

Open Water.....Catch the Wave!

By Patty Waldron

Patty is the Head Masters Coach for SwimMAC Masters swimming and also the Varsity Swim Coach at the Charlotte Latin School



Swimming, a sport we all love. The very first swimmers on this earth were open water swimmers.....fleeing from an aggressor or just swimming to the other side to see what's over there!

In our present time, pool swimming is the most prevalent form of swimming, with open water swimming gaining ground. This increase in interest of the sport of open water swimming can be credited to the growth in the sport of triathlon, as well as with the addition of open water swimming as an event in the Olympic Games.

Comparing open water swimming to pool swimming is like comparing tangelos to navel oranges...the pieces of fruit are both orange in color, and taste like orange but are different. Pool swimming and open water swimming, require swimming, but there are differences in variables and skills sets required in open water swimming.

With pool swimming, you are in a controlled environment, clear water to see where you are going, a black line to follow on the bottom of the pool, lane lines to make sure you swim pretty straight, and a temperature controlled environment. In the open water the water environment, the water is murky to black, there are creatures in the water, no black line or lane lines to make sure you swim straight, potential waves, the sun in your eyes, or pouring down rain, and temperatures that can range from numbing cold, to hotter than hades. Swimmers need to become knowledgeable with all the skills required to be an open water swimmer.

The information I will share with you is a direct result of the time I spent as a NCMS LMSC representative Coach at 2010 SwimFest last June. I have enjoyed first hand, the open water experience in triathlon as well as open water events and I will tell you what I learned at 2010 SwimFest concerning open water swimming would have made me a much better participant. I want to share what I learned with you.

Selecting an Open Water Event

Select an Open Water event that is appropriate to your level of conditioning and level of comfort with all the nuances of open water swimming. Be aware of all possible variables you may encounter in the venue you select with regards to

- 1)Air temperature morning of race
- 2)Water temperature morning of the race
- 3)Is there any marine life to be aware of in the body of water
- 4)The distance of the event in relation to how long it will take you to cover the distance.

Pre-Event Preparation

Become as familiar with the venue set up as you can be before race day, by reading on line about the course, perhaps reading the forum from last year's race, and even perhaps going to the venue to familiarize yourself with the course. Determine whether or not the race is wetsuit legal or not. Even if temperatures are borderline to wear a wetsuit, bring the wetsuit anyway. Make sure you have body glide, two pairs of goggles, sunscreen, your swim suit and your chip band if you own one. Get to the race course early in order to get marked and check out all that you can about current race conditions and to get a look at possible shoreline markers for the swim. Talk to a lifeguard or find a local familiar with the event site to give you insights to the race venue.

Starting Skills

With any start, position yourself appropriate to your ability and confidence with regards to front-center-back, wide left, center, or wide right of the starting group. Starts for open water vary depending upon the venue set-up. You can have a beach running start, a standing in the water standing start and an in the water treading start. You should get in the water to warm-up and get used to the bottom of the body of water where you may need to run.

Running Starts/Exiting-With a running start you need to run into the water and swing ankle wide over the water, then evolve to a high knee run, then into dolphin dives. If the start is in the water, be sure not to get in too early and get exhausted from too much treading. With exiting, you do what was just listed in reverse. When finishing you should get upright and start running as soon as possible. This is to ensure you have blood in your leg muscles and once you get out of the water, you are ready to run. If you swim as far as you can, you are guaranteed difficulty when trying to stand straight up. People who swim too far to shore fall down frequently.

Sighting Skills

You will need to arm yourself with different sighting skills. Sighting skills are modified swimming styles to improve your course vision relative to the conditions. Your goal in sighting is to keep making forward progress with the least amount of disturbance to your swimming rhythm. In calm waters the Alligator method or the Sneak a Peek method should be used. With Alligator breathing you swim with just your goggles above the surface of the water looking forward. To breathe during this method you put your head back to optimal swim position and take a regular breath. On Sneak a Peek breathing the swimmer looks up and then turns to the side for a breath all in one motion. Both of these methods take very little energy and can allow the swimmer to see pretty clearly.

In rough waters it is necessary to use either head up breaststroke or to Tarzan swimming for sighting. With head up breaststroke the swimmer keeps the head out of the water with the chin resting on the surface of the water. The Tarzan stroke is head up freestyle, with a shorter stroke. Keep the eyes focused on the target being looked at. Both the head up breaststroke and Tarzan freestyle stroke coast a lot of energy.

Cornering Buoys

Learning how to corner a buoy efficiently will save energy and help you keep your stroke rhythm. Have you ever tried to swim in a semi-circle.....it is very difficult and you do not want to do this during a triathlon. Instead you need to learn two of the most common turning techniques, the backstroke cornering technique, or the water polo kick turn.

With the backstroke turning method, the swimmer will swim one free stroke beyond the buoy and take a backstroke rotating toward the buoy for a 90 degree turn and repeat if the turn is 180 degree turn. This is a very fluid turning method and totally is compatible to the swimming rhythm. The water polo kick method works if you are turning right, then your left foot would come out and slap the water with a polo type kick to cause your body to pivot in the direction you want to turn. The opposite works to turn left.

Pack/Draft Swimming

When swimming in open water, be prepared for close swimming and even contact. Be prepared for other swimmers to be in your personal space! Remember, you could be drafting, or you could be the one that someone else is drafting off of you. Positions in life can be changed.....swim to where you are comfortable! Optimal drafting space is close. If you are side drafting, then you should swim with your head at the swimmer's hip that you are drafting. If you are drafting from behind, then swim within three feet behind the swimmer in front of you. If you are drafting in a pack, learn to swim in the lateral wave zone. The lateral wave is the wave created by the lead swimmer and it will pull you along. Just watch a swimmer or even a duck in a pond swim away from you. Look at either side of the object moving away from you and you will see a wave coming off the body on either side.

Training

When possible:

- 1)Swim in pools without lane lines
- 2)swim on purpose 3-4 abreast in a lane to experience people swimming in your personal space
- 3) Integrate sighting drills into pool workouts
- 4)When possible swim with people or a guide in open water
- 5)Swim some workouts without pushing off any walls.

6)Swim distances more than the distance required in the competition.

For Masters, at least in this area, open water competition can be a great alternative to pool competitions in the spring and summer time. There are great opportunities in both North and South Carolina. The NC championships held in Pine Hurst NC the first weekend in June is one of the best, well run competitions in NC. Consult the LMSC calendars for both North and South Carolina to find open water events. Also in August there is the Lake Lure Olympiad that is a series of athletic events for everyone in the family.

Open water is a beautiful sport.....if you truly love to swim, and you want to experience the ultimate in bonding with nature without barriers, then give it a try!