can be made such as the explosive power created off a vertical jump we can improve a swimmers diving ability of the block & wall on their turns, there will be an improvement on the time swim. Increasing the core strength of the athlete helps their ability to keep form in the water for longer & will relate to better times.

## **6. Diet**

What fuel you put in is what you get out.

Is the athlete eating? This is an important question to ask teenage girls & to assess the answer by body language as well as verbal answer.

Are they eating the right foods to be able to train & race?

Are they getting enough carbohydrates & protein in during the day with 2 training sessions & the right amounts during the different cycles of training. No need to be getting high portions of protein when they are in an aerobic phase of training & high carbohydrates when it's an anaerobic cycle. We also need to be mindful that they are hydrated & teach them to be hydrated as this affects their performance greatly in training & on race days.

## **7. Sleep patterns**

We live in a technology driven world & we need to make sure that the athlete is getting enough restful sleep. Too often they go to sleep late because they are chatting to friends or even if they are sleeping their phones are on & the messages are coming though & they aren't getting restful sleep. Parents & athletes need to be aware of these pitfalls & make sure they manage them appropriately by either taking phones away or putting them on silent to have that good night sleep.

## **8. Flexibility**

Being flexible allows the athlete to do the strokes correctly & this translates into time improvements. Having the flexibility in the lower back will translate into a good butterfly stroke & allow for gains in butterfly events. The legs having flexibility won't just help in a good kick but will help for posture on the starting block & being able to engage in more muscle activation & a faster more powerful start.

## **9. Taking a break**

Sometime the physical & psychological needs of the athlete are to take a break from the hard mileage & gruelling work that is put in day after day, especially in the older athlete. Younger swimmers are much more resilient & bounce back from hard work more often than the mature athlete. By taking a time out the body & mind are able to rest & come back stronger than when they left.

## **10. Find the FUN**

Why did they start swimming?

What is it that brings them back every day to training?

Make it fun again for the athlete & ignite the passion for the water again.

## **11. Hard work**

Nothing comes easy, we all have to work hard to achieve our goals. There is no short cut to achieving what we want in the water & the hard work has to be put in. The attendance of the athlete needs to be checked & the attitude at training also needs to be checked.

There is no gain if you make all the sessions but you only put in half the effort. You will only receive the rewards of half the effort. So try engaged the athlete at all training sessions by means that you have available to you. Maybe take the session onto the beach & do some beach training for the day to make things fun & change the training variables.

## **12. The Coach**

Us as coaches hold the key to many of our swimmers success. Let it be because of your approach to the sport, our own passion for the water, because we are great at what we do but we can make or break our swimmers.

You need to be the coach, the doctor, the parent, the psychologist, the dietitian, the friend, you have to be it all & most often than not it is you, the coach who get your swimmers through the plateau that they face. You are there to encourage, uplift, give the race feedback & above all the truth of what is happening at that specific time in their swimming career.

You, the coach have to manage the athlete's expectations & their parent's expectations too. You need to be ready to help & guide the athlete through the dark place of standing still & developing the other areas of the athlete to better themselves to get through the tough times of no Personal bests. With hard work much is able to change but they have to stay in the game to see the benefit.

Being stagnant tests one's dedication to the sport & perseverance in the face of adversity.

To quote A League of Their Own, 'If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. It's the hard that makes it great.'

