

My Experience with Open Water Swimming

By Jim Lineberger

I've been swimming for about 35 years, mostly in preparation for a triathlon. I was in my 20's before I swam a lap in a pool, and I did that as part of training for a triathlon. While running had always been my favorite leg of the event, I found that I was actually more competitive in the swim. With big hands and feet, and years of teaching beginning swimmers at a summer camp, I felt very comfortable in the water.

My first bad experience with swimming was during a sprint triathlon at White Lake, NC. The lake was cold (spring fed?) and I chose not to wear a wetsuit. Standing waist deep in the lake while waiting for my wave to begin, I started shivering uncontrollably. Apparently that robbed me of some much needed energy. When the gun went off, I tried to sprint with the leaders and ended up out of breath, which led to panic and the sensation of hyperventilation. To be honest, I was embarrassed, and dreaded the thought that one of the support boats might try to fish me out against my will. I finally managed to find a calm patch of water, where I rolled on my back and took a couple of minutes to try to get my breathing under control. I recovered enough to complete the swim, but the experience left me feeling pretty shaky...not a good place to be. I returned to the same event the following year and replaced that memory with a much more successful one.

In the late 90's I got a good friend, Tony Leiro, hooked on triathlons and open water swimming. Initially he didn't think he'd be a competent swimmer, as he has heavier, muscular legs. Not the case....he found out quickly that he's an excellent swimmer. He started doing triathlons, and then did the Pier-to-Pier swim at Wrightsville Beach, NC, followed by the Chesapeake Bay Swim in 2006. With his encouragement, I decided to do the Bay swim in 2007. We both were selected in the lottery, and I began formally training for the event in January 2007. I trained a total of 93 miles in the next 5 months, most of it in the pool, but occasionally traveling to a nearby lake for much preferred open water training. I also did some mental preparation....I talked with Tony about his 2006 swim, and the most poignant thing he told me was that swimming between the two bridge spans felt like he was swimming between rows of sky scrapers. That image, along with a thorough study of the sharks of the Chesapeake Bay, helped me tremendously. As I recall, I learned that hammerheads are native to the Bay, but they are seasonal in their habits, and early summer didn't appear to be an issue.

The day before the event, I drove across the bridge with my family. There were whitecaps, and a small craft advisory was posted for the area. I also knew that the swim would happen regardless...but my adolescent mentality kicked in, and I determined that it might be cool to swim in those conditions. The morning of the swim, the Bay decided to behave, and the water was smooth. As I swam, I constantly monitored my location between the two bridges, because you will be disqualified if you end up off course. I had tucked some gel packs in the leg of my wetsuit (yes...I sometimes use one to be competitive with other wetsuit wearers), but the first time I tried to pull one out during the swim, it slipped out of my hand...so I decided to continue without any nutrition or water. Otherwise, the swim proceeded without a hitch, and I had a decent finish time, a little less than 2 hours for the 4.4 mile distance. A year later I tossed my hat in the lottery and wasn't selected, but Tony went ahead and completed the swim for a third time.

In 2011 Tony and I competed in "Swim Miami", Tony in the 10K, and I in the mile. We swam in a harbor, surrounded by boats, and my event started early. I swam directly into the sunrise, and couldn't see more than 10 feet ahead....very disconcerting and confusing. I somehow managed to get my bearings after straying off-course a couple of times, and finished second in my age-group, seconds behind the winner. Once you get to be my age (57) and older, if you stick with it, you'll find yourself becoming increasingly competitive in age-group competitions. That adds a lot of motivation for me...I always want to win.

Last year I competed in the Low Country Splash in Charleston, S.C., and had another tough experience as I battled leg cramps for half the 2.4 mile race. I've cornered the market on bananas, but apparently low potassium isn't the issue. I had to continue to swim while dragging my locked-up legs behind me...very awkward. I still finished the race with a decent time, but I need to determine what's contributing to this problem.

I'm now training to do the 3.5 mile "Swim the Loop" at Wrightsville Beach this October. I'm satisfied with these shorter distances at this point, but definitely admire the marathon swimmers.

Something that helped my swimming tremendously happened when I went to the YMCA with a co-worker five years ago. Dave had been a competitive swimmer in high school and he is an excellent swimmer. Considering myself equally accomplished, I was shocked when he watched me knock out a few laps and commented, "Your stroke is a mess". I became defensive at first, but decided to get a couple of instructors to work with me and critique my stroke. I'd never had any formal swim training, but thought I was doing well. It turns out Dave was correct. The primary issue was that I was regularly crossing the midline, which is definitely counterproductive. The instructors got me straightened-out and gave me some drills to build strength and fluidity. Up to that point I had always breathed unilaterally, but one of the instructors challenged me to breathe bilaterally. I began to work at it, and I can now breathe almost as efficiently on my right side as I have always done on my left. I also now typically breathe every 4th stroke when I train, and my swim times at 57 are better than when I swam in my 20's. I attribute most of this to improved technique and more attention to my core strength. I also still run a fair amount, and find that these two sports complement each other very well.