

Swimmer OUTDOOR
presents

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO OUTDOOR SWIMMING



* WHERE TO SWIM * TECHNIQUE & SKILLS * KIT GUIDE * EXPERT ADVICE





WHY SWIM OUT

Swimming outdoors offers so much more than the pool, says Simon Griffiths

Outdoor swimming is: an adventure, a community, fitness, wellbeing, a race, a meditation, a way of life... The rewards of swimming outdoors are many and varied and this guide is here to support you to take that first leap into the big blue beyond...

For years, authorities have been warning us against swimming in open water. They say it's cold and dirty, that there are hidden undercurrents and weeds that can entangle you and drag you down, and if you do happen to survive the initial swim, you'll probably get ill afterwards. Later we'll bust these myths and show you how you can swim outside safely, but firstly we want to answer a more fundamental question: why should you swim outside?

Perhaps the main draw – plain and simple – is that it's very enjoyable. If you haven't experienced outdoor swimming, that can sound surprising. If you're used to swimming pool temperatures for example, entering open water can give you quite a shock (literally) but with a bit of practice you can tolerate, and even thrive in, a wide range of natural water temperatures.

Swimming in cool water is a whole-body sensual experience. There's an initial period of discomfort followed by a spell of feeling invigorated and energised.

Swimming in a pool can also be enjoyable too, of course. There is something special about being immersed in water. Perhaps it's because it's the closest we can get to flying. In open water you also get the pleasure of being outside – immersed in nature as well as in water.

Swimming outdoors also gives you more opportunity to play. You can leap off rocks, swing from trees into the water and dive through waves. And it doesn't matter if you are nine or 99 years old. As well as enjoyment and fun there are outdoor swimmers who





Images: Claire Caldecott, Stobhan Russell, Simon Willis

INDOORS?

take up the sport for the challenges it offers and the satisfaction that comes from achieving things they previously thought of as impossible.

A first step for many new open water

swimmers is to sign up for a mass participation swimming event. We like the word 'event' rather than 'race' as often, for the majority, these swims are not about racing but about overcoming a personal challenge and completing the distance. A typical

beginner's distance is a mile and there is a wide range of events in different locations and types of water around the world offering this. In the UK, many swimmers will use a wetsuit for their first open water race (some organisers make

wearing a wetsuit compulsory) but that's not the case for all races.

A mile equates to a little over 64 lengths of a standard 25m swimming pool but it's a totally

different challenge in open water. Firstly, the water temperature will most likely be cooler than the pool and while a wetsuit does offer some protection you still feel the chill on your face, hands and feet. A wetsuit can also

feel restricting so combined with the shock of the cold this can cause some people to panic. But don't worry, you can overcome this with a bit of practice.

Secondly, in a pool you have the opportunity

to rest at every turn. Not so in a lake or the ocean. Even the push off from the wall at each turn gives you a second or two to rest your arms whereas outside they are in constant motion. Then, because you don't have a black line to follow, it's much harder to swim straight. These means an open water mile is 'longer' than a pool mile and for most people will be slower.

Other differences are limited visibility, rough conditions, other swimmers in close proximity, depth, distance from the shore and the possibility of encountering wildlife or swimming through plants. It's no wonder people feel a huge sense of achievement after completing an open water swim for the first time. On the plus side, because you're not changing direction every 25m, swimming a mile outside can, in some ways, feel easier than in the pool.

SWIMMING IN
COOL WATER IS
A WHOLE-
BODY SENSUAL
EXPERIENCE



MICHELLE CASTRO

Age: 32

Swim Highlights

2016 was the start of my outdoor swimming journey. I took part in an organised trip with the "This Girl Can" group from Active Northumberland to swim with seals at the Farne Islands. Outdoor swimming has allowed me to make new friends and has given me a newfound confidence to swim in pools, lakes and the sea. My aim is to take on a swimrun race and work towards an Ironman.

What does outdoor swimming mean to you? Outdoor swimming means getting out of my comfort zone. It's about enjoying your surroundings and embracing nature. Only last year I

was afraid of open water swimming, but not any more...

Favourite Swim Spot

Tynemouth has a beautiful sandy beach with a spectacular historic backdrop of Tynemouth Priory and Castle.

What are your top three tips for beginners to outdoor swimming? Practise getting in and out of your wetsuit - It's not as easy as it looks! Purchase a good pair of anti-fog swimming goggles. Swim with other like-minded people. It makes it more fun and there's safety in numbers, in case you get into any difficulties.

What kind of training do you do?

I am currently having swimming lessons as I still

feel there is a lot to learn and I want to improve my technique.

What would you say to someone considering getting into outdoor swimming?

Feel the fear - and get in the water anyway!



I want to improve my technique



Relax and focus on feeling natural

DELAZE GAZO

Age: 26

Swim

Highlights:

Participating in a 4x50m relay at the London Aquatics Centre during the European Aquatics

Championships as part of Swim London (an adult learn to swim course) and the Great Newham London Swim.

How did you first get into outdoor swimming?

I decided to participate in the Swim London programme and open water swimming was part of the course. Everything I had learned about swimming before then came from primary school swimming lessons. Despite having poor technique, I could will myself to 25m because I was armed with the confidence that being able to touch the bottom with my feet brings.

What does outdoor swimming mean to you?

Freedom

What made you take up outdoor swimming?

I've always had this visual in my head of diving off of a boat into the sea. I couldn't really swim, so I couldn't safely enact it. Participating in Swim London was the first step to realising it.

What are your top three tips for beginners to outdoor swimming?

Relax and focus on the swim feeling natural: 'Stroke: 1, 2, 3, breathe... 1, 2, 3, breathe.' The transition from the pool to open water was easier than I anticipated. The wetsuit aids your buoyancy. It's mainly a mental hurdle to overcome. The rest comes with practice.

Distance matters

Some swimmers like to push the barriers through ever longer distances. If you've done a mile, why not try two miles or five kilometres or ten kilometres - the swimming marathon.

For the purists though, real marathon swimming is done without a wetsuit. Not only do you have to train your body and mind to do the distance, you have to deal with the cold and, in the sea, possibly jellyfish stings. Removing your wetsuit and swimming outdoors without one for the first time can be very nerve-racking. You lose the warmth and buoyancy benefits. But it can be incredibly liberating. Your arms and shoulders are no longer

restricted and you sense the water over your entire body.

The pinnacle of marathon swimming challenges is often considered to be the English Channel. This 21-mile swim can take anywhere from seven hours (the current world record, held by Trent Grimsey, is 6:55) to 28 hours and 44 minutes (the current slowest swim record held by Jackie Cobell). For the swim to be recognised as 'official' you need to do it without a wetsuit and follow specific rules regarding your costume and swim cap.

The English Channel is not the only marathon swim in the world. Others include the Cook Strait in New Zealand and the North

Channel between Ireland and Scotland. All these swims offer different challenges in terms of currents, water temperatures and possibly wildlife encounters.

Ice breakers

Another way outdoor swimmers challenge themselves is with temperature. Historically,

YOU CAN LEAP OFF ROCKS AND SWING FROM TREES INTO THE WATER

OUTDOOR SWIMM

You don't need a lot of kit to get started but a few choice items will help

SWIMMING HAT



A bright coloured swimming hat to insulate your head and make you visible to other water users. Silicone is more comfortable than latex as and gives better insulation.

GOGGLES



TINTED, POLARIZED OR CLEAR - THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Again it's all about comfort and fit - not all faces and swimming environments are the same. Open water goggles tend to have a wider lens than pool goggles.

EAR PLUGS



Help protect your ears if they are susceptible to infection and many swimmers say it increases cold water tolerance. There is no need to wear them if you don't want to.

WATERPROOF SUN CREAM



You can still get burnt while you are swimming!

CHANGING ROBE



KEEP WARM, STAY DRY

The freedom of being an outdoor swimmer may mean that your swim location doesn't have a changing room. A changing robe keeps you warm and dry and saves your blushes.

COSTUME



Comfort and fit are key. Board shorts for men will seriously hamper your swimming and are not recommended for anything except dipping.

CROCS



Pre and post swim footwear helps navigate pebbly riverbanks and beaches.

TOWEL



Whatever you like! We like big fluffy ones to wrap up in after a chilly swim, but lightweight travel ones are great if space or weight is an issue.

POST SWIM KIT

BOBBLE HAT

It doesn't have to have a bobble, but a woolly hat is great to assist with warming up post swim.



KIT BAG

Whatever you like, but consider a dry bag to keep your wet kit separate from the dry.



LAYERS!

Layering up is the best way to warm up and a good woolen or synthetic base layer is key (not cotton). On top of the base layer add what you like: hoodies, jumpers etc. Down jackets are a popular toasty top layer.

ING KIT



Avoid chaffing from your wetsuit or swimming costume with lubricant in those likely areas – underarm, neck and edge of wetsuit etc.

NEOPRENE HAT, GLOVES AND BOOTS



These can all help keep out the cold and extend your time in the water. Particularly useful in colder temperatures.

WETSUIT



SUITS
YOU

A wetsuit is not essential but the buoyancy and warmth that it provides means it can be a good option for when you're starting out in open water.



How to put on a wetsuit

1 Dan Bullock explains how to squeeze into neoprene

STAGE ONE

Roll the upper body down, exposing the openings to the legs and gently push in your feet. Work on the very lowest sections to start with and do not move up the leg until the suit fully fits over the ankles, onto the calves and up to the knees.

STAGE TWO

If there is loose material in the legs, the suit will end up tight around the torso. It's better to pull the suit into your crotch and expose your ankles rather than vice versa.

STAGE THREE

Once you are happy with the fit under the crotch, ease the lower section of the torso part of the suit up and over your hips. Pull the suit higher up the chest and carefully insert one



arm. Work the hands all the way through the sleeves.

STAGE FOUR

Once the hands are free, start the trickier process of sliding the arm material up towards the shoulders. A small amount of bunching around the shoulders is acceptable as this leaves room for the arms to manoeuvre.

STAGE FIVE

Avoid pulling on the cord to close the zip as this stresses the stitching in the suit. It's usually easier to ask someone else to close your zip. Seal

the join around the neck with the Velcro once the zip has been fastened and make you sensitive neck skin isn't in contact with any rough edges or fastenings.

Improper handling of a wetsuit can easily damage it, so keep fingernails short and remove jewellery



RACES AND CH

Simon Griffiths explains how to get started in mass participation swimming events

It's just getting light on a mid-summer morning. You're standing in a crowd by a river. Mist hangs over the mirror-flat water. In a few moments, you – along with all the people beside you – are going to disturb that calm and swim 2.1km upstream towards Henley and the church which you can't see yet, but know is there. Your stomach tingles. You've been training hard, but this is still going to be a big challenge.

A week later you're standing on a beach on a

blustery afternoon, staring out to sea from the Jurassic Coast. The sea is choppy and agitated. You try not to think about jellyfish or 'jokes' about great whites. This is going to be a tough swim and you hope you're ready for it.

Next month you're in an East End London dock. A few weeks ago you didn't even know it was possible to swim here and now you see hundreds of people doing it. The water is slightly briny but you barely notice; you've never seen the city from this perspective

before – and it's awesome.

The next weekend you're in Cumbria. The water is a few degrees cooler. You notice its bite, but appreciate its clarity. It's raining gently, but sunlight breaks through to light up the mountains. You're about to swim 5km, the furthest you've ever done, and you wonder if you're up to it, but you know there's only one way to find out...

Welcome to the world of mass participation racing. Unlike the pool where you swim pretty



Image: Swim Serpentine

CHALLENGES

much the same distance, in the same type of water at the same temperature every time, no open water race is the same – these events will take you to rivers, lakes, the ocean, docks and estuaries and conditions will always change. When it comes to organised racing, distances range from a few hundred metres to more than 10km.

Signing up for an open water event is often the first step on a wonderful swimming journey. The challenges become addictive. Once you've done one, you start to wonder if you could have done it a little bit faster, or

could you swim further, or could you do it without a wetsuit?

So, how do you get started?

Find an event that appeals to you. With about 200 in the UK each year and many more around the world, there are plenty to choose from. Something of around a mile or less is a good place to start.

A strong swimmer can complete this distance in around 25 minutes, 45 minutes would typically be mid-pack while someone swimming breaststroke and chatting to a

friend on the way around could be out there for 90 minutes or more.

Know what you are signing up for and prepare accordingly. A sea swim is very

**RACING WILL
TAKE YOU TO
RIVERS, LAKES,
THE OCEAN,
DOCKS AND
ESTUARIES**



TYPICAL MASS PARTICIPATION EVENT DISTANCES

750m – a popular introductory distance, especially with triathlon organisers as it's the distance you swim in a sprint triathlon

HALF MILE – another popular introductory distance

1500m – the longest distance people race in a pool in the Olympics (where it takes the winners just under 15 minutes) and a common distance for triathlon organisers as it's the distance you swim in a standard distance triathlon

A MILE – The extra 150 yards or so definitely makes a difference. There are a few famous mile swims around the world such as the Tiburon Mile and Midmar Mile. It's a swimmer's distance, not a triathlete's

1.9k – Aimed at triathletes, it's the distance of a half-ironman swim

2.5k AND 3k – Popular swimming distances pushing beyond the comfort of a mile. 3k is the distance used in the ASA Open Water Nationals

3.8k – An ironman distance swim. Expect lots of triathletes

5k – The shortest distance for elite open water swimmers at international events

10k – The marathon swimming distance used for the Olympic open water event

25k – Rarely offered to amateur swimmers, this is the longest distance in the World Championships where it typically takes the winners nearly six hours to complete

88k – The longest race on the FINA Grand Prix circuit. It is at least current assisted

*Note that the distances of some events are determined by geography – for example, the length of a lake

← different from one in a small, shallow lake. How much training you need depends on your current experience. At a minimum I'd recommend that you are able to complete a continuous swim in a pool of a mile and a half for a one-mile race. This is because you do not have walls to rest on or push off from in open water and it's easy to swim more than the

PANIC IS OFTEN CAUSED BY SURPRISE AT THE WATER TEMPERATURE

event distance if your navigation is poor.

If you're going to wear a wetsuit for your event, you should practise in it at least once and preferably several times. Whether you wear a wetsuit or not you should still acclimatise to outside water temperatures. Three or four

swims should be enough to reduce the initial shock of entering cool water.

Your confidence and enjoyment of the swim will be massively improved if you are properly prepared. Event safety officers report that the majority of people who don't finish are pulled out in the first couple of hundred metres. The reason is often panic caused by surprise at the water temperature, not being able to see the bottom, feeling unable to breathe because of the wetsuit or distress caused by being among a mass of swimmers. The more you swim outdoors before your event the less likely it is that you will be bothered by these things.

Write down a plan for your challenge to help ensure everything runs smoothly on the day. List all the kit you need and pack the night before. Note down all the steps you need to take such as a reminder to put on wetsuit lube and how you will tackle the swim (eg start near the back and swim steady until half way). Your plan can also include some "if – then" statements such as: "if my goggles

MASS PARTICIPATION SWIMMING EVENTS – QUICK Q&A

How good a swimmer do you need to be?

You need to be able to swim continuously for the entire distance of the challenge. Speed is irrelevant unless the event has a time limit. Remember, if you are slower, you will be in the water for longer and therefore at higher risk of getting cold. However, if you have prepared and are acclimatised, this needn't be a problem.

Do I have to do front crawl?

No. You can swim any stroke on your front. Some events don't allow backstroke because they ask people to turn on their backs to float if they are in difficulty and need help – they might think you need rescuing if you are swimming backstroke. Note that some people find it difficult to swim breaststroke in a wetsuit because the buoyancy of the neoprene can lift your legs too high in the water.

Do I need a wetsuit?

It depends on the event. Sometimes wetsuits are compulsory; sometimes optional and sometimes forbidden; and sometimes it depends on the water temperature. Check in advance.

What other kit do I need?

Swim hats are usually compulsory – they make it easier to see swimmers in the water. Most event organisers provide caps and you are usually required to wear the official one. However, it's a good idea to have your own for practice or to wear underneath the race cap if it's very thin.

Goggles – the key thing is that you can see through them clearly as you need to navigate the course. You might like to have two pairs – one clear and one tinted to cope with different light conditions.

For non-wetsuit races check the costume rules. Some events allow FINA approved racing costumes, while others won't allow anything that covers your thighs.

Other useful kit includes: lube to reduce chafing, flip flops, a large towel or changing robe and warm clothes to put on afterwards.

Where do I find out about races?

Outdoor Swimmer maintains a list of UK races and a selection from around the world.

I'm thinking of going longer – what do I need to do?

It's a big topic! Our top tips are:

- work on your technique so you move as efficiently as possible through the water
- spend more time in the water. Don't just swim longer distances but dedicate time to developing technique and building experience. Check out some of our training sessions for inspiration
- If your swim is likely to take more than around 90 minutes you may want to consider your nutrition needs
- the longer you swim, the more important it is that you acclimatise and get to know your own limits. You can only do this through experience, so build up gradually

Can you give me some survival tips for my first race?

- Train, prepare and practise.
- Make a plan for the day.
- Arrive in plenty of time.
- Review the course from land as best as you can to help navigation.
- The first part of the swim is always the most chaotic. Remind yourself it will get better.
- Start slowly. A common mistake is starting too fast and struggling to finish.
- Most events have brilliant safety cover. If you are really panicking, roll on to your back and call for help. A quick word with a safety kayaker may be all you need to regain your confidence and continue.
- Give yourself space.
- Increase your speed gently as you approach the finish. A sudden change of tempo may cause cramp.
- Make sure you know where the finish is. Keep going until you have crossed the finish line and remember to smile for the cameras.
- Rinse your wetsuit and wash your hands before eating or drinking anything.
- Wrap up warmly and celebrate!



Swimmers about to set off on a mile race at Swim Serpentine

leak then I will roll onto my back and empty them" or "if I feel myself starting to panic then I will swim a few strokes of breaststroke to re-orientate myself". These can really help if something goes wrong.

Finally, enjoy yourself. Soak up the atmosphere that you only get when you line up for a challenge with other excited and nervous swimmers and take a moment to appreciate your surroundings. Remember all the training you've done and have a fantastic swim.

← SAM CRABTREE

Age: 17

Competitive swimmer.

Highlights Started OW swimming when he was 12 in 2012 after the Olympic Games and started competing in 2013. Trains with Thanet Swim Club.

Sam trains around 16 hours a week including one long-course session on Saturday mornings at the London Aquatics Centre Beacon Programme. Course records for the 2016 Henley Swim Bridge2Bridge (14km), the Docklands Dock2Dock 10km race and the Swim Serpentine 1-mile race. Sponsored by Selkie Swim Co.

How did you first get into outdoor swimming? In 2012, when I was 12, my club organised an open water taster session at Holborough Lake in Kent. I was quite good at the 1500m pool distance so I went along just to see what it was all about. I loved it. I now help run these taster sessions and mentor our junior swimmers who want to try open water.

What does open water racing mean to you? Open water racing means a lot to me. It gave me an opportunity to make it to 'Nationals' when I was just 13 years old and has developed my confidence as a swimmer. When I was 14, I entered my first non-ASA races, competing alongside adults, and to my complete surprise I was actually good enough to win some of them - I was even the fastest 'skins' swimmer in the Henley Classic 2014 (at that time I didn't even own a wetsuit!). I have made so many friends through open water and it's great to catch up at the different events.

What made you take up competitive racing? My open water swimming basically started with competitive racing and making the transition from competitive pool racing. I love the fact that at races like the Great Swim Elite races I have had the opportunity to compete alongside the GB open water team and even Olympian Jack Burnell and Commonwealth Games medallist Jay Lelliott - that was amazing!

What are your top three tips for beginners starting racing? If you can, practise mass starts, turning round buoys, sighting and racing finishes with a bunch of other friendly swimmers before you try a race. Make sure you are acclimatised and get your breathing under control before you set off. Just go for it!

What kind of training do you do? I train with Thanet Swim Club. I train every day, racking up on average 16 hours per week. Mondays and Thursdays are doubles, so that's two hours from 5:45 in the morning and two hours in the evening, usually 6-8pm. Every other day is two hours either in the morning or evening depending on club pool slots. On Saturdays I have a two-hour long-course training session at the London Aquatic Centre.

What would you say to someone considering getting into outdoor swimming? Find a group of open water swimmers locally and join them for a casual swim. If you enjoy that, progress to open water training sessions. Once you've built your confidence think about entering a small local race and take it from there - you'll love the freedom and variation you get with racing outdoors!



Open water racing means a lot to me

I have made so many friends through open water and it's great to catch up at events



WHERE TO

THE SEA

Sea swims are often more challenging than those in inland waters. There may be waves, chop, and sometimes you might need to swim against a current. Conditions can be very changeable so sea swims are the most likely to be postponed or cancelled in bad weather. There's also the chance of an encounter with jellyfish or other marine life. Salt water causes more chafing so you need to protect your skin, especially if you wear a wetsuit. Despite this, there is something especially invigorating and exciting about swimming in the ocean. Sea water is often cleaner than river and lake water and the added buoyancy due to the salt can help you swim faster.

RIVERS

Most river events are downstream and it's fun to get a speed boost from the current, but some are upstream and others are out and back. It's worth checking before you sign up! A good thing about river swims is that you are never far from the bank, which can be reassuring if you think you might need to stop and rest. Water quality varies hugely. Some rivers carry a heavy silt load, which can reduce your visibility under the water. While this can be disorientating it doesn't necessarily mean the water is polluted. However, river water in general is more likely to be polluted than lakes and the ocean, especially after heavy rain.





SWIM

Swimming conditions in rivers are usually benign as they tend to be more sheltered.

LAKES AND RESERVOIRS

Small, shallow man-made lakes offer some of the easiest open water conditions. The water warms up fast in spring, is generally clear and the quality good. However, as the season progresses, visibility can decrease due to algae growth. Natural lakes and reservoirs are often larger, deeper and therefore colder. Water quality is generally good but can be affected by blue-green algae. The larger the surface area of the lake, the more exposed it is to the elements, which can generate surprisingly big waves.

DOCKS

You almost certainly wouldn't want to swim in a working dock but in the UK there are plenty that are no longer used for shipping. Extensive environmental work also means they are suitable for swimming. Docks can be deep, dark and intimidating but that doesn't stop many first timers completing successful swims.



ROSE ENEVER

Age: 25

I have been open water swimming for the past six years, but been a part of various swim teams all my life.

How did you first get into outdoor swimming?

I worked in an American summer camp for three consecutive summers. My favourite part of the camp was the lake, where I spent most of my days in the water. This is when I realised how great outdoor swimming really was, it's not every day you can wake up, jump into a beautiful still lake and do some laps while the sun comes up.

What does outdoor swimming mean to you? I find outdoor swimming to be a release. You have no boundaries and nobody to compete with; you are free to enjoy nature at its finest.

What made you take up outdoor swimming? I joined 'Swim Dem Crew' two years ago and was asked to assist with a project called 'Swim Challenge', which saw 20 non-swimmers take on a one-mile open water swim after six months of training.

Favourite swim spot? My favourite swim spot is Lulworth Cove in Dorset. It's so picturesque, with rocky cliffs to climb and jump from into the water.

What are your top three tips for beginners to outdoor swimming?

I think the most important thing is your choice of wetsuit. Once you've found the right wetsuit, make sure you use vaseline or other lubricants so that your wetsuit doesn't chafe while swimming. Finally, I think finding the right people to swim with is very important. It's great to have people with varied abilities. Having experienced swimmers that can help give tips and motivation, is a great way to improve and make your open water swimming venture even better.

What kind of training do you do? I like to vary my training as much as possible. I train twice a week with Swim Dem Crew in London. I really look forward to these sessions as the sets are always varied. I also like training on my own. It always takes me the first 10 lengths to clear my head and push through those aches and pains and then I feel like I could go on forever. As soon as the temperature starts to pick up in May, it's time to get out into the open water.

What would you say to someone considering getting into outdoor swimming? I think finding the right venue is the best place to start.

If you live in London, West Reservoir is a really great place for beginner open water swimmers. You have to have an induction first, where they give you a safety talk and then introduce you into the open water and get you comfortable in the water. I think being comfortable in the water is the most important thing in open water swimming.



my favourite swim spot is Lulworth Cove

Finding the right people to swim with is very important. It's great to have varied abilities



OUTDOOR SWIMMING SKILLS

Simon Griffiths looks at some basic skills that will make your outdoor swim more enjoyable and, if you race, faster

When talking about the skills you need to swim outdoors, we often start by making the comparison with swimming in a pool: there's no black line to follow, the water may be murkier, it's colder, there's no wall to grab hold of, you often can't see the bottom and so on. But really, it's pools that are unusual, with their uniform shapes and constant water temperature. Still, most people learn to swim in pools and transferring to the natural environment presents some differences. These differences require us to use a few additional skills and techniques to those we use in the pool.

The primary purpose of improving your outdoor swimming skills is to enhance your

enjoyment of being in the water – this isn't just for people who want to race. However, if you do wish to race, mastering these skills will undoubtedly improve your performance. So, here goes:

Bilateral breathing

The ability to breathe both sides, while not essential, can be very useful when swimming outside. For example, if you are swimming parallel to the shore then keeping an eye on the land can help you stay on course. If you can only breathe one side, you may find yourself staring out to sea instead. If you're swimming early in the morning or late in the afternoon and the sun is low on the horizon, it might be more comfortable to breathe away from

it. If waves are hitting you from a particular direction, it might be easier to breathe away from them.

Some people find breathing either side easy. Others really struggle. But even if you're one of the latter it's worth persevering. Practise whenever you can. The traditional approach is to breathe every three strokes but experiment with other patterns such as breathing to one side for 25m and then switching to the other. Every time you swim, try to take a least a few breaths to your least favoured side.

Bilateral breathing is also good to practise for your development as a swimmer as it helps symmetry in your stroke.

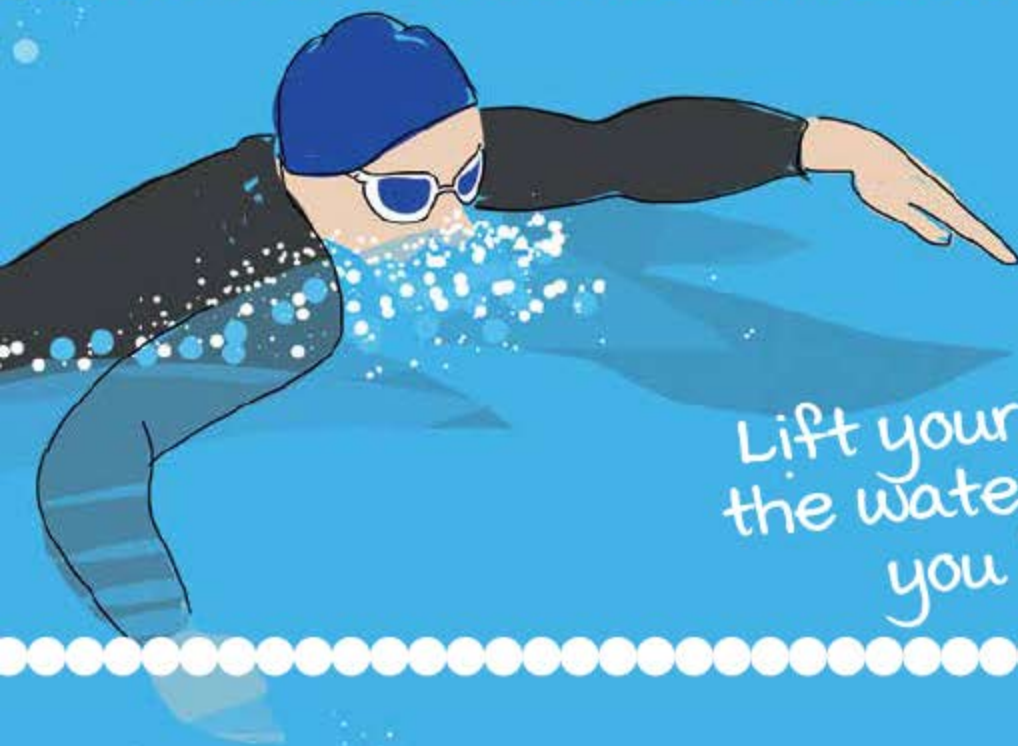


SIGHTING

Sighting is just looking where you are going. In breaststroke, it's easy as your head clears the water and you can look forward with each breath. With front crawl, you breathe to the side, so looking forward is harder. However, it's a useful thing to do if you want to swim in a straight line. The skill is to incorporate it smoothly into your swimming so it causes minimal interference with your stroke. If you lift too high or get the timing wrong it can all but bring you to a halt in the water. If you watch the best swimmers, it doesn't affect their speed at all.

To sight on front crawl, lift your eyes above the water (not your whole face) just before you turn your head to breathe, then turn your head to your regular breathing position and continue swimming normally. Don't attempt to breathe while looking forward. An alternative method is to lift your eyes just after you've taken a breath. Experiment with both to find which feels most comfortable for you. Make the movement swift and don't break your rhythm. You may need to kick a little harder to maintain your body position.

Don't worry if you don't see what you're looking for and definitely don't stop for a better look around. Instead, just sight again on the next breath and look in a slightly different direction. Do this as many times as necessary to find your target. Once you're going in the right direction you should be able to do six to 12 strokes before looking again. In the pool you can easily incorporate sighting practice into any swim by putting a water bottle or a float at the end of the lane and looking at it on each length.



Lift your eyes above the water just before you breathe



←Swimming straight

In a pool, we make micro adjustments to our stroke to stay on track, guided by lines on the floor of the pool and lane ropes. When you take those away, it's surprising how many people quickly veer off course. Some people will swim in circles. The straighter you swim, the less often you will need to sight and the quicker you will reach your destination. Veering to one side or the other is usually caused by asymmetries in your stroke, so practising bilateral breathing will help you swim straighter.

You can check how straight you swim by swimming with your eyes closed – preferably with someone you trust watching you to ensure you don't have a collision. Try 10 strokes first, then 20 and 30. Do you always veer to the same side? Once you know, you can attempt to fix any underlying causes and compensate for it while you swim.

Pacing

In a race, pacing is the art of regulating your swim speed so that you arrive at the end in the shortest possible time. Pacing is also relevant on any long distance swim, whether it's a solo marathon or a leisure swim with some friends.

The biggest mistake is starting too fast. It's very easy to do. At the beginning of a swim your nerves are tingling and you're pumped with adrenaline. If it's a mass start, the swimmers around you surge forwards and drag you along.

If you analyse the winning times in long distance pool races, it's apparent that the optimum strategy is to swim each part of the race at the same speed. The first length is usually slightly faster because of the dive start, not because of faster swimming, and the final length is often the quickest due to a sprint.

Other than that, top swimmers churn out the lengths with metronomic efficiency.

The same principle applies on any long distance swim. The trouble is, swimming at your sustainable pace will initially feel so ridiculously easy that it's almost impossible to resist speeding up, but you should try.

The best way to master pacing is to do regular timed swims in the pool. Try doing a set of 15 x 100m with about 10 to 15 seconds rest between each one. Aim to swim all of them at the same speed and notice how much easier it is at the beginning than the end. Or notice what happens if you do the first few too fast and how hard it is to maintain that speed. Get

AT THE START,
CHOOSE A
POSITION
APPROPRIATE TO
YOUR SPEED

a friend to time you for a 400 or 800m swim in the pool and record your time every 50m. After, analyse the times to see if you started to slow down at some point. If the second half of the swim was more than a few seconds slower than the first, you probably started too fast.

Things are different in an open water race because tactics come in to play. You may decide it's more important to try to stay with the pack and try to live with the surges and changes of speed than to swim your own race. However, if you start too fast you will pay for it later.

Close proximity swimming

Is swimming close to other people a skill, or something you just have to get used to? If you take part in a mass participation event, you will end up swimming close to other swimmers. Sometimes that will result in physical contact, usually accidental, especially at the start or around turns. This can be quite unnerving. The skill perhaps, is how you deal with it, both physically and mentally.

Firstly, try to minimise the risk. At the start, choose a position appropriate to your speed and race plans. Avoid starting on the front line in your first race unless you are exceptionally fast. Be aware of what's going on around you and anticipate pinch points. Drop back, surge ahead or take a different line accordingly.

Secondly, stay calm and keep focused on your own swimming. Usually collisions are accidental but even if someone has purposely swum over you, it's still not worth wasting energy to retaliate. There's very little you can do about someone else's swimming so just stay focused on your own. Relax and swim on.

One of the most annoying things that happens with open water swimming is when a person behind you repeatedly touches your feet. They shouldn't do it, but they do. Some people actually think that you're supposed to touch the person-in-front's feet when drafting. Resist the urge to kick harder and don't try to race ahead. You'll only waste energy and give the person behind an even faster tow than they are getting already. Unless you want to engage in some advanced race tactics, just stay calm and swim on.

If you can, find some friends to practise close proximity swimming with. You can do it in a

DRAFTING

Your leading hand should be about 15 to 30cm behind the other swimmer's feet



pool if it's not too crowded. Try swimming side-by-side as close as you can without touching and practise swimming one behind the other to get the feeling of swimming in someone's slipstream.

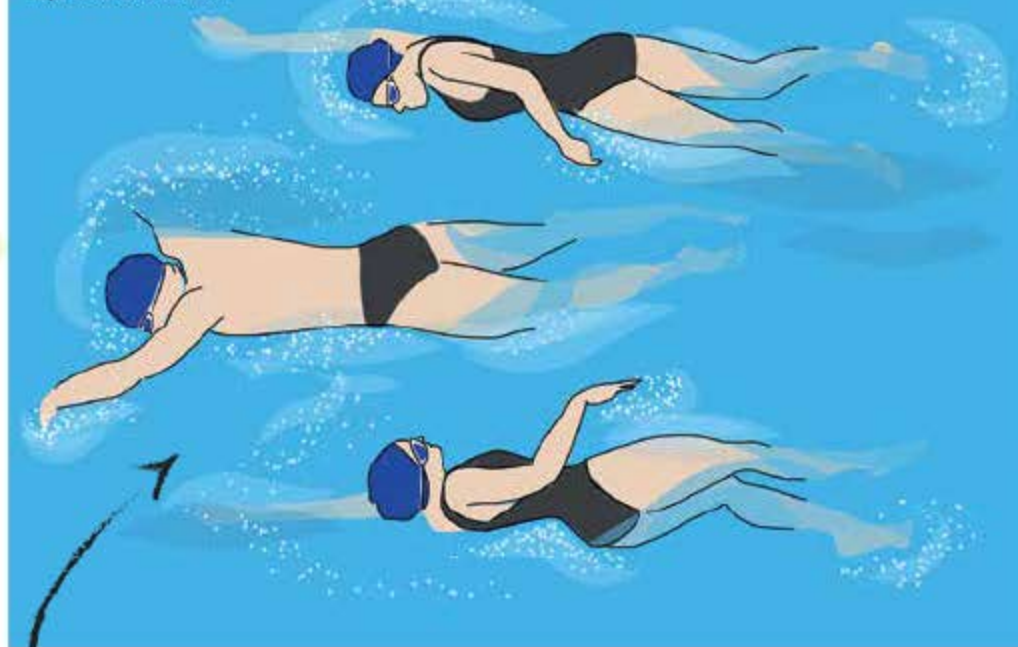
Confidence

This isn't a skill in itself, but rather the result of having mastered some open water skills and feeling at home in the environment. The confidence also comes with familiarity. There isn't any trick that we know to remove the anxiety of being out of your depth and not being able to see the bottom but the more you swim, the less you worry about it.

Skills we haven't covered here include beach starts, deep water starts and feeding during a swim. The first two are only relevant if you're racing and unless you're super competitive you can get away without them. The latter becomes important for swimmers that last more than about 90 minutes. If you're going to do swims of that length, we'd strongly recommend taking advice from experienced swimmers, and keep reading *Outdoor Swimmer*, of course.

ADVANCED DRAFTING

Two swimmers can draft off the hips of the lead swimmer



DRAFTING

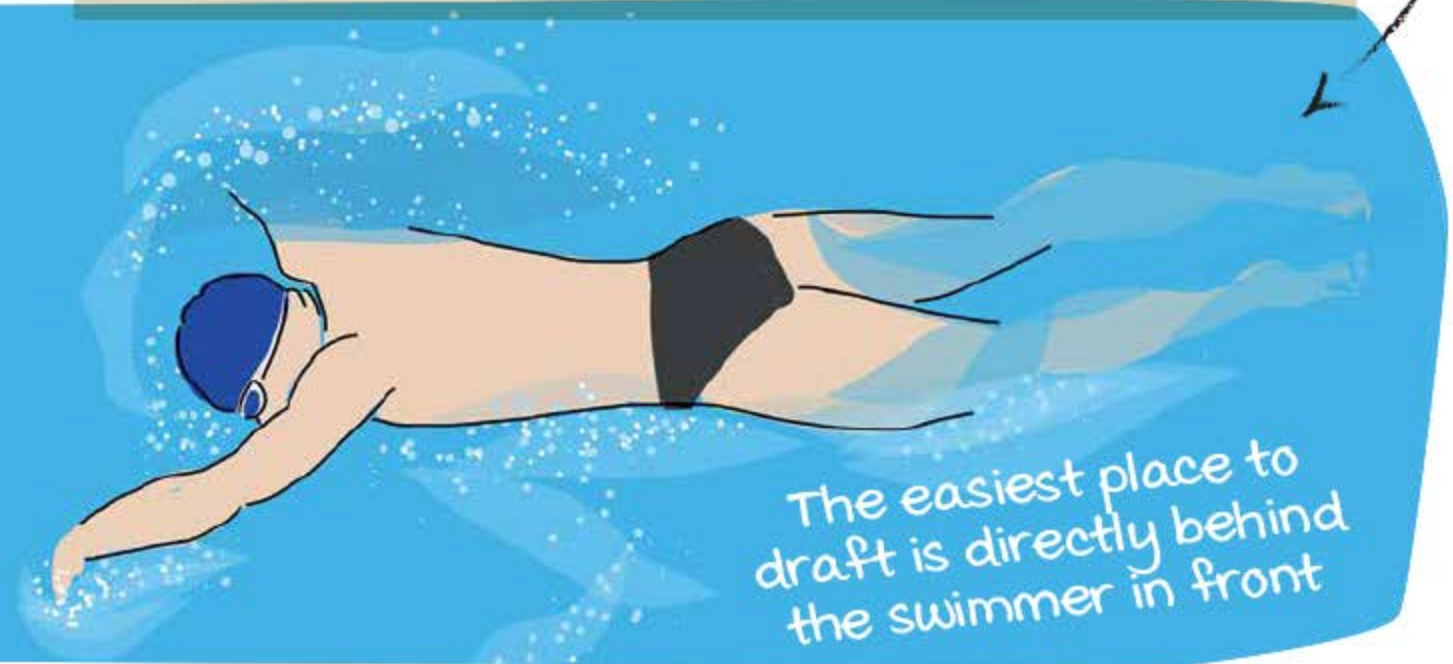
Drafting works in swimming just like in cycling. If you swim directly behind another swimmer, or in their wake with your shoulders close to their hip, you can swim much faster for the same effort. You don't even have to be that close. In an experiment we did in a pool with a 4m gap between swimmers, heart rate was about 10 beats per minute lower when drafting compared to leading.

You might think that drafting is primarily a racing skill but there's no reason you can't make use of it on recreational swims. It makes it easier for swimmers of different speeds to swim together for example.

The easiest place to draft is directly behind the swimmer in front. The closer you are, the better the draft. However, if you get too close you risk annoying the person in front (if you keep touching their feet for

example). A good distance is if your leading hand is about 15 to 30cm behind the other swimmer's feet.

A more advanced skill is to swim close to the other swimmer's hips. This is more technical as you have to time your arms to theirs. Drafting next to someone's hip is particularly useful in a racing situation, as you have a smaller gap to close down when overtaking.



The easiest place to draft is directly behind the swimmer in front

Face your first open water mile with confidence with coach Dan Bullock

Following a structured and progressive training plan that incorporates fitness and technique work is the best way to improve your event-day performance. As a prerequisite, I would suggest you can swim front crawl for at least 10 minutes continuously. A training session is usually split into the following parts:

WARM UP – the ‘warm up’ literally helps warm up the body and mind for the hard work to come. Start slowly and focus on good technique.

SUBSET – this might consist of ‘drills’ (swimming exercises that help you improve your technique), some work on strokes other than front crawl to add variety to your training or exercises to increase your heart rate prior to the main set. Make this optional if you find the full set too hard initially.

MAINSET – this is where the main fitness work is done and is the core part of this programme.

COOL DOWN OR SWIM DOWN – after all the hard work this is your chance to relax, swim slowly and let

WEEK 1

Session 1

TIME TRIAL + STEADY ENDURANCE

100m FC with 15s rest
200m FC with 25s rest
300m FC with 35s rest
10-minute time trial

Swim with a steady and sustainable effort except for the time trial. Keep a record of how far you swim in the time trial.

Session 2

BUILD SPEED WITH TECHNIQUE

4x100m FC with 10s after each.
4x100m FC with 15s after each.
4x100m FC with 20s after each.

Aim to maintain a strong but sustainable effort throughout. The extra rest is to offset the fatigue building through the set.

Session 3

STEADY ENDURANCE

100m FC with 15s rest
200m FC pull with 25s rest
300m FC with 35s rest
400m FC pull with 45s rest
300m FC with 35s rest
200m FC pull with 25s rest
100m FC

WEEK 2

Session 1

PRACTICE DIFFERENT BREATHING PATTERNS

500m FC, breathe every 5th stroke.
400m FC pull, breathe every 4th stroke. Switch sides each length.
300m FC, breathe every 3rd stroke.

200m FC with as few breaths as you can.

Rest 20s after each*

100m FC & a fraction faster breathing every 3rd then 2nd stroke (i.e. 3-2-3-2 etc).

Session 2

RACE PACE PRACTICE

3 x 500m FC swum as:
50m at target race pace, rest 10s
100m at target race pace, rest 20s
150m at target race pace, rest 30s
200m at target race pace

Rest 45s between each 500m. Don't start too fast. Aim to keep your pace even throughout.

Session 3

PACING AND BREATH CONTROL

10 x 100m FC with 30s rest after each 100m. Aim to only allow 4 or 5 breaths on last 25m of each 100m. This helps break autopilot and lower drag, and hence improve technique when it's usually at its worst.

*Intermediate swimmers start with the 500m swim, beginners start with the 400m swim. It's OK to stop for a breather at the end of the length if necessary.

WEEK 3

Session 1

TECHNIQUE FOCUS. TRY TO MAINTAIN STROKE COUNT AS PACE INCREASES.

4 x 300m FC with 45s rest after each swim as:

1 & 3: Alternate 50m full stroke, 50m pull.

2 & 4: Increase effort in blocks of 100m.

Alternating 50m full stroke, 50m pull.

Session 2

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL CHALLENGE

Swim as many sets of 150m + 30s rest after each as you can in 24m.*
Swim as many sets of 75m + 15s rest after each as you can in 12m.
Swim as many sets of 50m + 10s rest after each as you can in 8m.
Swim as many sets of 25m + 5s rest after each as you can in 4m.
Aim to achieve the same number of repeats in each block.

Session 3

STEADY ENDURANCE & PACE CONTROL

4 x 300m FC with 45s rest after each swim as:

6x50m FC with 10s rest

3x100m FC with 20s rest

6x50m FC with 10s rest

3x100m FC with 20s rest

Don't start too fast. Aim to keep your pace even throughout.

*Intermediate swimmers can start with the 24-minute swim, beginners can skip this and start with 12 minutes.

WEEK 4

Session 1

FITNESS BOOST

12 to 18 x 100m FC with 15s rest after each 100m.

Aim to swim each 100m in exactly the same time. Your first 100m should feel easy. The last few will be challenging. If you start slowing down at the end it means you started too fast.

Session 2

TIMED SWIM/ MENTAL PREPARATION

Swim as far as you can in 30* minutes. Aim to match three times the distance you swam in 10 minutes in week 1.

Session 3

IMPROVE LEG KICK

500m FC, steady pace. Kick every 5th length (kick board optional).

400m FC, steady pace. Kick every 4th length (no kick board)

300m FC, steady pace. Kick every 3rd length.

200m FC, steady pace. Kick every 2nd length (no kick board)

100m FC hard kick (board optional)

*Beginners can do 20 minutes.

DEFINITIONS FC = Front crawl. 100m FC means swim 100 metres (four lengths if you're in a 25m pool) off front crawl. Pull = Swimming with a pull buoy (a special type of float) between your legs. 100m pull means you swim straight in front or rest them on a float. Many swimmers use a large flat float known as a 'kickboard'. Interval training = Repeating a fixed distance within a fixed time. For example, 4 x 50m FC off 90s means swim 50m from place in front of you until you have completed a full cycle of the stroking hand.

your heart rate return to more normal levels.

In your first session, I recommend you test yourself to see how far you can swim in 10 minutes, and repeat the test perhaps two weeks after you finish the programme to gauge progress.

We also provide examples of warm-ups and cool-downs that you can use as you choose with each main set to build a full training session. Also, feel free to add in other strokes during this part of the sessions.

WARM-UPS

WARM UP 1: 400m easy FC swim followed by 4x50m getting quicker each one with 10s rest after each. (Use with session 1, week 1)

WARM UP 2: 200m easy FC, 150m FC pull; 100m opening and closing the fists every 2-3 strokes; 50m FC kick. (Use with session 2, week 1)

COOL-DOWNS

SWIM DOWN 1: 200m easy swim, include 100m backstroke

SWIM DOWN 2: 200m alternating lengths FC with a pull buoy, then double arm backstroke.

SWIM DOWN 3: 100m, not FC

Dan Bullock is the founder and head coach at Swim For Tri (SFT), a swimming coaching company specialising in open water swimming. He is an accomplished swimmer himself and has many times won his age group at the ASA National Open Water Masters Championships.

WEEK 5

Session 1

SPEED AND PACING, AVOID SLOWING DOWN THROUGH MAIN SET.

Complete the following swims at about 70% effort with 15s rest after each. All FC.

50m, 100m, 150m, 200m, 250m, 300m, 350m, 400m.

Session 2

STROKE TECHNIQUE AWARENESS

Do this twice:

150m FC at 50%

150m FC at 60%.

150m FC at 70%

150m FC at 80%

Immediately after each 150m swim 50m FC as six strokes with fists clenched, six strokes normal. Take 30s rest after each.

Swim as far as you can in 2m30s.

Session 3

STROKE TIMING AND ACCURACY

5 x 300m as:

Numbers 1, 3 and 5: 250m FC at 60% effort followed by 50m of catch-up

Numbers 2 and 4: 50m of catch-up followed by 250m FC at 75% effort.

Take 30s rest between each 300m.

*Swimming with either your fists clenched or with your fingers spread out is a useful drill to develop your feel for the water. You obviously wouldn't swim like this in a race.

WEEK 6

Session 1

IMPROVE YOUR CATCH

300m FC using different breathing patterns from week 2.

250m pull, breathing every 5 strokes. Keep the head still when not breathing.

200m FC. Try to maintain a similar stroke count on first and last lengths.

150m pull breathing every 5 strokes.

100m FC. Reduce stroke count by 1 stroke per length each length through focus on good technique.

Session 2

SINGLE ARM DRILL

8 x 100m FC with 20s rest after each as:

Numbers 1, 3, 5 and 7: 25m single arm (half distance on each arm) followed by 75m FC.

Numbers 2, 4, 6 and 8: full stroke FC but focus on perfect technique.

Session 3

MAINTAIN GOOD TECHNIQUE

500m continuous swim as: 50m catch up

200m FC pull (70% effort)

250m FC (80% effort with 3,2,3,2 breathing pattern)

Intermediate swimmers can repeat three times with 30s rest after each.

Take 30s rest between each 300m.

Count strokes on the 250m FC section and rethink your technique if this number starts to go up. Take extra rest if necessary to maintain technique.

WEEK 7

Session 1

AEROBIC FITNESS AND TECHNIQUE

Rest 45s after each of:

250m FC, breathe every 5.

200m FC, breathe every 4

(alternate sides each length).

150m FC pull, breathe every 3.

100m FC breathe every 2

50m FC strong effort but only 3

to 5 breaths per length.

50m easy

100m FC, breathe every 5.

150m FC pull, breathe every 4

(alternate sides each length)

200m FC, breathe every 3

250 FC breathe every 2

(alternate sides each length)

Session 2

PACING AND ENDURANCE

4x400m with 45s rest after each swim as:

1 & 3: Alternate 50m FC, 50m pull

2 & 4: Increase effort after each

100m

Session 3

AEROBIC FITNESS AND TECHNIQUE

Repeat session 1 from this week, but complete entire set using full stroke (i.e. no pull buoys). Work

on the breathing patterns to improve symmetry in your stroke and to give you versatility in your swimming so that you can cope with varying conditions when swimming outside.

*Novices can stop here. Intermediate swimmers continue!

WEEK 8

Session 1

HOLD TECHNIQUE UNDER PRESSURE

12 to 20 x 50m FC at strong effort & with a generous 45s rest after each to allow decent recovery.

Aim to swim the same speed and with the same stroke count on each. Use the rest to refocus and concentrate on maintaining good technique.

Session 2

PACING AND SPEED ENDURANCE

12-minute timed effort: swim 75m as many times as you can taking 15s rest after each.

50m easy swim

8-minute timed effort: swim 50m as many times as you can taking 10s rest after each.

50m easy swim

4-minute timed effort: swim 25m as many times as you can taking 5s rest after each.

50m easy swim*

Session 3

PACING AND SPEED ENDURANCE OVER 1500m

3 x (200m) steady pace, rest 30s after each (including the 3rd) and go straight into

5 x (100m) strong steady pace, rest 20s after each (including the 5th) and go straight into

8 x (50m) strong steady pace, rest 10s after each.

*Use a countdown timer on your watch for this. Aim to hit the same number of repeats on each.

four lengths (25m pool) using just your arms with the float held between your thighs. If you don't have a pull buoy, just swim these parts as normal front crawl. Kick = Using your legs only. Either hold your arms out and crawl four times and start each one 90 seconds after the previous one. This means if it takes you one minute to swim 50m, you will get 30 seconds rest. Catch-up = a swimming drill where you leave your leading hand in

HOW TO WARM UP ON

Dan Bullock explains why your swim needs to start before you hit the water

GET THE TIMING RIGHT

Ideally, you want to enter the water and feel like there is continuous momentum from your land-based warm up to your swim. The aim is to promote blood flow to your shoulders and to elevate your breathing and heart rate but without leaving you exhausted, so you need enough time for this but not so much that you get tired or that your muscles get cold again between finishing the warm up and starting the swim.

For a training session this is easily manageable. At an event you will need to take into consideration a number of variable factors such as the amount of space you have while waiting to be called to the start.

The ideal would be about 20 minutes before the start of the swim with a smooth transition to the water. If this is not possible, strive to do the best you can in the circumstances, and don't panic. Any warm up you can do is better than nothing. As

you get closer to the start you will likely have less space as more competitors enter the start area, so try to get your exercises with bigger movements done first.

Do the right exercises

Save your static stretches until after your swim. Instead, focus on mobility and activating the muscles you will need for swimming through replicating swimming movements.

TRICEPS SWINGS

Swing the arm from down by the hip sideways up over the head to the opposite ear. Repeat 20 times, alternating arms with a loose relaxed continuous rhythm. Repeat the exercise a further 20 times, this time reaching to the opposite shoulder.



CHICKEN WINGS

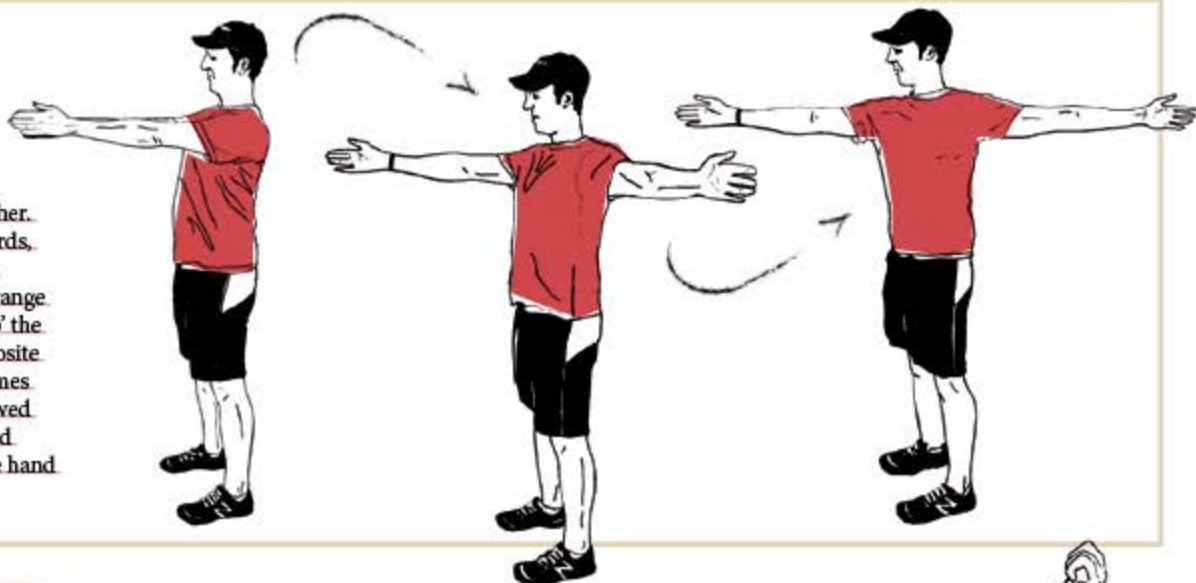
Bend over at the waist with the upper body leaning forwards. Stick out your elbows with your hands in front of your chin ('chicken wings') and draw circles with the elbows. Increase the size of the circles until the arms are straight and windmilling. Maintain this movement for a few seconds and then reduce the size of the swings until you return to the chicken wings position.



LAND FOR SWIMMING

TRUNK CLAPS

Stand straight with arms out in front parallel to the ground and palms together. Swing one hand backwards, travelling parallel to the ground through its full range and bring it back to 'clap' the hands and send the opposite hand back. Repeat 10 times with the head still, followed by 10 times with the head following the path of the hand as it travels behind you.



STANDING TORPEDO

This will help the trunk to mimic the front crawl body position. Keeping the head still, swing your shoulders from side to side aiming to bring each shoulder in turn as close as possible to your chin. Allow the hips to follow the shoulders.



SWORD DRAWS

These combine upper body rotations with a sweeping movement of the arm. From a standing torpedo position take the hand of the lead shoulder and place it into its opposite pocket. Draw an imaginary sword and as you rotate back arc the hand up and around to the base of the neck to finish above and behind the head. Do 10 on each side.

