

Open Water Training and Racing Tips

Equipment

- **Choose your swim suit wisely.** Most importantly, you need to be comfortable during an open water swim. You will be in the water for a while, so if the suit rubs or chafes your skin, you WILL notice! Don't wear a suit that has tight shoulder straps. You need to be able to move your arms. Don't wear a tight racing suit that puts pressure on your rib cage. You need to be able to breathe!
- **Wearing a wetsuit?** If you're going to wear a wetsuit, make sure you have trained in it so that you know how it feels in the water. Wetsuits do keep you warm and they do make you faster (because you are more buoyant in the water), but they also restrict your movement and can cause you to overheat if you're wearing one when you don't really need it.
- **Grease up!** Make sure to bring a tub of Vaseline (or a similar chafe-preventing substance) with you on race day. In fact, you might even want it during your training sessions. Rub a thin layer on your body where your suit has a tendency to run (underarms, neck, upper inner thighs, etc.) This is especially important in salt water. If the water in which you're swimming is cold, make the layer of Vaseline thicker on your body. In addition to reducing the rubbing, it will also keep you warm.
- **Wear goggles that float.** Open water races can be rough. You might get jostled or pushed around. If your goggles are knocked off and sink to the bottom, you'll have a very difficult time completing the swim. To prevent this from happening, start using a type of goggles that floats or, if you prefer a variety that sinks, tie a small flotation device to the back strap.
- **Consider your cap.** If you're going to wear a swim cap during your race, make sure you practice with it as well. You might be forced to wear a cap during a race for safety reasons (organizers often choose fluorescent colors so that competitors can be easily spotted), so it is often a good idea to get used to it ahead of time. If the water is cold, consider wearing two caps and try silicone instead of latex. It will keep you warmer.
- **Feeding time.** If you're planning to do a long race that will require a boat to be by your side, make sure you know how you will be getting nutrition from your coach. Most swimmers make a "feeding stick" that can be reached from the guide boat to the swimmer. You can use a broom or mop, cut off the top, and fashion a wire ring to the end. The ring should be big enough to hold a plastic cup so that you can easily grab and drink without taking too much time to interrupt your pace.

Nutrition

- **Thirsty?** Staying hydrated is one of the most important things you can do for yourself as an athlete. This means drinking plenty of fluids before, during and after your swims. While you should ensure that you are properly hydrated throughout all of your training and preparation, the day before a race is particularly important. Carry a water bottle with you wherever you go. A diluted sports drink typically works best, but drink whatever works for you. Your goal is hydration, so stay away from caffeinated and carbonated beverages and avoid drinking alcohol as you prepare for a race.
- **The most important meal of the day.** Make sure to give yourself plenty of time in the morning to eat a good breakfast. If you want your body to perform, you need to give it the appropriate type of fuel. Learning what you can and cannot handle before swimming takes time and practice, so make sure you test different combinations throughout your training. Most swimmers find that as long as they have eaten well the night before, a light breakfast comprised mainly of carbohydrates but with a small amount of protein works best.
- **Keep the calories coming!** It is important that you provide your body with nutrition not only before and after your swim, but also throughout the course of the event. This is especially true if you are training or racing for several hours. Again, learning what works for you takes time and practice, so do not let race day be your first attempt at eating and drinking while swimming. Many athletes find that drinking a few ounces of a moderately diluted sports drink every ten to fifteen minutes works well when combined with a stronger nutritional supplement every hour or so. Gel packs are ideal. Small chunks of banana work well for some swimmers. Keep in mind that it is difficult to chew when your face is in the water, so pick a food or gel that is easy to swallow. Your goal is to keep your blood sugar as level as possible and to prevent your body from completely depleting your glycogen stores. Simple carbohydrates work the best – so find something that works for you and practice consuming it as you train.
- **Eat (and drink) to recover.** In order to help your body recover from one swim and prepare for the next, you should be eating as soon as possible after an event. It does not need to be a feast – a simple sports bar and several ounces of a fluid replacement drink will do wonders. Keeping snacks in your locker at the gym, in your swim bag, in your car or in your purse is a great way to make sure you always have nutrition readily available so that you can keep your body in peak condition.

Training

- **Long slow distance.** If you're planning to do a long race, make sure you get used to long, even paced swimming during your training sessions. This might mean doing 1, 2 or even 3 miles of straight swimming at a time. You can certainly stop at the wall to take a quick sip from your water bottle, but then be sure to ease right back into your rhythm.
- **Easy on the shoulders.** Swimming can be tough on your shoulders, so you should do as much as possible to take care of them. If your shoulders start to bother you during your workouts, roll over on your back and stretch them out by incorporating more backstroke into your workouts. In addition, make sure to pick up a surgical tubing cord and strengthen your rotator cuffs for 3-5 minutes after each training session.
- **Keep it fresh by cross-training.** Not all of your training needs to be done in a pool. Running and biking are excellent activities for building endurance and cardiovascular fitness, even if you're not planning on doing a triathlon. If you're getting bored with your swimming workouts, throw in an hour on the bike at the end or pack your tennis shoes in your swim bag and finish your workout with a 30 minute jog. Your overall fitness will improve and you will add some variety to your routine.
- **Abs of steel.** While you might think you need to focus mainly on strengthening your arms and legs in order to swim well, you would be surprised by how much your ability to move quickly and efficiently through the water actually depends on the strength of your core. Swimming is all about rolling from side to side and maintaining balance in the water. Tighten up those abs each and every day with a few crunches and some core exercises and you WILL notice a difference!
- **Stretch your limits!** Stretching is one of the most important activities you can incorporate into your training. Not only will your muscles loosen and lengthen, but you will also help yourself recover more thoroughly between workouts. Stretching can help prevent injury and, best of all, you just feel better when you do it!

Racing

- **Where are you going?** Open water swimming requires you to be aware of your surroundings. You need to be able to swim in a straight line from one buoy to the next without being guided off-course by the swimmers around you. Sighting is a skill that can be practiced. When you're swimming in a pool, set a brightly colored object (a kickboard works well) at the end of your lane and practice glancing up at it every few strokes as you swim toward it. More importantly, practice looking behind you as well. Make sure you are swimming in a straight line from where you started toward your object – no need to waste any effort swimming a longer route than necessary!
- **Big bright buoys.** Even though you might have practiced sighting in a pool, finding the buoys during an open water race can still be challenging. When you get to an event, make sure you look at the race course before you enter the water. If you can, do a warm up swim on the course and take note of where the buoys are. If it's wavy, you might not be able to see the buoys no matter how big and orange they are. Find something along the shoreline that is easier to see – a unique building, perhaps, or a dip in the tree line that is directly above the buoy. When you're swimming, aim for the building or the tree instead of the buoy and you know you'll be going the right way.
- **Tighten your turns.** If you can, try to quicken your pace as you approach a turn buoy during an open water swimming race. Stay as close to the buoy as possible, swim around it and then immediately lift your head and look up so that you can set yourself on a straight path for the next leg of the race.
- **Follow the leader.** Let someone else do the work during an open water race. By swimming directly behind another person, you will conserve energy so that you can use it at the end to sprint ahead and beat that person to the finish. This tactic is referred to as “drafting” and is used in other sports such as running and cycling as well. Before you decide to sit on someone's heels, though, make sure that person knows the course and is swimming is guiding you in the right direction!
- **Kick it into high gear!** Throughout the majority of an open water swim, you should be kicking enough to keep your body afloat but letting your arms do most of the work. As you approach the finish line, however, you should turn on your legs and allow them to motor you home. If you're doing the first leg of a triathlon, this is a great way to warm up your legs for the cycling portion of the race. If you're swimming a race that requires you to run out of the water for an on-land finish, this is a perfect way to get the blood flowing to your feet so that you don't fall over as soon as you stand up. If you're simply doing an open water swimming race with an in-water finish, kicking into high gear at the end ensures that you have given it your very best effort and allows you to leave your competition in your wake!