

~B's Open Water Swim Tips



Equipment

Wetsuit: a wetsuit should fit well in order to keep you warm and enable your best stroke

Goggles: choose goggles that do not leak and enable the best field of vision possible (goggles are perhaps the least expensive equipment triathletes use so it make sense to always have a back-up pair)

Swim cap: Bright color in open water, bring two and double up when cold

Ear plugs: For many, plugs avoid that “sea sick” feeling and keep you warmer

Anti fog: a \$3 bottle lasts forever and works better than anything

Anti Chafe: Products such as body glide protects against the harsh effect of friction and salt... use liberally

Swim

Dry warm up: don't enter the water cold... a good stretch and warm up will keep you limber and ready to swim... a good warm up can better performance by as much as 30%

Study the surf: Knowledge is king!!! Every beach has its trends. While on the beach, study the surf to identify patterns that will be helpful knowledge while swimming. Time the break, make note of sets and note the swell. This will allow you to go through the waves with the confidence of understanding what you're swimming through.

Waves (The sand is your friend): All of the force and power is at the middle to the top of the wave. There is relatively little force under the wave. Just like a surfer dives under the wave, swimmers should dive below the wave, maintain “long body position” and feel the wave go over you. The deeper you dive, the more calm the water so remember when going through waves... the sand is your friend.

Sighting: sight as often as your skill set requires. If you are a strong swimmer and generally swim a straight course, you may be able to get away with sighting less. For everyone else it is a balance between maintaining your best stroke, rhythm and swimming straight. Sight off of fixed landmarks on the horizon (trees, houses, peaks, etc...) and do not sight off of potentially moving objects (parked cars, banners, etc...). Technique... lift your head forward to identify your landmark. Try to avoid lifting your head too much as lifting your head will lower your hips and legs thus creating more drag for you to overcome. Then turn head to the side for your normal breathing pattern. A good starting point is every 4 strokes... then as you gain skill you can extend it to 6, 8, 10...

Swim stroke: Open water swimming, especially in the ocean with waves and swell, poses several challenges that are not present in pool swimming. Practice high elbow recovery to minimize the effect of swell and chop. It can also be beneficial to slightly shorten your stroke... reduced pull can lead to better efficiency in open and more turbulent water. It can also be helpful to count your strokes and think about your stroke mechanics... the more you focus on the 2'x 6' space you occupy; the more likely you are to enjoy the experience and progress.

Drafting: you can save about 30% of your energy output by swimming behind another swimmer and its perfectly legal in triathlon. Water is 300 times more dense than air... drafting enables you to swim through less water because turbulence created by the lead swimmer produces bubbles and a forward moving wave. The tradeoff is that it does take some mental energy to draft and you are relying on the lead swimmer's sighting ability. When drafting, continue to sight. It can also be a challenge to find the right person to draft. I like to swim behind a pace that feels similar to my non-drafting race pace for the given distance. This allows for a faster swim pace at the same energy output. Practice drafting in the pool and open water whenever you can to get the feel for the dynamics of drafting.

Swim Exit: Just as you did when entering through the waves, you will likely have to exit through waves. And the sand is still your friend ☺. There are many options and the one that is right for you will depend on your skill set and comfort level in waves. For some, body surfing the wave is a fast way in. For most of us a more conservative option is best. As you turn towards the shore after the final buoy, increase your kick to get blood flow to your lower extremities. It is helpful to exaggerate your head turn during breathing so you can look back and see any waves. If you intend to body surf the wave then you want to kick like crazy, keep a streamlined body position and stay at the top of the wave. If you stay towards the bottom, the wave can push you around quite a bit. You can always dive below the wave as well.