



## **Open Water Swimming**

### **1. Overcoming Your Fears**

The fears and concerns related to open water swimming are very real. The most obvious reason being, most triathletes complete their swim training in the safety of a swimming pool complete with lifeguards, walls on which to rest, lane ropes that calm the water (and to grab if need be) and a shallow bottom on which to walk leaving even the most timid swimmer feeling safe and secure. In the open water these conveniences are not always available, especially in the ocean. Yes, there may be lifeguards on duty, but that doesn't help much when you are 50 yards offshore swimming in fifteen feet of water and the lifeguard appears as a small red dot on the horizon. Add to that the chance of rough seas and swells breaking close to shore as well as the possibility of an undertow, and it's no wonder such fears exist. Lakes are not as bad as the ocean and tend to be a bit calmer, but you still have to keep an eye out for boaters (and critters) and be sure to swim in designated areas.

### **2. Get Out There in the Open Water and Practice, Practice, Practice**

As obvious and cliché as this may sound, it really is the best way to get used to swimming in open water. And you will learn very quickly that swimming in open water is much different than in a pool. For one, there is no thick black line running along the bottom of the ocean or lake to help guide you as you swim. Unless the water is crystal clear, you will have to lift your head to "sight" or see where you are going. And you will probably take a swig or two of water during your swim. So the more you hit the open waters to swim, the better the results.

### **3. Don't Lose Your Goggles**

Nothing is more dispiriting than rushing into the water at the sound of a starting gun only to have your goggles snap off. It's happened to the best of us, and although it's rare, it can be the death-knell for one's racing goals (not to mention one's contact lenses if you wear them).

Always make sure to inspect your goggles the night before your race. Pull the straps gently and look for small tears and ripples that indicate wear and tear, especially at the clips where the straps are secured.

Often, you will find that straps can look shiny and new while showing signs of deterioration at the seams and buckles near the eyepiece. If so, get another pair of goggles and adjust them before you go to sleep; the following race-day morning will be hectic and nerve-wracking, so you won't want to think about preparing a new pair of goggles to fit just right.

Remember that sun, chlorine, and moisture all add to the elements that can cause a strap to break, so take care to keep your goggles dry and wrapped in a towel when not in use.

It is not uncommon to see extra-paranoid swimmers bringing a spare pair of goggles with them during a race (around their neck, wedged into their swimsuits, or even tied around their ankles!). While this is a surefire way to add insurance to your race experience, it is highly unnecessary and cumbersome. Goggles around your neck are dangerous (choking hazard), and all other options are nothing more than dead weight.

One is much better off anticipating a Worst Case Scenario and being prepared for it: Try swimming without your goggles, and accustom yourself to opening your eyes under water. Such drills are invaluable to your confidence should the unexpected occur, and you will be able to cope with such an unforeseen circumstance without sacrificing your entire event. Place your Goggle straps UNDER your swim cap.

#### **4. Train your Brain**

Safety First, no kidding! It seems instructors are always preaching safety. Unfortunately, many drowning accidents in open bodies of water are often easily preventable. Please use your head and leave your ego at home. Don't swim alone in an open body of water unless there is a lifeguard on duty or you have a friend to accompany you. If you are swimming under the watchful eye of a lifeguard, let him/her know your plans and where you will be swimming. If you are planning on swimming in the ocean and the seas are rough...don't bother. It won't make you a tougher swimmer, chances are the race conditions will not be that extreme, and the bottom line is - it may save your life. If you are swimming in a lake, swim in a designated area and swim along the shoreline if possible. Swimming straight out towards the middle of the lake will put you right in the middle of "motorboat" territory. And the boaters will not be looking for you. Plus, swimming along the shoreline will allow you to choose a comfortable depth in which to swim.

#### **5. Getting a Cramp**

Leg cramps while swimming are very common among triathletes, most often striking the calves. This is because triathletes are predominantly lower-body athletes whose legs by virtue of their defined musculature and overall training fatigue are more prone to muscle spasms in the water as their less-flexible legs flay stiffly back and forth. Try taking potassium supplements, bananas and other foods rich in potassium.

#### **6. Test the Waters**

Whether it is just before the start of a race or you are out for a training swim, always test the waters and water temperature. In a race situation, I recommend getting in the water and warming up prior to the start. Get a feel for the water and do some warm-up strokes. If you are going out for a training swim, make sure the water is safe to swim in. Obviously if you are swimming in a public area, there should be no problems. But in areas where you are swimming at your own risk (with a friend of course!), familiarize yourself with the waters and stay close to shore. If you are training and you are wearing a wetsuit, make sure the waters are not too warm. It is easy to overheat when wearing a wetsuit. If the water temperature is above 80 degrees, I recommend swimming without one. By contrast, if the water feels too cold, take some caution. Obviously, a wetsuit helps to create warmth in cooler waters. But for folks swimming in the Northeast, Pacific Northwest and Canada, the water temperature can be dangerously cold, even in the summer months. So again, be careful. If you plan on training in unsupervised waters, I suggest you purchase an underwater thermometer to take with you. You can usually pick one up at a pool supply store or a larger sporting goods store. Simply hold it underwater for a couple of minutes and you will know the exact temperature of the water before you start.

#### **7. Blisters**

Second Skin is a great solution if your blister is a few days old. This product, which you apply to the blister with a small brush, dries over the wound creating a second skin, allowing you the freedom of a painless foray into the water. This product should only be used if the blister is a few days old, as the label suggests. Remember to monitor your blister in the days before a race and snip off the dead skin surrounding it prior to competition. Although it is never recommended to cut away the skin soon after the blister pops (that may result in infection), after a few days it is safe. While it still may sting underneath, the removal of the loose skin will eliminate the distracting flapping you might feel under water.

#### **8. Practice Your Sighting**

Unlike a pool, you will not have a thick black line running along the bottom of the ocean or lake to help guide you in a straight line. Learn to lift your head and sight certain points in order to stay on track. If you are out for a training swim, you will want to look for various land markers. It may be a tall tree, a water tower, or the top of a building, something that you can see each time you lift your head to look forward. In a triathlon, there will be orange markers floating in the water outlining the swim course. Prior to the race, get in the water and practice sighting these markers during your warm-up.

## **9. Chafing**

Chafing is the most easily overlooked Worst Case Scenario that undoubtedly can cause the most grief. Chafing occurs in salt water, where areas of your body rub together and create sports hickies that can last for days (and sting throughout the rest of your event). Common chafing areas are the underarms, neck, and around swimsuit straps and openings. Chafing also occurs if you wear a wetsuit, mostly around the neck or armpits. Vaseline is an easy solution to chafing, and any serious open-water swimmer never packs a swim bag without it. A small amount rubbed around the susceptible areas is all you need to avoid chafing, though Vaseline is not recommended if you use a wetsuit (the petroleum jelly can damage the rubber and cause it to deteriorate over time). There is a great wetsuit-friendly lubricant on the market that triathletes and surfers swear by, called BodyGlide. Found in most sporting goods stores and surf shops, BodyGlide works as well as Vaseline, without the greasy residue. It also comes in a convenient roll-on stick (like anti-perspirant), with none of the mess that results from the manual application that Vaseline requires.

## **10. Have Faith in Your Training and Your Stroke**

It is not uncommon for all of us to get a little panicky during an open water swim. We get so used to swimming in a nice clear pool that we tend to "freak" a little when we realize we can only see a few feet in front of us! And as a result, we tend to lift our head and check our position much too often. Unfortunately, the more we look, the more disruptive we are to our own stroke and pace. This will not only physically wear you out, but it can mentally tire you out as well. So – RELAX and have faith in your training and your stroke. You should be able to swim 5-7 strokes before lifting your head to check without seriously straying off course.

## **11. Learn Bilateral Breathing**

Breathing on Both Sides: If the swim course is an open rectangle whereby you swim out for a short distance then head left or right along the shoreline then back in again, you can use the shoreline as a means of marking your position. However, this may require that you breathe to a particular side that may be uncomfortable. So practice breathing on both sides during your freestyle swim training. Also, breathing on both sides will keep your stroke in balance and allow you to swim straighter for more strokes. During your swim training, practice breathing every three strokes. This will force you to breathe on both sides. If you are uncomfortable at first, use fins or a pull buoy until you develop a feel for this.

## **12. Follow the Bubbles**

During the swim portion of a triathlon (and unless you are the lead swimmer) learn to spot the "kicking" bubbles from swimmers that may be in front of you. Spotting someone in front of you from their kick is just one more way to keep you swimming straight without lifting your head to sight. A word of caution, do not rely solely on these swimmers. Always keep track of the orange markers as well. It is possible to be led off course by the swimmers in front of you. This is another good reason to get out there and test the waters. Check the visibility of the water. If you see others warming up, swim close to them, and practice spotting the bubbles from their kick.

## **13. Take Advantage of the Draft**

Drafting during the swim portion of a triathlon is legal. And placing yourself within a pack of swimmers of similar experience and speed can prove beneficial to your swim performance and overall triathlon performance. There are actually two ways one can draft off another swimmer. One is swimming directly behind a lead swimmer and the other is swimming in the wake of a lead swimmer. And both can be very effective in an open water swim. If you were to swim directly behind a swimmer and close to his/her feet the result would be a "pulling" effect (similar to that created by an outboard motor on a speedboat). If you were to swim in the wake of another swimmer, ideally you would position yourself just off the shoulder of that swimmer. The benefit being, an added push provided by the swells or wake created by that lead swimmer. One note of caution. If you are swimming in a pack, things can get a little rough. There will be swinging arms and kicking feet and you might find yourself getting hit by accident. Try to stay relaxed and let the momentum of the moving water push you along.

#### **14. Swim Without Lane Ropes**

Basically this means you are training in the pool without lane ropes. This can create a heck of a chop and will be the closest thing to an open water swim you will experience in a pool environment. Unfortunately, this may not be convenient or even possible. However, if part of the pool is set up without lane ropes, and there is no "free" swim going on, do your workout in the open portion of the pool.

#### **15. The Start and Positioning**

With the exception of a few specific races, there are two ways you will start a traditional triathlon...either wading in deeper water or beachside which requires a running start. If you start beach side or even in ankle deep water, you will quickly discover you can only run so far in the water before it becomes counterproductive. Unfortunately, you may still be too shallow to start swimming! So what do you do? Many triathletes will "dolphin" for several yards until they are deep enough to begin swimming. "Dolphining" refers to a swimmer taking a shallow dive or leap forward, gliding for a few yards under water, then standing and leaping out again until the swimmer is deep enough to begin swimming. This can be very effective. And you will probably find the more competitive and/or experienced swimmers performing this technique. However, it is not necessary. There is nothing wrong with walking into deeper waters before swimming. Plus, if you are among a large group at the start, most likely, you will not have the room to dolphin. This too will be a result of how competitive you want to be and your swimming background. One note of caution...if you do dolphin...do not dive deep! If you dive too deep you can seriously injure yourself. Know the depth of the water where you are swimming and keep the dive portion of the entry shallow. Finally, regarding Positioning at the start - if you have problems with the masses, then stay out of them! Place yourself to one side of the group or the other prior to the start.

#### **16. Start Out Relaxed**

I have read and heard others recommend to start out your open water swim with a hard or "all out" effort in order to put yourself in a particular position or pack of swimmers and then settle into your pace. And if you are competing in an open water race only, I might agree. However, you are not competing in an open water swim competition. You are competing in a triathlon. After you complete your swim, you then have to jump on a bike and cycle for 10, 25, 56 or even 112 miles. And how you feel after the swim, especially regarding your heart rate, will be a big factor in your overall performance. Starting out too hard on the swim will cause your heart rate to "spike" or shoot up to anaerobic levels, leaving you in oxygen debt at the onset of the race and forcing you to try and "catch your breath" during the "settling in" period. And for most, "settling in" never really happens, regardless of your swimming experience. So build your speed throughout the swim. Start out swimming long and relaxed. Find your pace. And once you have found a good pace, then you can turn it up a notch if you want. This will keep your heart rate lower and leave you better prepared for the bike ride.

#### **17. Drills for Open Water**

Water Polo Drill (or open-face swimming) – Have you ever had the opportunity to watch a water polo match? If you have, then you probably noticed the team members spending most of the match swimming up and down the pool with their face out of the water. Well, the Water Polo Drill is based on this open-faced swimming. Basically, this drill requires that you swim freestyle with your face out of the water. This will help develop the necessary strength to lift your head when sighting during your triathlon without disrupting your freestyle rhythm. However, it is not as easy as it may appear and can put some stress on your neck and lower back. So feel free to start out using fins until you feel comfortable enough to swim without. And do not use a pull buoy

#### **18. Waves**

Open-water swims in the ocean can be a lot more frightening should you face a set of 10-foot breakers when the gun goes off (and any sensible race director will consider postponing the race should that occur). In the event that you find yourself facing down a Perfect Storm-sized behemoth of salt-water force, your first instinct may be to swim over it. NO!

The smartest way to avoid a breaking wave is to dive directly under it. If possible, dive to the bottom and pull yourself forward by grabbing the sand. This serves two purposes: one, it lets the wave pass overhead and safely

keeps you out of range of its pull; and two, it allows you to use the ocean floor as leverage to pull yourself forward while less-seasoned competitors get whitewashed and thrown back.

As frightening as waves look, their bark is always bigger than their bite from the oncoming swimmer's point of view. Underneath, however, the water is quiet and still, and ideal for bypassing the rush above.

Of course, the above Worst Case Scenarios seem rather quaint for those swimmers who may have encountered a shark or Portuguese Man-Of-War. However, these are common horror stories that require very little of your concern, should you wish to avoid them in the future. Pre-awareness is the most important step in avoiding these pitfalls and having a great race.

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