

## Open Water Swimming

... is kind of like a box of chocolates, you never really know what you're going to get.

By Laura Medcalf, Triathlon Swim Coach, Vernon BC

Open water racing can be unpredictable. Swim buoys can drift – changing course distances, temperatures can be unseasonably cool, or the complete opposite – sluggishly warm, dynamics of the pack can vary depending on the number of swimmers and organization of wave starts, and then of course there is wind, waves, and bright sun that can affect your swim as well.

So, how do you have a successful swim with so many unknowns? You need to train for various conditions, learn to establish your own rhythm, and manage your expectations by defining what a successful swim is.

### Train For Everything

Get in the open water when it's cold. Swim in wind and waves. Instead of seeking out beautiful, sunny, calm days, find a group that swims no matter what the weather. Find a choppy day to practice swimming into, away from, and across the chop. Swim in a group with your eyes closed and expect to swim into people and have them swim into you. The biggest challenges I hear from athletes are learning to deal with the cold water, how to avoid becoming panicky, and how to settle into a rhythm in a mass start. The single best advice I can give is to breathe. Just breathe. It seems simple, but it's often neglected. You know the feeling, you hit the cold water, you're bumped by other swimmers and you GASP, then hold your breath. If you *can just calm down and EXHALE*, the rest will come together.

### **Try this before the warm up of your next open water swim:**

- get in early season when it is still cold.
- start by splashing water on your face to acclimatize.
- submerge and just float with your face in, blow bubbles. Listen, feel and see the bubbles. Be completely absorbed in just exhaling, and don't let your mind wander to anything else.
- next, try swimming for only 10 strokes with all of your focus and attention on continuously exhaling.



### Finding YOUR OWN Rhythm

What is your swim style? Do you have a slightly shorter, choppy stroke? A longer catch-up type stroke? Do you know? Think back to your most successful swims in the pool this season. Think

about when you felt the strongest, when you felt like you were on top of the water and really moving. Think about what it was that helped you feel that strong and smooth. Maybe it was a technique cue such as a change in head position, or catch position. Maybe you settled into a natural breathing pattern. Maybe it was listening to the sound of your hands enter the water rhythmically.

In the pool we have external cues and reminders. We can gauge how fast we are going based on stroke count, pace clocks, and by watching how fast we are moving past the lane ropes. In the open water we lose all of those external cues, so we need to find some internal ones – cues that are unique to your swim style and stroke, cues that will be with you in the open water too. There isn't a one-size-fits-all rhythm or rate, know your OWN swim inside and out. Imagine how it looks, feels and sounds. Describe your strongest swim with one word. The word can be a reminder of a certain aspect of your technique, or a description of how your stroke looks or feels. Use that 'cue' word to help find your stroke and rhythm in the open water. You might have to go back and forth from the pool to the lake to discover, and to make the connection between your strongest pool swim, and how that feels in the open water.

#### **Try this:**

-put words to your rhythm. For example, if you breathe every 3 strokes, and sight every 9, and you know you swim best when you just remember to breathe OUT, your internal metronome might sound something like:

“out.... out.... in..... out..... out..... in..... out..... sight..... in.....”

-next, on land, practice saying that out loud, and timing it with your stroke.

-it should feel natural, it should feel like you are just turning on the 'audio' of your swimming.

-try it in the water.

#### Re-define Success

This article was partly inspired by the long swim at the Oliver Half Iron this year. According to a few Garmin comparisons from athletes, the swim was approximately 350m longer than the course was supposed to be. There was a lot of grumbling in transition and out on the course about the swim being 'slow'. Let's learn from this, let's learn to re-define a successful swim so you can get out of the water feeling great, and build the rest of your day around positive thoughts.

There are so many variables that can influence swim times and results. Instead of defining successful swimming by the time on your watch, **try setting a different goal** for your swim such as:

-Staying on course. If you often wander off course, define success by swimming straight.

-Finding, and settling into your own rhythm by the first buoy.

-Swim strategy. Perhaps you just want to find clean water to swim your own race, or if you are a stronger swimmer, maybe your goal is to hang onto the lead pack for the first buoy, or the first

lap, or the whole swim.

-Your effort. Know what effort level you can and intend to work at. Perhaps your goal is to swim smooth, not waste extra energy and get out of the water feeling fresh and ready to cycle. Or, perhaps your goal is to push a higher pace. Know what that feels like. What is your breathing rate at that effort? What do your arms feel like at that effort? Use those cues to measure success throughout your swim.

-For the more competitive athlete and/or stronger swimmer, you can gauge your success on the swim by your place in the pack coming out of the water.

If you spent the winter season building good swim techniques, and the spring season building some fitness and strength, now you can get comfortable in the open water, and allow it all to come together. If you can anticipate surprises, know your own stroke, and set realistic expectations, you will have the successful swim you have trained for.

*While swimming in open water, your safety is top priority. Make sure you swim with others, wear a wetsuit that fits properly and brightly coloured cap, stay close to shore. Don't swim in areas with tides and/or strong currents unless you are an expert in those conditions.*