

Swimming for Triathlon

By Tim Josephs

For beginners to the sport, my experience has shown that most come from a general exercise or running background, but have little to no open water swimming/racing experience. The swim start can be intimidating for the uninitiated and may take several years for you to reach your comfort level. Here are some ways to overcome that anxiety and get you as prepared as possible.

While your goal may be just to make it through the swim, there's no reason you can't finish without energy left over. I've seen many athletes make fast progress in a short amount of time by working on the following techniques:

In the Water

1. Practice: Make sure you show up at your first race with some open-water experience. The open water requires a longer glide stroke than in the pool, in other words you go further per stroke
2. "Sighting" or looking where you are going: There's a "road map" on the course, marked by large buoys, but you need to occasionally look to see where you are going. This needs to be done every three to seven strokes, depending on the conditions.
3. Kicking: For a "non-swimmer", triathlon requires very little kicking, compared to pool swimmers. Use a "flutter" kick to keep your back end up. You don't want a lot of waves behind you.
4. Drafting: Is legal in the swim. Find someone who is swimming your pace and match it; you will save 10-20% energy.
5. Positioning at start: If you are a new/weak swimmer, position yourself at the side or back and let the mass go ahead with a five- to 10-second head start.
For your water exit, know where you are going and practice going from horizontal in the water to vertical when you get out and are ready to race on land. Make sure you kick more near the exit to get the blood to your feet.
6. Gear:
 - a. If you haven't worn a wetsuit in the open, try it out in the pool first. Make sure to rinse out the chlorine afterwards. Wetsuits are legal per USA Triathlon up to 78 degrees. They



- a. Goggles are available in full sleeve and sleeveless. For most inland lakes, sleeveless will be your better choice.
- b. Goggles are available in various sizes and types. Pick those that will suit your swim event and expected weather conditions for sun and dark skies.
- c. Earplugs are a personal preference. Caution: They can make hearing challenging.

At the Pool

7. Race simulation workouts: Practice a fast start, a steady set and a fast closing set to simulate the race effort and distance. Included in these simulations are the "Tarzan" and "Water Polo" drills. They are great for simulating swimming around buoys or in packs of swimmers.
8. You should practice "bilateral breathing" or breathing out of both sides in the pool. You never know what the race conditions will bring and you may have to breathe out of your weaker side.
9. Make sure you are swimming 1-1.5x the distance of the race. You can't finish the race if you spend all your energy in the water.
10. Hire a swim coach: A few good lessons can make a world of difference because swimming is all technique.

The only way to overcome your first open-water start is to jump in with both feet. We all started as beginners and first time triathletes. Make 2011 your year to do it!