

## Open Water Swimming

I just got done conducting my annual training camp for my athletes out at Innsbrook. Without a doubt, the biggest benefit to the athletes is the opportunity to practice open water swimming. And we practice open water swimming a lot. The first time a triathlete tries open water swimming (especially if wearing a wetsuit for the first time) can be a highly stressful situation: the first time can feel like you are swimming in outer space. Below I have summarized what I have learned teaching people to open water swim over the years. While it is geared towards the beginner, the experienced triathlete may find some helpful hints.

- 1) Panic attacks are very common. Just because you get one does not mean you are a terrible person or a complete failure in life. I have seen brand new swimmers have panic attacks. I have also seen highly experienced triathletes have panic attacks during a race. It happens. In fact it happens quite a bit, so don't let it get you down. You can work through the issues that cause panic attacks.
- 2) Before you attempt your first open water swim, you need to practice in the pool. Make sure you can cover twice the distance of your first open water swim without stopping. For example, if you plan on doing Octomax with a 500 yard swim, make sure you can swim 1000 yards without stopping. You need to develop total confidence that you have the fitness to cover the distance required. I also suggest that you learn to do flip turns instead of hanging on the wall at each turn. As you know, there aren't any walls to hang on to in a lake so get used to swimming without hanging or stopping. I also suggest you practice sighting in the pool because you will definitely need that skill in open water. And finally, practice breathing on each side.
- 3) If you plan to wear a wetsuit in your open water swim (which I highly recommend since it helps you float), practice swimming in your wetsuit in the pool several times. I know you will look ridiculous and it might get hot, but you need to feel comfortable in the wetsuit. Wetsuits fit extremely snugly and everyone complains at first that they have a hard time breathing and that they are constricting. Swim in your wetsuit, relax, get comfortable and find a rhythm. Practice deep slow breathing while wearing your wetsuit.
- 4) I highly suggest you buy a Tempo Trainer which is a metronome for swimming. What happens to most new people is that when they begin swimming in open water the first time, they have no point of reference (lane lines, stripe, clock, end of pool) to gauge speed and/or distance, so they swim way too hard and fast at the beginning. They get out of breath quickly and thus the panic cycle sets in. Using a Tempo Trainer gives you a point of reference in the open water. Practice with this device in the pool often until you can correlate stroke rate and pace.

- 5) The last piece of equipment I suggest you buy is a Swim Safe Device. I require all my athletes to wear one of these. It is a belt that goes around your waist that will inflate into a life vest if you pull the rip cord. These are legal in USAT races.
- 6) Now that you can swim twice your race distance doing flip turns, have practiced swimming in your wetsuit, practiced sighting, breathing, using your Tempo Trainer and have a Swim Safe Device, you are ready for your first open water swim. Don't go alone. We have several supported open water swims in the area which are great places to start (or hire a coach to take you out). Start out your first swim by just floating in your wetsuit. Do the breast stroke a little. Flip over on your back and do the frog kick a bit. See how much you float in your wetsuit. Pay attention to your breathing using slow deep breaths. Do this for 10 minutes or so. Once you are comfortable in this new environment you are ready to start swimming.
- 7) Start your swim by sticking close to the shore and just swim for 20 strokes which will be roughly the length of one pool. Take your time and go easy. Turn around and come back. How did it go? If you feel ok, do it again. If that goes ok, you are ready to go for the main swim.
- 8) Turn on your Tempo Trainer set to an easy pace. Make sure you start out by going very slow. Try not to kick at all or just a little bit (since your legs float high in the water with a wetsuit, kicking becomes a wasted motion). Pay attention to your breathing. Don't let it get too fast or out of control. If you start breathing hard, slow down to get it under control. Breast stroke or float on your back if you need to. When you are breathing normally, start swimming again.
- 9) Once you are going try to sight every 5 strokes so you don't get too far off course. You will be amazed how hard it is to swim in a straight line. When you are not sighting and your face is in the water, I know that it helps relax some people to close their eyes.
- 10) Once you get your first open water swim under your belt, try to practice open water swimming every chance you get. Don't wait until the race itself to practice your open water swimming. Even if it is for just 5 or 10 minutes, every little bit helps make you more comfortable in the water.