IT HAS been a disappointing week for Tao Li at the Singapore National Swimming Championships.

The two-time Olympian only qualified for the women’s 100m butterfly at this year’s South-east Asia (SEA) Games during the six-day meet, which ended yesterday at the Singapore Sports School.

Her meet ended with a whimper, after she lost out on both the gold medal and SEA Games qualification in the 200m butterfly final.

Tao Li, the biggest name in Singapore swimming, is eyeing a much improved showing in the second half of the year.

Her poor form is understandable, after the 23-year-old faced major disruptions due to school commitments and her coach Ian Turner receiving cancer treatment.

She said: “I haven’t been able to train seriously because of school and Turner being ill.

“The 200m fly is a long event and you need a lot of stamina. I’m usually not as strong in the 200m and because I haven’t been able to train properly for the past month, the result isn’t as good as the 100m.

“If I can defer my studies for the rest of the year and focus on my training, I don’t think it will be a problem. With Turner getting better, I can discuss my training plans with him.”

While Tao Li beat the SEA Games qualifying mark of 2:15.70sec when she clocked 2:15.55 in the morning heats, she finished second behind winner Quah Ting Wen (2:13.77) in the evening final, posting a slower time of 2:16.33.

Seven-gold haul

The Singapore Institute of Management undergraduate – she is studying business management – won’t be able to match her seven-gold haul from the 2011 SEA Games (50m, 100m, 200m fly, 100m backstroke, and three relays) as only one 50m event – the 50m freestyle – will feature at this year’s SEA Games in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, from Dec 11 to 22.

Tao is aiming to qualify for the 200m fly and 100m backstroke events, with still a slot each open.

The swimmer, who made history at the 2008 Beijing Games when she became the first Singaporean to qualify for an Olympic swimming final – she finished fifth in the 100m fly – says she has three years of competitive swimming left.

After the SEA Games, Tao Li wants to defend her Asian Games 50m fly gold medal in Incheon, South Korea, next year, and then head for a final flourish at the 2016 Olympics in Rio.

While it has been a tough time for his swimmer, Turner says the hard work must start now.

He said: “I’ve had very little to do with Tao Li since I was diagnosed with cancer last October and I think by her own admission, she’s taken her foot off the gas.

“She realises it and this national championships has been an eye opener for her in as much as there are some good swimmers to beat. She’s got to pull her socks up and become more focused.

“Tao Li’s an experienced athlete and she knows what needs to be done. It’s not a teenager we’re talking to, she’s a very experienced athlete.”

TAO LI SET TO STEP ON THE GAS

Two-time Olympian aims to make up for lost time in the second half of the year

GREGORY LOO
gregloo@sph.com.sg

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Sports

Swimming

WHIMPER: Tao Li (above) fails to qualify for the SEA Games 200m butterfly event after finishing second in the final of the Singapore National Swimming Championships yesterday.