

Open-Water Preparation

With temperatures rising, it can mean one thing only: outdoor swimming! But don't panic.

Andrew Potter is here to allay your fears



Andrew Potter is a BTA-qualified coach who specialises in open-water swimming

The open-water swim leg of a triathlon is usually the most intimidating element for any new athlete to the sport. Even experienced pool swimmers can find open-water swimming introduces challenges that are well beyond their experience and, as a result, they perform below their potential. Once mastered, open-water swimming to pool swimming is like comparing trail running to track sessions, and a time to enjoy being in the outdoors rather than in a chlorinated indoor pool.

The objective of this feature is to ensure you maximise your open-water experience – not only for newcomers to triathlon but also for experienced racers.

Mental approach

Cold water, lack of visibility, waves, current, no rests at the end of the pool, no lane discipline with arms everywhere, not to mention marine life and depth... It shouldn't be that difficult, should it?

Often, people become anxious with new and uncomfortable activities, and it's quite common to feel panicky in open water. But an athlete who is anxious and tight in the water is a slow athlete, so we need to take ourselves up this 'comfort scale' to perform better and reach our potential.

In the pool we're largely focused on our stroke and the bottom of the pool. In colder open water we're distracted by the chill, we have no reference points and visibility is poor. Our mind can play games and wander away from our swimming technique due to the external factors and environment.

Panic or at least distraction creeps in very easily unless we have prepared ourselves – so understanding the elements that increase your own particular level of anxiety or discomfort is the key to swimming better.

Physical anxiety

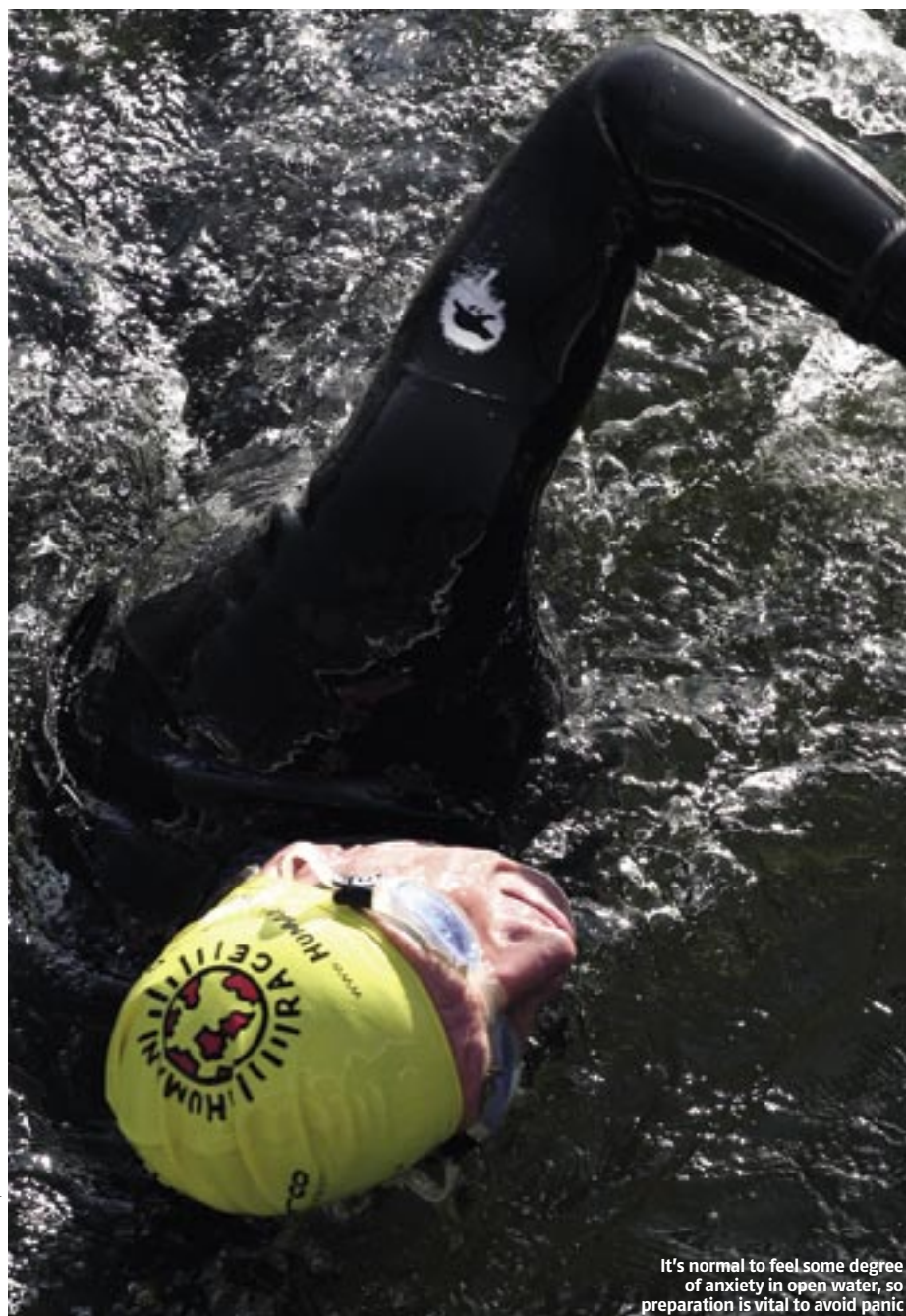
The first element of increasing our comfort level is to ensure our physical comfort. In the

Jargon Buster

Neoprene Made by polymerizing chloroprenes (an elastomer), which are produced when mixing hydrogen chloride and acetylene. This forms the synthetic rubber known as neoprene

Warm-up Low-intensity exercise designed to prepare you for the stringent workout to come.

Acclimatisation Physical or behavioural response to changes in the environment.

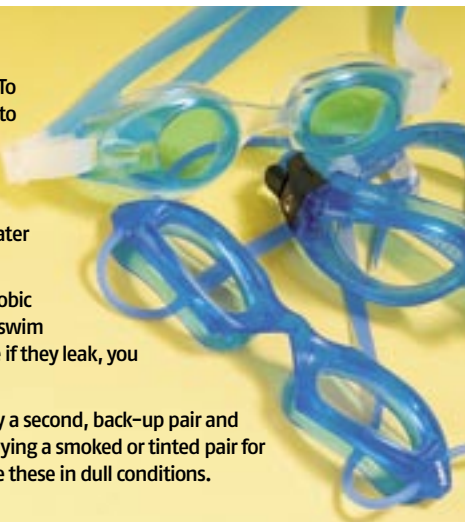


It's normal to feel some degree of anxiety in open water, so preparation is vital to avoid panic

PHOTOS: DAVE TYRRELL, PETE DOWNING

Your goggle of choice

- Choose a pair of goggles or swim mask that fits. To ensure a good seal, gently press the goggles/mask to the face without the strap. If you can look down and they stay on through suction alone, then they're likely to remain leak free.
- Don't use goggles with small sockets for open water because they'll inhibit your vision.
- If you find sighting difficult or have a claustrophobic tendency when in open water, try an open-water swim mask. Again, ensure the mask is a good fit because if they leak, you end up with a lot of water in there.
- Once you've found a type you're happy with, buy a second, back-up pair and take them with you to your races. Also, consider buying a smoked or tinted pair for swimming in very sunny conditions – but don't use these in dull conditions.
- Don't use old goggles – they will fog up.
- When in the water, a little spit goes a long way to help keeping the lens from fogging – although most decent types have an anti-fog coating.
- Straps under the hat or over? Pro for under: goggles more protected. Con: if you do get knocked, they may be harder to adjust. Personally, I have them over so I can reposition them more easily.



“Understanding the elements that increase your level of anxiety or discomfort is the key to swimming better.”

UK our races are usually in waters that are relatively cold, and certainly colder than the pool you may be used to. The British Triathlon Association's (BTA) rules set out the conditions for wetsuit-only swims based on water temperature (see www.britishtriathlon.org for more). So first up, ensure you have a wetsuit and that it fits you. There's a variety of suits to choose from (see last issue for more), but the critical thing is to ensure that it's a good fit all over – especially the lower back and the neck seal.

To guarantee comfort over a long, continuous swim, it's always advisable to apply lubrication to areas where chafing could occur. Use one of the special products that do not affect neoprene, such as Bodyglide, and apply around the neck and under the arms.

In addition to keeping the body warm, we need to think about the head and in particular the ears. Cold water robs the body of warmth 32 times faster than cold air, and it's quite common to see people come out of the water at a race looking drunk. This is often due to the fact that the head and the inner ear have become cold, which affects balance. So make sure you wear a decent swim hat. If possible, swim with two hats (latex ones are thicker and warmer) and ensure they cover your ears. In very cold water, some swimmers use earplugs and

even neoprene hats – these can be very effective, but again it's what suits you.

Our next piece of equipment is goggles. Unlike the pool, sighting and visual awareness is crucial, not only in racing but also to alleviate mental fears. Quite often we hear of swimmers feeling claustrophobic in open water – this may be due in part to not being used to a tight-fitting wetsuit, but also it can be caused by not being able to see very much. So don't use worn-out, scratched or old goggles that fog. Opt for larger types like the Aqua Sphere Seals or Zoggs Predators.

Safety and well-being

When training in open water, safety is paramount. Before leaving the shore, make sure you have thought about what to do if something doesn't go to plan. Largely it's common sense: swim with a buddy; let someone on shore know your plans; stay a safe distance from shore; swim along the beach, not out to sea; and always wear a brightly coloured cap that can be seen. In some areas of the UK, there are specially supervised lake sessions that you can take part in – again, a great way to practise safely.

No matter what the temperature, you're safer in a wetsuit than without because they provide a fair amount of flotation, so if, for example, you do get cramp it's simply a matter of rolling on your back, stretching out and calming down.

Health considerations

It should be mentioned at this point that there are some health hazards when swimming in lakes, rivers and confined waterways. The most widely recognised one is Weils disease (Leptospirosis), a bacterial disease associated mainly with rats. The →



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It's simple: the more time you spend in open water, the more confident you'll become

risks of catching it are quite low, providing you don't swim in polluted water, and take the basic precautions of ensuring any cuts are covered. Also, showering straight after swimming is a must.

Cold-water shock

When plunging into cold water, the body reacts with 'cold-water shock'. This is something that must be respected, so it's a good idea to ease your way in steadily and allow your body to adapt rather than have a shock reaction. If you do have any kind of medical condition that could be affected by sudden shock, seek out expert advice before plunging into any cold water.

The process of jumping into cold water makes us tense up, resulting in very shallow breathing, so entering the water gradually is essential. However, once over the initial immersion, many new open-water swimmers then struggle to put their face in cold water. Again, this needs to be done gradually to build confidence. (Some of the larger open-water swim masks can help beginners as more of the face is covered. You may find this aids confidence levels.)

Once in the water we need to allow ourselves some time to overcome the shallow breathing reaction to the cold. So it's a good idea to adopt a warm-up or acclimatisation routine that can be practised in training and also used in the warm time prior to a swim start. Typically, it should involve some easy swimming, working solely on breathing exhalation and rhythm to counter the body's reaction. Try to swim with a breathing pattern of three, four and even six strokes per breath for around 3-5mins. Then roll over on your back and take some

“Think about varying your training location to include different challenges in order to help build confidence.”

large, controlled breaths. The next part of any warm-up will focus on your stroke. We'd suggest some basic drills, followed by a series of short, increasing-pace swims of 20-30secs, focusing on stroke length and breathing. Finish with around 2-3mins of steady, recovery swimming and stretching.

Prolonged swimming in cold water has different effects on different swimmers, and the length of time you swim for will depend on your own physiology. That said, we can of course develop some acclimatisation to the cold by swimming more often in open water and becoming more and more used to the conditions. Note: when swimming early in the season, keep the sessions relatively short until your body has adapted and the water temperature has begun to rise (in late May).

Fear of the unknown

Familiarity is also a way of reducing your anxiety levels so regular training in open water is a must. Of course, when you arrive somewhere new for a race, you may be back in the anxious zone because the venue will be unfamiliar territory. Expanding your experience will help build confidence, so think about varying your training location to confront different challenges, rather than practising at the same venue all the time. For the novice, it's a good idea to start in a

Open-water swim venues

Where Heron Lake, Wraysbury, Middlesex
When Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, 6:00-9:00am, from 29 April '07
Cost £4 per swim or £30 for a 10-swim ticket
Contact Rick Kiddle 07770 391966
rick@rickkiddle.com www.sbrsports.com

Where Serpentine, Hyde Park, London
When Daily, 6:00am-9:30am, all-year round
Cost £20 per annum
Contact Alan Titmuss AlanTitmuss@aol.com
www.serpentineswimmingclub.com

Where Eastney Beach, Portsmouth
When Begins 4:30 pm on 7 May '07. Subsequently, swims will take place at 9:00am every Saturday morning until September '07
Cost n/a
Keith Mould 023 924 31812
Contact enquiries@portsmouthtriathletes.co.uk
www.portsmouthtriathletes.co.uk

Where Lyn Tegid Bala Wales
When Ad-hoc sessions organized by the British Long Distance Swimming Association
Cost n/a
Contact Maurice Ferguson 01606 75298
maurice-feri@tiscali.co.uk
www.blds.org.uk

Where Gullane Bents, Gullane, East Lothian
When Ad-hoc sessions organized by Edinburgh Tri
Cost n/a
Contact Edinburgh Tri www.edinburghtri.org

controlled lake environment and then, as the confidence builds, progress to larger lakes and sea swims – this should increase your levels of comfort through progression. With this sort of preparation, when you arrive at a race you'll have a positive mindset.

If you're at a new race venue, try and swim prior to the race. You should at least swim prior to the race start, using your warm-up routine to increase your familiarity with that particular patch of water. The more you decrease the mental unknowns, the better your swim will be.

Okay, that's enough for this issue. Next month we'll give you the stroke skills and sighting advice to cruise through any body of open water. ■

Find out more...

www.swimming.about.com A good all-round site for swim articles, it's aimed at all levels of ability.

DVD: Open Water Swimming Series: Level 1
Rick Kiddle. Lays the fundamentals for better outdoor efforts.

www.blds.org.uk The British Long Distance Swim Association (BLSA) provides race listings.



PHOTOS: JONNY GAWLER, THANKS TO MIKE TREES (WWW.OPENWATERSWIMUK.COM), NIGEL FARROW

Swimming straight in choppy open water is a key skill to getting through the swim leg in good shape

Open-Water Swim Skills

Once you're in the water, you need to know the most efficient way to get round the swim course. **Andrew Potter** has the essential advice...



Andrew Potter is a BTA-qualified coach who specialises in open-water swimming and runs T3 Performance Coaching

After last month's look at getting comfortable and confident in open water [see *Open-Water Preparation*, issue 207], it's time to look at racing and the specific skills you can practise to help you. We'll also discuss the adjustments you may need to make for racing in seas or rivers to cope with any waves and currents.

Having practised and become more comfortable in open water, the actual race



Jargon Buster

Warm-up Low-intensity exercise designed to prepare you for the stringent workout to come.

Marker buoys The floating course markers that show you the route in the swim leg of an open-water triathlon.

Swim exit The point where competitors leave the water to make their way to the transition zone.

Sighting Regularly popping your head up above the water while you're swimming to check that you're heading in the right direction.

Drift The direction bodies in the water will travel when carried by the current.

Upstream Moving against the current in a river.

Downstream Moving with the current in a river.

Drafting Swimming closely behind the feet of the swimmer in front to take advantage of the area of low pressure in their wake that allows you to swim with less energy.

Breakers Waves toppling over as they hit the beach.

“Quite often, marker buoys that are easy to spot from dry land become much less visible in the water.”

but once you're in the water they become much less visible. Knowing the course will at least help you visualise the direction you need to follow when you're trying to sight the markers.

One very effective method of minimising the disruption sighting can cause to your stroke is to use taller landmarks on the race line or shore rather than the buoys themselves. Often in a lake swim it's also possible to walk around the course, look at the turns and work out some landmarks and sight lines that you can use from the water. Choose large, tall objects that are easily visible. Make special note of the last part of the course and the swim exit, especially if it's a different place from the start.

Once you're in the water, if the first buoy is not too far away, swim the first stretch as part of your warm-up, and once there check the direction to the next course marker.

You can also check for any current – if the course is in the sea – by swimming to the first buoy and floating near to it to observe your drift. You can take this into account when choosing your line to the first turning point.

If it's a major event, there's often time to carry out a practice swim prior to the race. This can be invaluable in helping you establish sight lines and land-based markers around the course. Make a special effort to note the route from the last buoy to the exit, and see if you can find a shore marker because it's sometimes pretty tricky to swim the last bit in a straight line. →

will throw up a whole set of new challenges. And if you're not prepared for them, they could immediately undermine any confidence you had in your open-water practice sessions.

Apart from the start (which we'll cover next month), one of the biggest challenges in a race is to keep swimming in the right direction; otherwise known as navigation.

Navigation

There are two elements to ensure your 1.5km swim doesn't become 1.6km: planning and sighting technique.

Planning amounts to carrying out some research prior to jumping in the water to help you understand the course. Quite often the marker buoys are easy to spot from dry land,



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Sighting technique

This should be practised so that the act of sighting is incorporated into your stroke and disrupts you and your momentum as little as possible. The most common error is to confuse sighting with breathing – if you look up and forward and try to take a breath at the same time, your legs are going to sink, which will stop you dead in the water.

Instead, try looking forward by only slightly raising your head so only your eyes are above the water. This way you can keep exhaling beneath the surface and your body remains flat with your legs up. Then you inhale as you normally would by putting your head back in the water and rolling to the side on the next stroke. Sighting like this is referred to as the crocodile technique as only your eyes peak out above the surface.

Sometimes the initial sight gives you only a rough idea of where you're headed, so practising taking two sights on successive strokes is useful. The second sighting allows you to hone in on the point you're looking for. It's equally important to not lift your head up too far or for too long. You need to keep the swim rhythm to ensure your momentum is maintained. After sighting, make small adjustments to your stroke; otherwise you'll end up zig zagging.

Sighting can be practised in a pool. If you have a pace clock at the end of the pool, try practising your sighting technique in a set and noting the clock's second hand to see your mid-pool splits. You can also practise the double sighting technique this way.



1 Swim as normal but, instead of looking down into the water, raise your head so your eyes peak out above the surface while you continue to exhale.



2 Ensure you don't raise your head too far because this will unbalance your body position in the water, causing your legs to drop and stalling your momentum.



3 Once you've sighted, return your head to the looking down position in the water. Continue exhaling gently as you repeat one more stroke cycle...



4 ...Then, the next time you bring your arm through the recovery phase, roll to the side to inhale as you normally would.

Swimming straight

Swimming straight is also a skill that can be improved with practice – and it's actually easier to practise in open water. Training in open water allows you to swim with your eyes closed without fear of hitting an oncoming swimmer or wall.

Choose a buoy or set of markers about 30m away, close your eyes and aim to swim straight towards them. Sight every so often just to check you're not swimming off course and swim slowly until you improve your ability to keep going straight.

As you increase your pace, keeping straight becomes more difficult, so practise this drill at different effort levels and get to know your stroke. In a race situation this practice will enable you to gauge how often you may need to take a sight – typically it could be anything from eight strokes to 12.

Following other swimmers can enable you to sight less often (provided they're going straight) but there's no substitute for being able to swim straight and developing a good sighting technique.



Turning technique

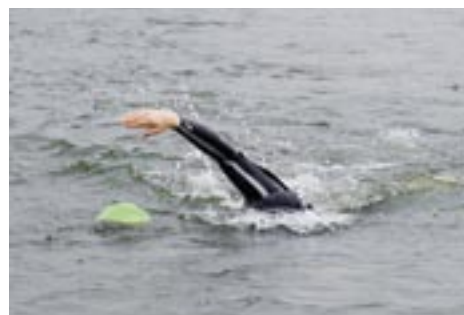
If the turn is very sharp, there are two ways to change direction fast, the first of which is the sweep turn.

Use the arm that's closest to the inside of the turn as a pivot by keeping it straight and deep through the underwater phase of the stroke. Then, with the arm that's on the

outside, take wide, 'sweeping' strokes to push you round the turn.

Secondly, there's the roll turn, where you roll onto your back mid turn before turning 90° as you roll back onto your front. In effect, it's like doing one stroke of backstroke to cause a complete change of direction.

SWEEP TURN



1 Approach the turn, keeping as close to it as possible to ensure you take the shortest route around it.



2 Once your head is level with the buoy use your inside arm (above the water) as a pivot on the next stroke.



3 Drive your inside arm straight and deep into the water to act as the pivot around which you'll turn.



4 Take wide, sweeping strokes with your outside arm to change direction around the turn.

ROLL TURN



1 Swim up to the turn using your normal front-crawl stroke until you draw level with the buoy.



2 As you pass the buoy, roll over onto your back as your arm comes through to take the next stroke.



3 Throw your recovering arm over as though you're doing back stroke, to roll onto your back...



4 ...Then, use your next stroke to roll you back onto your front and take you round the turn.

Drafting

During a race it's possible to reduce your effort substantially by 'drafting' behind another swimmer. It's much the same as drafting behind someone on the bike – allowing the person ahead to break the wind, or, in this case, water.

Of course, swimmers vary in their ability to swim straight and in their kick technique. Drafting a swimmer with a relaxed kick is a lot easier than following a washing machine.

Just like on the bike, if you're too far from the swimmer in front, the effect soon disappears, so you literally need to be swimming just off the back of their feet. Get too close too often and hit the swimmer ahead and it's likely they'll start kicking harder to make your life unpleasant, so practise staying in the right place. It's a useful skill and one that you can practise outside the race situation.

Arrange a small group of up to four swimmers (although you can do this in pairs) and swim 20-40 strokes on the front and then swing out to the side and let the second swimmer come through and rejoin at the rear. Your aim is to see if you can keep the group together and mimic the draft situation you'll get in a race. →



Practise swimming in a group to prepare yourself for the melee of racing, as well as getting used to drafting



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Current

In sea or river courses you may encounter currents. There are no specific differences to technique when you're racing in water with a current but it can have an impact on your performance. Depending on its direction, it can make you swim further (or shorter), and may make holding a straight line and navigating turns more difficult.

Mentally, it can also affect you as, if you're on an out-and-back course, you may have the current with you one way and against on the way back. As such, the swim can, in effect, be much longer if the second half is against the current, so beware and pace yourself!

Your navigation lines need to be adjusted when the current runs across the course. In these circumstances, simply sighting and aiming for the buoy will result in you swimming in an arc and taking a longer course to reach the turn (see Pic 1). What you need to do is to aim above (or below) the marker to compensate for the drift the cross current will cause.

When approaching a turn in a cross current that takes swimmers 'below' the turn, it's common to see swimmers struggling around the turn – so make allowances early.

In the sea, you can check for any current on the course by swimming to the first buoy and floating nearby to see you drift. You can then adjust your line to counter the current as you approach the first turning point and beyond.

In rivers, the current may vary considerably, and choosing to swim a longer route to avoid it can often be advantageous. Generally, the shallower the water, the weaker the current, with the stronger areas being in the deeper parts. On bends, the river will be deeper on the outside. So if you're swimming upstream, keep to the inside of the bend; when you're coming back down, stay on the outside (see Pic 2).

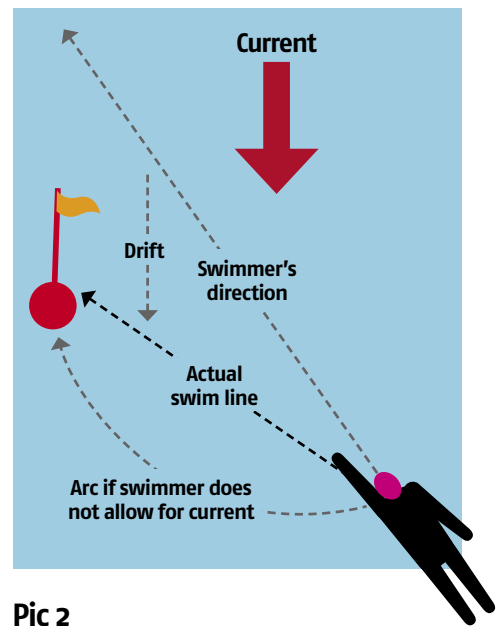
Waves

You only really encounter waves in large open-water lakes or the sea. There are various kinds – sea swell, waves or wind chop. Waves travel in one direction and take you up and down; chop is lots of little waves with no apparent direction to them and a swell is a large wave.

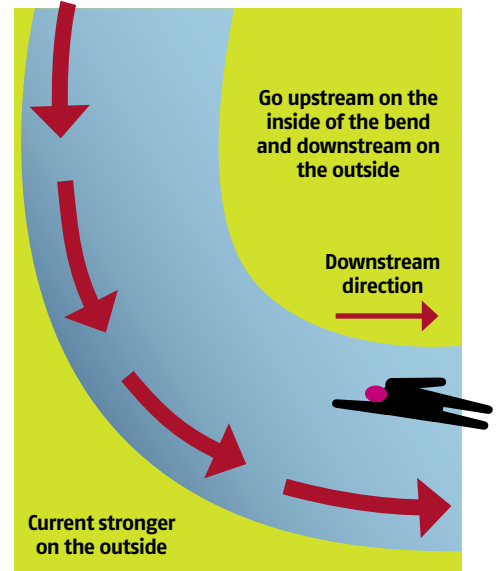
When waves reach shallower water they become steeper and, of course, when they hit a beach they can turn into breakers.

Swimming in waves may mean that you need to use a higher arm recovery. If it's too low, your hand could enter the water too early or be hit by a wave unexpectedly, causing you to unbalance. Since waves move in the same direction, if they're coming from your right and you can only breathe to the right, you're likely to swallow a lot of water and won't be

Pic 1



Pic 2



very comfortable. This is one good reason to learn bilateral breathing so you can adjust the side to which you breathe.

Sighting is also much harder in waves and swells. Taking your sight at the top of a wave is important – you won't see anything from the trough. Again, practice helps.

Breakers affect your start and exit, which we'll look at in detail in the next issue.

Summary

So, with your new found comfort in open water, you can begin to replicate race-related challenges such as sighting, navigation and swimming straight to better equip yourself for the challenge of racing.

In addition, you can begin to think about waves, currents and sea swimming – all good for building the experience you need to tackle a wide variety of race venues. Next time we'll look at how we put all this to use in an actual race situation. ■



Converting a good training regime into a fast race time is an art – and it all starts before you get in the water

Open-Water Racing

Race day is when you need to put all of your preparation into practice.

Andrew Potter helps you ensure your performance goes according to plan



Andrew Potter

is a BTA-qualified coach who specialises in open-water swimming and runs T3 Performance Coaching

All your swim training and open-water practice is leading towards one thing: racing. Your key objective is to make sure you put all that preparation and planning to good use by keeping it together on race day to ensure a good performance.

Swimming well in training is one thing, but if you fall apart under race conditions then it's all been for nothing. That's why we're dealing with the specific challenges you'll face during an open-water triathlon swim this month.

Putting everything into place to ensure you have a good swim begins before you even get in the water. It's been said many times but you should always allow plenty of time to get ready before the start of the race. There are plenty of things to prepare prior to the swim, and there's nothing worse than working yourself up into a panic by trying to get them all done when you're short on time.

Take an early bath

Getting into the water prior to the start is crucial. It gives you a chance to acclimatise to the water temperature, relax, warm up and prepare yourself for the fast pace at the start.

You also need a good understanding of the swim course so you can plan your route. This makes navigating easier – especially if there are currents and turns to deal with [see last issue's 'Open-Water Swim Skills' – Ed]. It's also

Jargon Buster

Wave start The art of staggering a busy race to limit crowding when everyone heads into the water.

Clear water Making sure that you've got as much free space around you while you're swimming.

Drafting Swimming closely behind the feet of the swimmer in front to take advantage of the area of low pressure in their wake that allows you to swim with less energy.

worth swimming to the first turn to help you check sight lines, as marker buoys aren't always visible when you're in the water.

Most races start in groups – known as waves – in order to prevent bunching on the bike course. Watch a couple of starts and see how people are setting off. Pay attention to what happens: look out for squeeze points, which swimmers have the best line and where clear water emerges.

Swim starts

Swim starts can be either water or land based. Water starts begin with you treading water; land (or shore) starts have you standing at the water's edge or running down the beach. Make sure you know which one you'll be facing and prepare yourself appropriately.

Your other key considerations are the direction and distance to the first turning point, currents, and the number and level of swimmers in your wave.

Your swimming ability should dictate your race plan and starting position. If you're a novice swimmer, it's best to start nearer the back or sides, as you'll find more clear water quicker. Always avoid the front of your wave as the faster swimmers will be fighting to get past you. If you're an advanced swimmer, correct positioning is crucial for a clean start.

How to beat the traffic

Wherever you position yourself at the start, it will be busy, so creating space for yourself is a good idea. If it's a water start, most people will begin by treading water near each other in a vertical position. The trouble with doing this is that when the starter pistol fires and everyone moves into a horizontal

position to start swimming, you end up fighting for space with everyone else.

The best way around these congestion problems is to stay afloat horizontally as you wait for the start by sculling with wide arms and a light leg kick. This allows you to create some space around you for those all-important first few strokes.

If it's a shore start, it's essential that you practise the entry into the water so you know how the ground lies to avoid tripping. It's also imperative that you have a short swim before you start to make sure your goggles are on properly and not leaking. Once they're in place, leave them alone – further fiddling will increase the chances of leaks.

The dolphin technique is useful for shore starts where there are waves or the water is too deep to run fast in but too shallow to swim in (see the explanation below). It's faster than swimming in shallow water and is essential for helping you dive under any incoming waves. It's also helpful for getting ahead and creating space for yourself. Practising the dolphin technique before the race is vital so you know how shallow the water is and when to switch to swimming.

THE DOLPHIN TECHNIQUE



1 Running into the water: as the water becomes deeper, prepare to dive forward with both arms.



2 First dolphin dive: launch forward and dive into the water, aiming to go as long as possible.



3 Underwater phase: in waves you should plan to time this so that you dive below the oncoming wave.



4 Placing your hands on the bottom, push up to help plant your feet and prepare for the next dive.



5 Now bend your knees and launch yourself forward for the second dolphin dive.



6 Repeat the sequence until the water is mid-thigh or so, then it's more efficient to swim.

Swim at an even pace, focusing on breathing and rhythm, and the chances are you'll put in a strong finish



Pacing yourself

Once the race starts you need to judge your pace. The more experienced and faster swimmers will tend to go out hard to get clear of the pack, often swimming at almost full speed for over 100m before settling down into a more aerobic effort. For novice swimmers this fast-start pacing plan may not be the best approach – it's actually much better to go steady and to focus on breathing and rhythm. This way you'll finish the swim more strongly by not having swum anaerobically at the start.

After the start you need to swim at a sustainable pace. Most triathletes have real problems with knowing how fast they're swimming, especially when there's no clock or turn after each 25/50m. It's therefore very important to know your limits – using the pace clock or a watch to measure your swim workouts in training will pay dividends when converting to open water.

A great workout if you're racing 1,500m in open water is to swim a 10-12 x 100m with a 10sec rest between each 100m. Note the start and finish times and deduct the rest intervals (10-12 x 10 secs). Aim to swim at an even pace. You'll probably notice that the first five or six are relatively easy but then it becomes increasingly difficult to hold pace. If that's the case you know you're swimming too fast, so you should adjust your pace the next time

you do it. When it comes to the race, use your experience from these workouts to ensure you don't set off too fast, only to fade later.

Good course knowledge is also a big advantage, as you'll know how far you have left to swim. Unless it's an out-and-back course, it can be tricky to judge how hard to push. The best tip is to not increase your pace unless you know you can sustain it.

Drafting (swimming directly behind another swimmer) can save a lot of energy – as much as 25% – yet it means finding the right feet to follow during the chaos of a swim start, so you need to track someone who

kicks smoothly and swims at a similar pace to you. This may prove tricky, but it could prove invaluable – especially if you're beginning to feel tired at the end of the swim.

Watching other swim starts to see if there's a favoured side of the course will also help, as will being fully aware of what's going on around you. (See last issue for more on drafting during the swim.)

Less-experienced swimmers are often tempted to stop to look where they are and catch their breath. You'll save a lot of time if you don't do this and swim continuously, however slowly, through the course. →

Taking the turns

When you reach a turning buoy you'll have a lot less space to swim in as everyone converges around the buoy to change directions. At this point, your awareness of your position in the water, in relation to your fellow swimmers, plays a crucial role in your final placing.

The worst place to be is squashed up in the middle of the pack. The shortest route around the inside of the turn is the fastest but that's what everyone is aiming for, leaving you with two choices: you either accept that you might have to slow down and fight for space, or you can take a wider line and stay out of trouble.

Alternatively, if there's a large pack arriving at the turn together, it may be best to back off



from everyone else and take the inside line once it's clear. Being aware of what's going on around you will help you make your decision regarding the best course of action much easier.

Swim exits

Knowing the best line to take from the last turn to the swim exit will save you seconds, so check it out before the race.

If the exit is up a steep bank then you may face steps or a ramp, so it's wise to investigate how far into the water they extend so you're prepared for them. Alternatively, if the exit is onto a beach, you may find using the dolphin technique useful for the final stretch.

Think ahead as you approach the exit so you're ready for it and know what to do. Some people advocate kicking harder towards the end of the swim to get some more blood flowing into your legs. Be careful, though, as too much kicking with your big thigh muscles will set your heart rate racing and you'll be anaerobic as you run to transition.

Be prepared to feel a little unbalanced as you go from swimming to standing. Cold water can affect your inner ear, and therefore your balance, which is why I recommend wearing at least two swim caps.

The first thing to do once you're out of the water is to move your goggles onto your forehead to give you full visibility. It's best to leave them there for the time being, so that you've got both hands free to begin removing

Training for open water

Use the sessions suggested here to give your open-water swim training some structure. It'll also add a bit of variety and fun...

- ▶ Start each session with a warm-up. Focus on breathing and overcoming the cold-water shock. Use different breathing patterns and roll onto your back for breathing exercises, relaxation and visualisation of your start plan or swim session.
- ▶ Practise slowing down your stroke and focusing on technique with some drills – for example, the catch-up stroke (delay stroking with your leading hand until your recovering arm catches up with it).
- ▶ Do a progression of short swims at pace, keeping your breathing and rhythm steady to raise your heart rate and warm-up.
- ▶ Finish your session with a longer, steady swim followed by stretching.
- ▶ Practise swimming 'blind' to improve your ability to swim straight (see *Open-Water Swim Skills* in the previous issue).
- ▶ Develop your sighting technique in the pool, as well as using sighting points on the shore in open water to help you stay on track.
- ▶ Swim with one or two training partners to practise swimming as close as you can to each other to simulate a race situation. Take turns at being the annoying one splashing water!
- ▶ Practise swimming for time instead of distance. Increase the time you swim without resting to get used to a continuous effort in open water.
- ▶ Try swimming with an unzipped wetsuit, then stop and zip it up in the water. Now if this happens in a race, you won't panic but just stop and fix it. The same applies to your goggles.
- ▶ Develop your ability to draft by swimming in a line with others and taking turns at setting the pace at the front.

your wetsuit. Peeling down the top half of your wetsuit as you run to transition will save you valuable time, so make sure you know where your suit's closure fastenings are and how to operate them while running.

Leave the waist and legs of your wetsuit on until you get to your slot in transition. Once

you're there, pull both sides as far down your legs as possible at the same time. Then stand on the suit with one leg while you lift the other leg out, before swapping legs to get your other one clear. If your suit is tight, applying a little lubricant around your ankles before the race should help. Alternatively, you can cut the bottom few inches of the legs off, which will make the openings a little wider – just be careful not to damage the seams.

Summary

Each open-water swim presents its own specific challenge, and you need to be able to familiarise yourself with their particular characteristics. This means finding ways of reducing your anxiety levels, increasing your comfort, and maximising your focus on technique and race strategy.

Choosing a wetsuit that meets your needs, preparing well and practising your race skills – as well as carrying out a good warm-up routine – will enable you to take minutes off your time. Whatever may happen during a race, the better prepared you are, the more likely it is you'll remain in control.

Remember: a tight, anxious swimmer is also a slow swimmer. So keep calm, stay relaxed, remain in control and you'll swim better than ever this season. ■

Find out more...

www.britishswimming.co.uk The website of the national swimming governing body. Contact them for information on any open-water events and venues near you.

Open Water Swimming: A Complete Guide for Distance Swimmers and Triathletes Penny Lee Dean (Human Kinetics, 1998) ISBN 0880117044.

Rick Kiddle: Open Water Swimming Series 1 DVD Impressive open-water coaching advice.

SWIM EXITS



1 Goggles lifted and running out of the water, release the neck Velcro fastening on the wetsuit.



2 Now just grab the cord and pull the rear zip right down as you step onto dry land.



3 Pull the wetsuit off your shoulders and then slide one arm out at a time.



4 Release your arms, roll the wetsuit down to your waist, and take off your hat and goggles.