

## **“Safety: The missing link in open water swimming”**

By: Nicole Gross

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This past March proved to be a turning point in the continued growth of open water swimming in the United States. Over 100 open water swimming advocates met in San Francisco, CA to engage in the inaugural US Masters Open Water Swimming Conference. The event brought to light numerous areas where current open water swimming competitions lack standardized safety precautions. The recent death of elite swimmer Fran Crippen rocked the swimming community and fueled his sister Maddy to form the Fran Crippen Elevation Foundation. The mission of this foundation is to improve the protection of the sport's athletes by increasing the need for better safety standards. Maddy was also a driving force behind the emphasis of safety at the US Masters Open Water Swimming Conference.

It has become vital to implement lessons learned by other successful organizations and race committees as safety becomes the paramount issue in open water swimming. One such advocate of working closely with similar organizations is 7-time World Marathon Swimming Champion Shelley Taylor-Smith. USA Triathlon is one such organization that offers a formal education and certification process for its race directors. This certification process provides qualified race directors with the education, training and resources necessary to organize a safe and successful race experience. Further, USA Triathlon has established safety standards that must be met in order for an event to be labeled a USA Triathlon Sanctioned Event. This sanctioning process has become a standard as it ensures that the number one priority of the event is the athletes' safety.

The education of race officials as well as standardization of safety procedures are integral components of improving safety at open water events. However, the proper education of open water swimming participants is an equally important part of the equation according to speaker Jim Wheeler of Total Aquatic Management. Educating athletes on the inherent risks involved in the sport will enable them to be more prepared to handle the open water as well as recognize signs of distress. While the race officials are responsible for providing a safe environment it is also imperative that the athlete take steps to ensure their own safety. This can include honestly assessing one's ability level, staying up to date on potentially inclement weather as well as knowing the race course layout. Participating in local swim clinics and working with a qualified swim coach will also help prepare an athlete for success in the open water by gauging ability level.

North Carolina Masters Swimming has taken a great interest in improving the quality and safety of open water competition by keeping abreast of the latest available information. North Carolina has an opportunity to set the bar in terms of standardization of safety practice by utilizing available resources and continued involvement from participants and volunteers alike. The success of triathlon in the state shows that with the right combination of educated race officials and participants open water swimming in North Carolina can be taken to the next level.