



Classification : an overview

Classification in swimming attempts to place individuals with disabilities into groups of comparable ability and function. It is an area that is often controversial. This usually arises from misunderstanding the purpose and basis of the system.

The ultimate purpose is to provide an opportunity for the vast array of physical disabilities to have elite competition at the highest level of sport, the Paralympic Games. The Paralympic Games are the “parallel” Olympics – the Olympics are the highest level of sport for an able-bodied sports person.

Making an Olympics depends on numerous factors – naturally inherited attributes (body shape, height, arm span etc) superior technique and training, the “will” to win, being able to remain injury free at the “right” time and the presence of a large field of strong competitors. These very same factors apply to swimmers with a disability. Making it to the “top” depends on many variables.

It is easy for people to blame the classification system for their inability to make a games – rather than looking at ALL the components that go into making an elite swimmer.

Quite simply, classification provides the structure, which allows swimming competition to take place. It is not designed for participation for all ... just as the Olympics exists for the truly elite sports person.

FAST FACTS ON SWIMMING CLASSIFICATION

- Classification has three components – bench test, water test, observation & confirmation of the class in competition
- Bench testing uses different tests depending on the disability
- Only classification completed by IPC Swimming authorised individuals is recognised
- Individuals should be able to swim 50 metres of at least two strokes with a correct technique and have been in a structured swimming training program for approximately 4 years, before being given a permanent status classification
- The tests used are based on adult swimmers – particularly coordination tests can lead to an inaccurate class in younger swimmers
- If classified at a young age (eg. Under 17) the swimmer will be reviewed upon reaching maturity (this depends on the disability)
- The classes are based on maximised potential of a swimmer with a disability
- There is a wide range of disabilities in a class
- Some swimmers appear to be in the “wrong “ class as they are far behind in the field – this may be due to factors such as poor technique, training, length of time competitively swimming, age etc – all these factors have been considered when allocating the class. The individual may still be developing OR simply not at the top of the field. The same situation exists in able-bodied swimming.
- There will never be a **perfect** system, one that satisfies everyone. The range of disability is unending and each person is unique. To make the sport competitive there are 10 classes for the physically disabled. (NB: Able-bodied swimmers have a range of physical characteristics and have 1 class!).
- Not every swimmer with a disability will become a Paralympian or world class, just as not every able-bodied swimmer will become an Olympian
- The most difficult swimmers to classify are those that sit on the “borderline” of a class. The majority of swimmers fit in the middle of a classification group.
- When swimmers are classified before reaching their full potential – the classification is based on the predicted maximised or fulfilled potential of that swimmer. Any improvement that the swimmer makes by training harder and more effectively should not change the class.
- High achieving athletes are often perceived as being in the wrong class rather than being acknowledged for having talent and being well trained.

- Not all disabilities “fit” the system. It is quite possible to be “legally” disabled and not be allowed to swim in the Paralympics. Some disabilities cannot be tested under system guidelines – these include but are not limited to disabilities based on pain, respiratory conditions and cardiac abnormalities.
- Some individuals do not fit the system as they are not “disabled” enough according to system guidelines. There are clear eligibility rules as to the minimal amount of disability that an individual must have before being allowed in the system.
- The visually impaired or blind are classified using a medically based approach which involves testing eyesight. There are 3 classes.
- As this information is being written the guidelines for inclusion of swimmers with an Intellectual Disability are yet to be determined.
- The system for all swimmers is constantly researched and monitored by IPC Swimming

Want to Know More?

The [Layman’s Guide](#) gives a brief introduction to the different classes.

The [Process for Functional Swimming Classification Brochure](#) gives an overview of the classification process

The [Complete Classification Manual](#) is available for download from this site
IPC Swimming offers an [online course](#) is open to any individual. This forms part of the IPC Swimming program of training to become a classifier.

There are two types of classifiers :Medical classifiers (who have to be Medical Doctors or Physiotherapists) and Technical Classifiers (accredited swim Coach/ Trainers).

All these resources are available through the IPC Swimming website.