

# Open Water Swimming II

**By Rob Cole**

This is part two of a two part series on open water swimming. Last month we discussed some training elements that are useful in preparing for an open water event. This month we cover some of the race specific techniques.

## Race Day Preparation

Ideally get to swim the course or some part of it before the race. If you cannot swim the course before, get to the race early to get marked and scout the course from land. Look for landmarks for the turns and the finish. You can line up your start landmarks just before the start. Think about where the sun will be on the course. Ask a local or lifeguard about race day conditions. Come prepared. You should have extra goggles and plenty of body glide. Ensure your goggles will stay fog free. There are commercial applications you can use the night before or use a newer pair of goggles. Get warm-up in the body of water. Get comfortable as you prepare your body and mind for the swim.



## Start and Finish

Position yourself for the start relative to your ability and confidence. If you have a strong start, you can position yourself toward the front. If you don't have a strong start, you may get swum over by other participants. Consider the overall course layout when determining whether you should start right, center, or left. Starting far right or far left may provide a shorter swim course. If it is a beach start, run in to ankles, then swinging ankle run, then high knee run, then dolphin dives. Reverse this process for the exit. Before standing up at the finish, you should be unable to take any additional strokes; e.g. your hand is hitting the bottom.

## Sighting

This may be the single most important skill to master and is the easiest to practice in the pool. The goal when sighting is to continue making forward progress with the least amount of disturbance to your swimming rhythm. Have an expectation as to where the object you are sighting should be. If, a big if, you can swim straight, it is better to take more strokes between sightings. This could be up to 20 strokes. If you don't see your object, take another stroke and sight again. Below are some sighting techniques to use in both calm and rough conditions.

- Calm Waters

- Alligator Eyes – Lift just the eyes above surface of water for several strokes, head returns to water before breath. Hold head still in the alligator position.
- Sneak-a-Peek - Swimming and in rhythm lift head forward to alligator eyes and in one motion return to the water for a breath.
- Wavy to Rough Water
  - Head up Breaststroke - Keep chin at surface of the water and continue forward movement with breaststroke.
  - Tarzan Swimming – The energy cost is high when swimming with the head out of the water. Practice a shorter stroke and only sighting for a couple of strokes.

### **Cornering**

The primary goal when cornering is to use the least amount of energy to quickly make the turn. Two techniques are primarily used:

- Backstroke Technique - Swim one free stroke beyond the buoy, and then roll on your back away from the buoy. Lift the shoulder that corresponds to the direction you want to turn. Take a stroke on your back, roll in the same direction to your front and then back to a freestyle stroke. If the turn is 90 degrees then only one cycle is needed. If the turn is a 180 degree turn then two cycles will be required.
- Water Polo Kick - If you are turning right, your left foot comes out with a water polo type kick that pivots you in the water. If you are turning to the left, your right foot would come out for the kick.

If the turn buoy is crowded, it may require just swimming some easy breaststroke or going a bit wider for the turn.

### **Pack/Draft Swimming**

One key difference from pool swimming is that open water racing is a full contact sport. Be prepared for other swimmers to occupy your personal space! While bumping, pulling, kicking, and scratching may be against the rules, inadvertent and illegal contact still happens. You can prepare yourself mentally for this by swimming three to a lane and side-by-side with your training partners. Whenever possible get a larger group together and practice mass starts, even in the pool. The most important thing to remember is to keep yourself mentally together, and do not take anything personally. Remember you can change your position in life. Swim to a location where you are comfortable. Everyone should learn to swim in the lateral wave zone. The optimal drafting space is close to another, with your head at the swimmer's hip you are drafting. If following directly behind, be up to 3 feet off the swimmer in front of you, not with their feet in your face.

### **Miscellaneous**

Anxiety in open water swimming is something that just about everyone encounters at some point, even the elites. The three most common reasons for the anxiety include cold-water exposure, water conditions, and competitor contact. While it may not be something that you can completely eliminate, you can learn to manage it.

The shock of cold water can cause an extreme headache, shortness of breath, and tense muscles. Gradual exposure, taking time to acclimate to the temperature, is preferred over sudden immersion. So if a zero-point entry is not possible, find a ladder or some other method that allows you to go feet first. Start out by swimming for a few strokes with your head up, so if you do start to gasp for air, you will not choke on water. Waves, chop, swells, and low visibility are conditions inherent to open water swimming, so you must learn to become comfortable with them. By practicing in open water, especially in groups, you will learn how to adjust your tempo and technique to fit the conditions, and become more comfortable with low visibility. If you begin to feel panicky or anxious, do not go vertical! Roll over and swim backstroke or kick until you feel as though you can roll over and start swimming again.

Below is a 3,400 yard pool workout that allows you to work on a variety of open water skills while still getting a good workout. The skills involve working on potential open water problems while still moving forward.

- 4 x 200 yards/meters warm-up  
Swim, Kick, Pull, Swim
- 400 yards/meters alternating 4 strokes with head in the water and 4 strokes with head out of the water, :30 rest interval.  
Only breathe when head is out of the water
- 400 yards/meters bilateral breathing
- 4 x 50 yards/meters goggle recovery drill  
25 with eyes closed and goggles around neck. Open eyes to sight the end of the pool. 25 on back with breast stroke kick replacing goggles. Once the goggles are back on, roll over and swim normally.
- 4 x 50 yards/meters cap and goggle recovery drill  
25 with goggles around your neck and cap off tucked in swimsuit, 25 on your back with a breast stroke kick and replace both cap and goggles by the time you get to the wall. If you get it done before reaching the wall, roll over and swim normally.
- 4 x 50 yards/meters cramp removal drill  
Swim half way down pool then roll over on back and stretch each calve by bending forward and pulling leg back, then grab arms behind back and lift upward to relieve tension in your shoulders, return length swim normally.
- 400 yards/meters crawl bilateral breathing
- 8 x 50 yards/meters sighting every 3rd or 4th stroke, :15 rest interval  
Get into a breathing pattern and sighting on a landmark. This could be a spot on the wall or the starting block at the end of the lane.
- 400 yards/meters warm down with bilateral breathing. Swim slowly and relax.