



Better Open Water Swimming

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Overview

1. Dealing with open water anxiety
2. Key skills: Sighting and exiting efficiently
3. Other good stuff to think about before your next race: preparing to race, drafting, turning buoys, wetsuit tips, problem solving

Open water anxiety

Many of us feel anxiety when swimming in open water, even after doing it many times. Whether this is due to a natural response to cold water, a bad childhood experience, or holding ones breath, a bit of preparation can go a long way toward alleviating the fear you feel when standing at the start line with a big lake in front of you.

How to relax in the open water: Whatever it is that causes you anxiety (depth of the water, not being able to see under the water, swimming in close proximity to others, etc) typically causes you to hold your breath when swimming. **The #1 thing you can do to help yourself relax more is to focus on exhaling into the water (blowing bubbles) in a constant stream whenever your face is in the water.** If you begin to panic, roll over onto your back or swim breaststroke and control your breathing until it can deepen. Exhaling, not inhaling, is key to this. Keep those deep, easy breaths going as you transition back to freestyle.

The things that cause you to panic are typically things you cannot control. Set yourself up for success by focusing on things that you CAN control – exhaling, good body position, smooth strokes, etc. The more you can stay focused on yourself and your technique, the more relaxed you will be and the better you will swim!

Dealing with fear that you can't finish the distance ahead of you: For those of us who swim mainly in pools, seeing 300, 800, 1600 yards laid out in a straight line can be quite daunting. There are many things you can do in the pool to prepare you to finish the distance you see before you with confidence:

1. Learn to tread water with an easy kick and arm scull for 5 minutes in the deep end.
2. Learn to float on your back, breathing easily
3. Learn a “recovery stroke”, such as the side stroke or breaststroke that you can do with little effort, and which will allow you to breathe easily and make some forward progress.
4. Increase the distance you cover in a single pool session to 150-200% of your race length, most of it in intervals longer than 50 yards.
5. Practice turning at the “T” rather than going all the way to the wall during some swims to get used to pacing yourself without resting at the wall, or to use your recovery stroke as a break.
6. Actively think about exhaling as you swim, both in the pool and in open water. The mantra “bubble-bubble-breathe” or “bubble-breathe” will remind you to exhale between head-turns. Blow big, obvious bubbles ALL THE TIME. Practice this in the pool and in the lake in advance.

There is also no substitute for practicing swimming in open water prior to racing in it. You have done this at least once by attending this clinic. The more often you do it, and the longer the distance you cover in practice, the more confident you will become.

Dealing with cold water: If you have stepped into cold water, put on your goggles and splash your face 5 or 6 times with the water. Now when you immerse your face in the water, you will be less likely to experience the natural response of your body to gasp, which makes it hard to breathe.

Dealing with fear of mishaps: Never swim alone, and never swim where there is boat traffic. Make sure that you have help to float if you should have a calf cramp or otherwise find you cannot continue to swim – bring along a lifeguard rescue tube and/or a friend in a kayak. Often anxiety comes from fear of bad things that could actually happen. Take the proper precautions to avoid mishaps, and there will be less to fear.

Sighting

Triathletes must lift their heads to stay on course and therefore swim the shortest distance possible, but this lift causes the legs to drop and interrupts the rhythm of the stroke. Practice sighting so that it is a subtle movement and happens as infrequently as possible while still allowing you to stay on course.

How to sight: Just before turning your head to breathe, lift it forward just enough for your eyes/goggles to break the surface, and then turn to breathe in one fluid movement. Resist the urge to lift your head enough for your mouth to come above the surface and therefore breathe while looking forward. You should think of a frog or alligator floating on the water with just its eyes above the surface. This technique will keep your legs from dropping much, and interrupt your stroke rhythm only slightly. You may also lift your eyes to take a quick peek and then not breathe.



Attempting to breathe before you sight will interrupt your stroke more and put more pressure on your shoulders since your recovering arm will be more forward when you lift your head.

Remember to take just a quick look, not a long scan of the horizon, and then process the information you gathered as you swim a few more strokes. If you didn't see the buoy or other large object that you were looking for, take another quick peek. Knowing in what direction you tend to drift off-course can help you sight more effectively. Even if you don't see the buoy, you can get a sense of the direction that the swimmers around you are swimming and just follow them until the buoy comes into view. Use whatever visual clues you can to stay on course, just like you would use the lines on the road to guide you while driving in fog.

If you are really not sure where you're going, switch to side-stroke or breaststroke for a few strokes so you can keep your head above water easily for a longer time while still making forward progress. Tread water if you must. Once you have your bearings, switch back to freestyle/crawl.

How often to sight: You should sight only as frequently as required to swim in a reasonably straight line. Experiment during your practice swims -- practice sighting every 3rd, 5th, 7th, 10th stroke. If you are already off course after 3 strokes, then don't wait until 10 have gone by to correct your direction! If you are still on-course after 10 strokes, then sighting every 3rd will only slow you down and wear you out unnecessarily. In a race situation, if you are unsure of what to do, try sighting every 5 right-arm strokes. Keep in mind that if you are a fast swimmer, you may have to sight a bit more just to avoid running over swimmers in front of you, rather than only keeping an eye on the next buoy.

Exiting the water

If you will be exiting onto a beach or ramp, make sure that your fingertips touch the bottom **three times** (*three times!*) before you stand and jog out of the water. This strategy will ensure that you rarely stand in water higher than your knees. You will swim past many who are slowly slogging through waist-deep water and will beat them into transition!



As you exit, make sure to put your goggles onto the top of your head if you have a wetsuit/speedsuit to pull down. Pull your wetsuit/speedsuit down to your waist as you run. If there are wetsuit strippers, make sure to pull your wetsuit down below your rear end before

you sit down on the ground with your legs up for the strippers. At this point, or immediately after exiting if you don't have a wetsuit/speedsuit on, pull your cap and goggles off into one hand and run to T1. Remove your wetsuit/speedsuit once you have arrived at your spot, if necessary.

Other open water race strategies



Pre-race and race-start suggestions

- Warm up on shore with some running (0.5-1 mi easy jog, some strides), with stretch bands to imitate swimming, and arm circles to warm up the shoulders.
- If you wear a wetsuit, make sure to apply body glide liberally to ankles, wrists and neck (all the way into your hairline). Plastic bags on the feet can be helpful for getting the wetsuit on, and if your nails are trimmed short you are less likely to scratch or tear the wetsuit. Make sure the suit is snugged up well in crotch and armpits for maximal flexibility in arm and leg movement.
- Warming up some more in the water is highly recommended for ridding yourself of pre-race jitters and also for “seating” your wetsuit properly in the crotch and armpits. Swim out to the first buoy and back (about 5 minutes), exhaling smoothly into the water, practicing your sighting technique and swimming just like you would in the pool. Once you are comfortable in the water, speed up to about 80% of race effort for a few short intervals before swimming smoothly to shore and practicing your exit strategy.
- Decide where you will line up in your wave. At the back and/or on the outside is preferable if you want to avoid contact with other athletes. At the front and on the inside is best for strong swimmers. If you are treading water, leave enough room between you and the swimmer in front of you that you won't take a kick to the face when that swimmer becomes horizontal at the gun!
- Start your watch 5 or 10 seconds before the horn sounds during the countdown so you don't have to try to hit it and start swimming at the same time.
- The beginning of the race will be tumultuous. Do whatever you have to until you find some open water in front of you or a good drafting pack, and then quickly settle into the race pace you have practiced in the pool, EXHALE rather than holding your breath, and stick to your sighting plan.
- Note that it is perfectly acceptable to wait a few seconds for the rest of the swimmers in your wave to start before you begin to swim if you wish to avoid contact at the beginning of the race. Note that swimmers in later waves will likely pass you later in the swim, making contact somewhat unavoidable. Practice contact during your training swims so that you are able to recover quickly on race day.

- Focus on your technique as you swim rather than on your surroundings (other than navigation). Exhaling by blowing bubbles you can see and hear whenever your face is in the water is your number one priority. Choose one or two other things about your technique that you can focus on as you swim that will make you a better swimmer and keep you “in the moment”. Be a “selfish swimmer”, and don’t think much about everyone else in the water. It’s all about you 😊.

Turning at buoys

- Buoys can be crowded places where the pack narrows down to get the best line. There may also be swimmers treading water here.
- If you don’t like contact, plan to take the buoy “wide”, and set your line coming into the buoy accordingly.
- If you don’t mind contact, then just be aware of other swimmers, which may require more frequent sighting.
- Turn the buoy with two or three arm strokes that gradually turn you through the required angle.
- Make sure to sight to the next buoy as quickly as possible to avoid going the wrong way right off the bat!
- Here’s an interesting buoy turning technique to try: the “corkscrew open water turn”. The arm closest to the buoy slides forward until you have turned all the way onto your back. Take one stroke on your back, and then with the third stroke, turn back onto your belly, making a 90-degree turn. See the Swim Smooth blog for photographs and more details: <http://www.feelforthewater.com/2012/06/corkscrew-open-water-turn.html>.

Drafting

- Drafting in swimming can decrease your effort level noticeably, and is worth trying if you find yourself swimming next to someone who is your same speed or a little faster.
- Draft just behind a swimmer, watching for their feet/bubbles just in front of your lead hand, and making sure not to touch their feet, which will earn you a hard kick!
- You can also draft just to the side, but this is a bit more difficult to do.
- Make sure that you draft someone who is staying on course.
- You may only choose to draft for a short time (a few minutes), but it’s still worth the energy you will save if you maintain at least the same speed you would have swum on your own.

Using a wetsuit

- A wetsuit provides many advantages, the most obvious of which are extra warmth in cold water and buoyancy of your legs. However a wetsuit can also feel very constrictive if it is not the right size or you have not done a fair amount of swimming in it.
- Use Body Glide on your neck to avoid the dreaded “wetsuit hickie”. A bit of Glide on your wrists and ankles on race day can be helpful for getting your suit off more quickly in transition.

- When you enter the water and there is a thin layer of water between your suit and body, hike the suit up all the way into your crotch and armpits to take as much pressure off your shoulders, neck and chest as possible.
- Swim several times in open water or even in a pool at both easy and race-like speeds in your wetsuit ahead of race day to become accustomed to how it feels.
- On race day, remove your wetsuit to the waist as soon as possible after exiting the water. If wetsuit strippers are available at your race, pull it below your rear to help them remove it from your legs. If not, finish removing your suit when you find your spot in transition.
- Make sure to rinse your wetsuit in clear water (especially after a pool swim) and hang to dry thoroughly inside and out between uses. Never apply petroleum products to your suit.

Troubleshooting

- If your goggles fill up with water, flip onto your back and kick while you empty them out.
- If the water is choppy from wind or lots of other swimmers near you, try swimming with a “punchier”, quicker stroke rhythm and slightly straighter arms in the recovery phase. Using a higher cadence will give your stroke more power, and will help you maintain much better momentum in choppy water than if you try to lengthen your stroke by gliding.
- Instead of being intimidated by rough water or a large swim wave, give yourself a positive mantra to repeat to yourself in time with your arm stroke. Swim Smooth’s Paul Newsome, who has swum the English Channel in less than ideal conditions, recommends “when the going gets tough, the tough get going” – cheesy, but effective!
- If you can’t see the buoy or other object you are sighting off of, switch to breaststroke so you can keep your head up higher and for longer until you get oriented. Treading water is also helpful, but won’t move you forward.
- If you still can’t see the buoy, follow the swimmers in front of you until you can.
- Feeling breathless or like there is pressure on your neck if wearing a wetsuit typically results from swimming too hard. Slow your pace down to “cruise” and see if this helps.
- If you need to take a break, switch to your recovery stroke or just float on your back.
- If you are too anxious to swim safely, then signal for help. Don’t become a statistic!

Final words of advice

- **NOTHING NEW ON RACE DAY**
- Make sure you can easily finish your race distance or 500 yards, whichever is less, continuously in the pool without resting at the wall – use fast turns, flipturns or turn at the “T” instead of coming all the way to the wall.
- Ideally you should complete your race distance in open water prior to race day as well; doing it at race pace is not required. Practice exhaling smoothly, sighting effectively, and focusing on smooth technique, and mixing race pace swimming with easier swimming in these practice sessions.

- Swim in open water with the same outfit and goggles you will use on race day to make sure everything functions as it should. If you will race in a wetsuit or speedsuit, practice in it, and practice putting it on and taking it off.
- Make sure you can tread water for 5 minutes in the pool, practice floating on your back, and have a recovery stroke such as breaststroke and/or side-stroke that calms anxiety and also allows you to make forward progress so that you are not completely dependent on freestyle to get you to the end of your swim leg.
- Stay safe
- Have fun in the water!

About Go the Distance Coaching

<http://gothedistancecoaching.com>

Coach Casey Arendt, head coach of Go the Distance Coaching is a USA Triathlon certified coach and has recently completed the Swim Smooth Coach Education Workshop. She utilizes coaching methods based on Joe Friel's and Swim Smooth's methodologies.

Go the Distance Coaching is a full-service triathlon coaching business. We provide online personal coaching to athletes in Texas and elsewhere at all levels from sprint to Ironman, specializing in olympic and half-iron distances. We also provide private swim lessons, video analysis, open water swim clinics, heart rate (and power) zone testing, Hammer Nutrition and Skratch Labs sports nutrition, and other retail products such as Tri Tats and Finis swim tools that are useful to triathletes. Coach Casey also offers private swim lessons, group swim technique sessions and group triathlon training under the auspices of the Northwest Family YMCA of Austin. If your goal is to set a new PR, master a new distance, or become a stronger swimmer, we can help!

Swim video analysis at Sendero Springs Pool, Round Rock

Visualize the top two or three things that are holding you back in the water, and learn cues and drills to improve them. Your 1.25 hr session includes four angles of HD video, a video-captured discussion of your video footage, and in-pool instruction in corrective drills that are specific to your swim style for \$100. Learn more and schedule your session on our website:

<http://gothedistancecoaching.com/video.html>

Private swim lessons, Northwest Family YMCA

Available Th 6:30-8:30am and Fridays 5-6pm or during the day most weekdays. All lessons are offered through the Northwest Family YMCA on MacNeil between Parmer and Mopac. Packages of 1, 5, or 10 lessons of 30 or 60 min are available (~\$20/30 min members, ~\$40/30 min non-members). Group technique sessions are also scheduled on a monthly basis on Tuesdays and/or Thursdays 11:30-12:30am ("Stroke clinic").

Heart rate zone testing

Heart-rate based training for cycling can help you keep your easy rides easy to promote proper recovery and your hard interval workouts hard enough to improve your fitness, race pacing and results. During this test you will increase power output each minute as heart rate is monitored (maximal effort test). Results will be used to derive approximate heart rate zones for cycling. Advice on how to train using these heart rate zones will be provided. 1 hr session, \$50, your location or coach's. A similar test may be performed for running zones -- a one-hour personal training appointment at Northwest Family YMCA is required (\$60 members, \$70 non-members).

Please contact Coach Casey for more information on any of these services at casey@gothedistancecoaching.com.