

Open Water.....Just Do it!

First of all, many thanks to North Carolina Masters Swimming for allowing me to be a part of the North Carolina delegation to 2010 SwimFest. What really sticks out in my mind was how well the weekend was organized and run so smoothly for the athletes and coaches. There were more coaches than athletes in attendance, so the athletes received great personal attention during workouts. I would rate this experience for a swimmer and coach as a fantastic learning and social experience.

My big take away from this clinic was in regards to open water swimming. This is the fastest growing aquatic sport in the country and the world. I thought I knew something about open water swimming from my pool training and triathlon background. I have swum in the ocean (Wilmington and the Gulf several times under many conditions) as well as in lakes and I thought I knew what I was doing. Boy I found out I knew very little and by the time the day was done I really feel like I learned things that will help people not be as intimidated by open water as well as some skills that are particular to open water swimming.

What truly was unique about this experience was being able to isolate and practice skills in a pool and then follow up with practicing these skills in real oceanic conditions at La Jolla Beach.

The topics that were covered included: Training for Open Water, Race Day Prep, Exit and Entry Strategies, Sighting Skills, Cornering Skills and Pack Swimming Strategies.

With Regards to these topics the clinicians emphasized the following information:

- I. **Training**-Need both aerobic and anaerobic training.....all gears needed for open water swimming.
 - Need to learn negative splitting and descending
 - Be comfortable in your race suit.....practice in your wet suit.....putting on, taking off, make sure you lubricate the neck area.
 - Whenever possible get in open water to train.

- II. **Race Day Preparation**

- Ideally get to swim the course or some part of it before the race
- If you cannot swim the course the day before, get to the race early to get marked and scout the course from land.
- Look for landmarks.....for the turns and the finish
- Ask a local/lifeguard about race day conditions
- Have extra goggles and plenty of body glide

- Have a warm-up period in the body of water.....get comfortable and prepare your body to swim!

III. Exit and Entry Strategies

- Rule #1 on start: Position yourself appropriate to your ability and confidence with regards to: Front-Center-Back and Wide left-Center-Wide Right

Beach/Shore: Run in to ankles, swinging ankle run, high knee run....into dolphin dives. Reverse the process for exit.

IV. Sighting Skills

Goal When Sighting-Keep making forward progress, with the least amount of disturbance to your swimming rhythm.

Calm Waters.....

- **Alligator Sighting-** Eyes above surface of water for several strokes, head returns to water before breath....hold head still in alligator position
- **Sneak a Peek-** Swimming and in rhythm lift head forward to alligator and in one motion return to the water for a breath

Wavy to Rough

- **Head up Breaststroke-** Swimmer keeps chin at surface of the water and continues forward movement with breaststroke
- **Tarzan Swimming-** Energy cost is high, shorten stroke

V. Cornering

Goal-To use the least amount of energy to corner a buoy. Two techniques used primarily:

- **Backstroke Technique for Cornering**

In this clip the first two swimmers do the skill wrong.

Swim one free stroke beyond the buoy, then roll on your back face toward the buoy back to a free 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 and slaps the water with a polo type kick that pivots you in the water. If you are turning to the left, your right foot would come out and slap the water with a water polo type kick..

VI. Pack/Draft Swimming

- Be prepared for other swimmers to occupy your personal space!

- Remember you can change your position in life! Swim to where you are comfortable
- Optimal drafting space is close, with your head at the swimmer's hip you are drafting. If following directly behind, be 3 feet off the swimmer in front of you.....not with their feet in your face!
- Learn to swim in the lateral wave zone!

Having access to a 50 meter pool is a real asset, but these particular skills can be systematically set up to be practiced in any sized pool. Definitely ditch the lane lines. Our group was divided into three groups and we rotated through skills. The stations we had were: 1) Cornering 2) Pack swimming skills 3) Sighting Skills. The athletes spent about 20-25 minutes at each station practicing specific drills and skills. After the athletes rotated through all the stations then they were put together to swim some course scenarios in the pool.

After the pool session, the clinic was moved to La Jolla beach where the athletes practiced the real thing. It was awesome to see how this worked. The athletes selected the distance they wanted to swim and we had three different groups out there swimming.

Since returning from SwimFest 2010 I have given two Open Water Swim Clinics and they have been well received and will be included in our rotation of clinics for the age group team as well as our adult swimming population. Learning these skills in the pool and gaining confidence made the open water experience less intimidating.

If you haven't experience open water, give it a try. There is something very liberating about swimming without lane lines, without walls and without lane lines. Swimming open water can be very zen-like as well as an alternative to traditional pool swimming but with all the health benefits of pool swimming.

Patty Waldron
Masters Coach
MACMasters
SwimMacCarolina