

Tips for Triathletes Looking to Improve the Swimming Portion

(Available online at www.gordon.daugherty.name/swimming)

Most triathletes either hate or mostly tolerate the swimming portion of the competition. That's because most of them didn't grow up swimming but everyone learned to ride a bike and knows how to run. Learning to swim with an efficient and effective stroke later in life isn't impossible at all but doesn't typically come easily without some level of coaching from someone who knows what to look for. Swimmers with a proper technique look like they are just gliding through the water effortlessly.



This document is intended to convey a set of tips, tricks and hints to help triathletes that either struggling with the swimming portion or are just looking to improve from beginner to intermediate. This document complements another one I wrote called Getting Started With Swim Workouts, which covers a variety of topics that I don't duplicate here. For triathletes, I recommend checking out the sections titled "Freestyle Stroke Advice", "Equipment", "Safety and Injury Protection" and "While on Travel". You can find the link to this other advice document in the middle of this web page: <http://gordon.daugherty.name/swimming/>.

Swim Workout Location

Pool or open water, that's the key question. In some cases you don't have an open water option. But if you do, my recommendation is to conduct most of your workouts in a pool but with periodic workouts spent actually in the open water. The pool environment brings a level of safety and predictability that you can't get with your open water location. And you'll see further below in the Practice Drills section that there are some things you can do in the pool to help prepare for the race swim in open water.

Stroke Technique

My Getting Started With Swim Workouts document referred to above includes a section on freestyle stroke advice. All of the comments in that section apply to open water swimming, so I won't repeat them here. Instead, I'll mention a couple of additional things to keep in mind for open water swim technique:

- **Sighting (stroke)** – Forget changing to breaststroke to sight, unless your muscle strain needs a change. Instead, keep swimming freestyle, just with the sighting incorporated. It will be much faster and will keep your cadence going. You'll need to modify your arm stroke a little so that it pushes water down and perhaps digs a little deeper. Otherwise you won't have the leverage to raise your head.
- **Sighting (timing)** – From a timing standpoint, I like to sight exactly at the moment when I would have otherwise breathed to the side. Instead of turning your head to the side, lift it straight up. But don't simply bend your neck to look up, try to also raise your whole upper body just a little with the change in your arm stroke. This minimizes fatigue on your neck muscles. And don't sight with every stroke. Once you get a good sight on the upcoming buoy, swim for a while and then sight again. How long to swim in between sightings depends on how straight of a swimmer you are.
- **Sighting (breathing)** – I don't often take a breath while sighting, which allows me to raise my head just enough to see. In other words, with eyes above the waterline but not the mouth. And because I don't breathe during sighting, I commonly take two successive breaths to the same side immediately before my sighting stroke. In other words, breathe, breathe, sight, then regular stroke pattern. And if you don't get a good look at the upcoming race buoy, do this sequence twice back to back before returning to your regular stroke



pattern.

- **Breathing** – In a lake or river that only has small waves from the agitation of the other swimmers, you should be able to breathe the same way you do while in the pool. But if you're in open water with legitimate waves of even 12 inches, you will find that you need to get your mouth completely out of the water when you turn your head to the side. Otherwise, it's too easy for a small swell or surface agitation to cause you to gulp sea water, which possibly means salt water. Not fun.
- **Kicking** – Excessive kicking causes tremendous oxygen demand from your leg muscles. I recommend kicking just enough to keep your legs from sinking but not enough to really propel your body. The extra oxygen can be used by your upper body and for times when you are sighting without a breath.
- **Maneuvering Buoys** – This is a personal preference. Most beginners and intermediate swimmers switch to breaststroke while going around the buoy, which is fine. If you decide to use freestyle while navigating the buoy, you might find it really hard to turn. It's like trying to turn a row boat while pulling both oars together. Because of this, advanced triathletes actually roll while going around the buoy, pulling with one arm while on their front, then the other arm while on their back and continuing like a corkscrew. I don't recommend trying this for the first time at a race. If you want to try it, find a video on YouTube and practice it in the pool first.

Practice Drills

- **Sighting** – It is really important to practice sighting before race day. First off, sighting disrupts your normal freestyle stroke, even if you don't switch to breaststroke temporarily. Secondly, the act of sighting puts extra strain on the muscles of your neck and upper back. You don't want to exercise those muscles for the first time during a race. Finally, just the act of trying to spot a colored object on the distant horizon isn't as easy as it might sound. Get off course a time or two and you're just adding race time while wasting energy.
 - **Sighting a Target** – Don't just stare into the distance when you practice sighting. Instead, put a colored object on the pool deck so you have something to specifically look for. One idea is to put a red kickboard on a chair that is situated 10+ feet from the edge of the pool, exactly in front of your lane. If you don't specifically see the target object when you sight, then immediately sight again (just like I explained in the Breathing section above).
 - **Incorporating into a Workout** – Pick one set during each workout for incorporating sighting. I like to do it when I'm swimming middle or longer distances in a set. On every fourth length of the 25 yard (or meter) pool, incorporate the sighting. This has the added benefit of helping you count by 100 yards/meters since every time you finish a length with sighting is the finish of a new increment of 100. Try this for a 1000 yard continuous swim and see if you notice the extra strain on your neck and upper back muscles.
- **Disruption From Crowding** – Not just at the start of the race but also during the race as you're passing others or being passed, you will find that your arms and legs connect with other swimmers. It's inevitable, so you may as well practice it. Get two other swimmers and do the following exercises in the same lane (assuming it's in between lane ropes to define a boundary).
 - **Side By Side** – All three together, side by side, swim a single length of the pool and stop. Repeat about 4 times and do this every few workouts.
 - **Passing** – Alternate with two in front and one behind. For one length of the pool, the back swimmer passes in between the front two swimmers. Then for one length of the pool, the back swimmer passes to one side of the front two swimmers.
- **Swimming Straight** – The longer you can swim straight without having to sight, the better. To practice this, get into a swim lane with lane ropes on either side and no other swimmer in the lane with you. Push

off the wall and after 2-3 strokes to make sure you're right in the middle of the lane, close your eyes for 6-8 strokes and see if you've drifted to one side or the other. Keep practicing this until you can take 12-15 strokes with your eyes closed and without hitting the lane ropes. The lane ropes will inform you if you've drifted too far. Just don't keep your eyes closed so long as to risk reaching the far side of the pool and slamming into it.

Equipment

- **Hand Paddles** – With a buoy between your thighs and hand paddles, you can work just your upper body, which is great since you won't be kicking very hard during open water distance swims. Go easy on this until you get used to the feel of the paddles and also don't get huge paddles. Beware that hand paddles amplify the strain on your shoulders, so start really easy and gradually build your intensity over the course of months. And if you experience any pain at all, stop using them for a couple of weeks. Shoulder injuries take amazingly long to fully heal.
- **Goggles** – There are specialty goggles for open water swimming. They aren't quite as aerodynamic but offer a wider range of view and are usually tinted to help with sun glare. Just be careful not to get ones that are excessively tinted because triathlons usually start in the morning right at dawn. It's actually a catch-22 because your race might start with only a small amount of indirect sunlight (before the sun officially rises) but during your race the sun crests the horizon and shines directly in your face as you're trying to spot the buoys. For this reason, check for the exact sunrise time compared to your expected race start time (for your heat) and also check the orientation of the open water course to determine if you'll ever be swimming directly into the sun. And remember that except for the months of May, June and July, the sun rises in the Southeast rather than due East – for those of you in the US.
- **Wetsuit** – Check your sanctioning and rules on wetsuit use for your particular race. Usually there is a temperature threshold below which wetsuits are not only allowed (legal) but without affecting your eligibility for time reporting and competitive placement. If you don't care about competing for a medal and the expected water temp is too cold for you to swim comfortably, then wear a wetsuit. There are thin wetsuits ideally suited for triathletes. And you'll find styles that cover the full arm/leg as well as "shorties" and "tank top" styles. Just remember the more of your body it covers the longer it's going to take to remove during transition. And in all cases, use some lubricant near your arm pits and neck. But make sure it's a lubricant specifically for swimming wetsuits. In other words, not a petroleum-based product like Vaseline.



Race Day

- **The Start** – Like in the photo at the start of this document, you'll be starting with 20-50 other competitors. And even though you've already practiced bumping into other swimmers (see Practice Drills above), there's no need to put yourself in the middle of the washing machine while it's running. Instead, move to the far outside for your start. The first buoy is probably 400 meters or further in the distance. So starting 20 feet from the true center line to the first buoy isn't going to make a difference at all in your time but it can save you a lot of kicks to the face, grabs of your shoulder/foot/swimsuit or loss of your goggles (that reminds me, put your colored swim cap over your goggle straps to prevent losing them altogether if they get kicked out of your eye sockets). Once the swimming crowd thins out and separates, you can gradually move to the center line.
- **Pacing** – Your adrenalin will probably be pumping pretty good when the race starts. So you will want to force yourself to start out really slow and smooth. Concentrate on getting a good sight on the first buoy and staying away from flailing arms and legs for the first 50-100 meters. Then start finding your pace. I

like to gradually build my pace through the first half of the race. Then during the second half I concentrate more on my heart rate to gauge my pace.

- **The Finish** – The main thing to realize during the water exit is that you're legs aren't going to be fully stable for walking/running. And you might be standing on rocks or some other slippery surface as you make your way to the land. So be really careful during your first several steps. And once fully on shore, gradually increase from a jog to a run as you make your way to the transition area.