

The coaches' corner - Open Water Tips by Seth Botwick

Meet Seth Botwick. Seth is a coach with One Step Beyond in Cary and he tells us about his swimming background and philosophy in open water swimming

I come from a background in swimming, luckily! Swimming has been a big part of my life. Starting in High School then Masters and now coaching. My uncle is also a former swimmer and coach. At Christmas we become giggling little school girls comparing swimming notes. A few years back we went for a swim. In a vulnerable moment he confessed that he couldn't figure out why I would always pull ahead on the odd lengths. It was a simple answer, I was kicking on those lengths! He was a bit deflated but we had a good laugh about it. Our passion for the sport became even more intense when our sons started swimming. I mentioned my Uncle because I remember a phone conversation we had about how he had been "hand-picked" by a team of talented tri guys to be the "Swimmer" in their butt kicking relay. Race completed and the phone rings. My poor uncle, the swimming prodigy, freaked out and had to hang onto the support canoe and compose himself!! He had also gotten himself "way **way**" off course.



So the topic of the article is now revealed. As strictly pool swimmers, we don't have, I believe, an appreciation for the "dark side" of our sport (pun intended). Open water swimming is, for some of the most talented pool swimmers, a dangerous and scary proposition. However, if you can get over the mental hurdle of swimming with creepy, slimy, who knows what, open water swimming can be a wonderful deviation from the tiled landscape of a pool bottom.

Now onto the coaching. I would like talk about these key open water topics: sighting, no walls, breathing, and starts and finishes.

Sighting is something I rarely see people practice in a pool. Not sure why, it's easy! Focus on a point at end of the pool and look at it! Let your eyes focus on it, don't peak so fast you miss it. You also don't have to lift your head so high out of the water your feet then sink. Get your chin to the surface and take a gander. Like steps? Here you go: Step 1. Take a little larger kick Step 2. While taking a pull lift your chin to the surface Step 3. Focus Step 4. (It is a little Zen but it works) remember what you saw and "see it" through your forehead and point yourself to it. One more thing, don't trust that the guy swimming next to you knows where they are going even if he looks like Michael Phelps.

Walls, walls, walls! There are none in a lake. So that means that a 1500 meter open water swim is longer than it is in a pool. Usually in a pool you are only swimming the distance between the flags. Take that into account with your training. I extend each stroke and focus on getting my chest out of the way of the water during an open water event.

Breathing is a big debate. I stand on the side of; breathe when you want and on whichever side you want. We are not doing sprints, so breath! As coaches we sometimes tell people to breathe on both sides to fix a stroke problem. Even though I breathe on my right, I can breathe on both sides. Just in case you are swimming with waves or Mr./Mrs. Turbokicks in your face, you should know how to breathe on both sides comfortably. I typically have an athlete practice breathing on both side just in case.

Finally, starts and finishes. This will depend on the race conditions but dolphin diving in and then again at the finish works very well. Running through water is very slow. Run in as far as you can, remember water is 1000 times more dense than air so don't dive in too early. I like to swim in as close as I can to the shore before standing up. That usually means swimming until my fingers start brushing the bottom. When I first started out, I would exit the water a drooling dyslexic fool. My heart rate would spike terribly. My wife would say "You look horrible!!! But hurry up and catch that guy!!" I found that if it's a triathlon, visualizing my T1 set up 200 yards from shore and doing a very relaxed jog helped a lot. If you are doing an open water swimming event, get out and sprint to the finish.

The mystery of open water swimming can be conquered with good practice, good friends, and good coaching.

Good luck,