



OPEN WATER SWIMMING TIPS

Open Water

Visibility of less than 2 feet. No stripe to follow on the bottom. Unseen creatures lurking under you. Seen creatures kicking you and flailing their arms all around you. Choppy water trying to splash in your mouth on every breath..... cold water in some cases (but not for the Aquafest in Hong Kong – as we pick warm water months for our own comfort!)

Maybe you can't understand why anyone would be interested to swim in open water.

Open water swimming can be a wonderful activity though. Open water swimming is to pool swimming as trail running is to track running. It is a chance to get out and simply enjoy your surroundings. You can stretch out your stroke and get into a rhythm that you can't achieve when there are walls every 25 or 50 meters.

Get Comfortable

Admittedly, it is important to feel comfortable in open water before you can really enjoy it. And to feel comfortable, you have to understand what the water can do, what you can do, and have some confidence that you can handle whatever it throws at you. Don't go into the water with the attitude that you can depend upon someone else to bail you out. Lifeguards, and other people, will do what they can

to help you, but if seven other people also go in with the same attitude and have trouble at the same time you do....

Maintaining Your Composure

In almost every pool around, it is impossible to be more than 4 lane widths from a wall. And with lane ropes installed, there is always something within an arms reach for support in case you get a mouth full of water. That is not the case with open water.

Swimming alone or with a small group, there is often nothing right next to you to hang onto. At least in races, there are usually lifeguards on rescue boards or kayaks nearby to quickly lend assistance. How far do you feel comfortable swimming without hanging onto something?

Think carefully about that question, because the answer is very important. In the pool, do you grab the wall at each turn in order to get a little rest or a little more breath? Can you swim longer distances without grabbing a wall? Can you stay afloat while coughing from getting a mouthful of water, or do you hang onto the lane rope? Can you keep swimming when you get a side stitch, calf cramp, or foot cramp? Can you swim underwater for a few seconds without feeling claustrophobic?

Although it is not uncommon for even very experienced swimmers to occasionally feel a little panicky in open water, panicking is about the worst thing you can do in open water (it isn't recommended in many other situations either). The biggest mental challenge to open water swimming is to maintain composure no matter what happens. This may require doing some breaststroke, or even treading water or floating for a little while. It is always good to value your life more than staying with the pack, getting a fast time, or riding a great wave. Find some way to keep afloat and to regain your composure. With this mental security, you will at least enable yourself to enter another event at a later date. You can swim any stroke you want in open water races, so if you need to switch to feel comfortable, do it! Once you are composed and more relaxed, you can chase the leaders again.

Don't Swim Alone (this is not the case with an open water race, but only if you want to train in an unorganized session)

Even if you have tried to prepare for every possible problem, it is always possible that something unexpected will happen and you find yourself needing help. That is not the time to be alone. If there are lifeguards, let them know your plans before you start swimming. If there are no lifeguards, then swim with someone else (keeping an eye on each other and knowing lifesaving will both help). Even if there are lifeguards, a partner will be able to get to you a lot sooner than a lifeguard.

Navigation

Can you swim in the right direction when there is no line painted on the bottom? The best thing to do is to look up every few strokes. Practice in a pool. Try lifting your head up and looking at the end of your lane. Lift your head at different times during your stroke and see what feels most comfortable. With that accomplished, you have tackled the most important part of navigation in open water. That is really all you need to be able to do, although there are refinements to help you speed up and make it easier.

Refinements:

- Looking up slows you down and tires you out. If you can stay on course, you will be much better off looking up every 20 strokes as opposed to every 6 strokes. But that is a big "if." Not looking up may speed you up, but that doesn't do much good if you start swimming in circles. The classic solution to this is to practice swimming a length of the pool with your eyes closed. The lane ropes will quickly make it apparent in which direction you naturally veer. Work to straighten out your stroke.
- Know where to expect the buoy (I'll use the term buoy, even though you may end up using some other landmark) when you look. It is a whole lot easier to find the North Star if you start by looking generally north. Likewise, it is a whole lot easier to spot a buoy or some other target if you generally look in the right direction and know where to expect it.
- Don't look for too long. If you don't spot your marker (buoy) quickly, take another stroke and look again then. Or you may have only gotten a glimpse of the buoy before you had to put your face back in the water. But this should help you spot it more quickly the next time you look. In choppy or rough water, you may be in the trough of a wave in one stroke, making a buoy impossible to see. But two strokes later, you may be on the crest and able to see for hundreds of yards. Note also that even though you may be on the crest of the wave, the buoy may be in a trough. Oh well, it is better to keep swimming in the direction where you think the buoy is located than to stop until you sight it.
- Follow others. If you are swimming with others, and they appear to be swimming in a straight line, just follow them. But even though they will probably not intentionally veer off course, you should still check periodically.
- Find things to the side that you can use as markers. In the case of the Sheko Challenge, the land is always on the right side when swimming to the finish line at Rocky Bay. Look for a point on the shore that is the farthest out in the ocean, and aim for that. Once beyond that, look for other points that stick out along the coast, until you reach the next bay. For bouy races, always look for your next bouy, and be aware (by studying the course map before hand, where it is going to generally be.
- Use your imagination. There are lots of things around that can help you stay in a straight line without looking up too often. You can even use the

- rays of sunlight are entering the water to help you stay in a straight line. It certainly isn't perfect, but if it allows me to look up only every 20 strokes instead of 6, it is worth it. The wave direction can also help orient you.
- Don't make big adjustments to your position. If you find yourself quite a ways to the side of the course, change your direction to slowly move back. Remember that the shortest distance from your current position to the next turn is a straight line, no matter where you are. Don't bother swimming straight back to the other swimmers before heading for the next turn; just go for the next turn. You really do not swim much further if you gradually move away from the shortest path and then gradually move back. On an out and back 1.5K swim, you can swim over 40 meters to the side on each leg of the swim, and still swim only an additional 10 meters for the entire swim.

Racing with Others

Racing in open water is not quite the same as just swimming in open water. There are lots of other people around. Do you feel comfortable swimming in the midst of 400 flailing arms and legs? Do you prefer having a little space around you? Keep this in mind during the swim. You almost always have the ability to control how large of a pack you are swimming in. If there are too many arms and legs, move to the outside of the course. The outside of the course is good if you are uncertain, instead of the inside of the course because of turns. At turns, everybody bunches up as close to the buoy as they can. If you are on the inside, you must work your way into that group in order to swim around the buoy (rules generally frown upon swimming to the inside of the turn buoy). If you are on the outside, you can remain just to the outside as everybody else fights to get within touching distance of the buoy.

Although there are advantages to be gained from drafting other swimmers, you have to be careful in doing so - there are some pitfalls also. When drafting someone else, your stroke may end up being choppier as you struggle to stay in the proper drafting position. If the swimmer is the same speed as me, this choppiness may just make you more tired without any additional speed. Drafting can be good if you find the right situation, but other times it is better to look for open water where I can stretch out my stroke and cruise. Don't convince yourself that you have to draft just because it is faster; it may not be worth it, so examine each situation.

Race Start (finding/creating space)

Take a handful of spaghetti (uncooked is much less messy) and hold it so all the noodles are resting vertically on the table. (If you are at the office, you can go to the supply cabinet and use a handful of pens as a substitute) They can all be contained in a pretty small circle on the table. Now let them all fall over in the same direction. They are now all over each other and take up much more space on the table. Now imagine a whole bunch of swimmers/triathletes standing on

the beach or treading water behind the starting line. They are contained in a pretty small area. Now sound the starting horn and what happens? They all go from being vertical to being horizontal and, just like the spaghetti, are now all over each other. No wonder we always get mercilessly kicked and elbowed at the beginning of races; there just isn't enough room for everybody until after we start to spread out.

If you don't want to be a part of all those flying arms and legs, then plan your escape route before the race starts. Don't start in the middle of the front. Start in the back, where nobody else will really want your space in the water. The only trouble is that as people get tired after the initial sprint, you will have to navigate through them (or over them). Another option is to start near one side or the other. You can always just swim a little further to the outside to get away from the elbows, yet there aren't as many people to swim through after they tire from their sprint. If you want to mix it up with the other swimmers, then be prepared to do a little fighting to maintain your space. A bigger, more forceful kick is one method of getting a little more room. The splash acts as discouragement for those around you. Even if they are not afraid of getting kicked, I don't know of many swimmers who like to take a breath while getting splashed in the face. Another trick that is not too obnoxious is simply to make your pull a little wider and hold your forearm close to vertical. This allows you to use your forearm to keep other swimmers a slight distance to your side.

Waves/Swells

For the purposes of this discussion, we should distinguish between waves (or swells), breakers, and chop. Waves travel in one direction and make you go up and down. Breakers are what result when waves reach shallow water. Breakers crash over your head and try to grind you into the ground. Chop is the result of lots of little waves with no apparent direction to them. Imagine putting 100 kids in a pool with no lane ropes or gutters - the end result is "chop." It is also what you often get in windy conditions.

Every body of water has waves and chop. Modern pools do an amazing job at keeping them to a minimum; large bodies of water do not. Remember all those stroke drills you have done in the pool, teaching you to keep your fingers just above the surface on the recovery and to have a nice smooth entry into the water? You can forget them in wavy choppy water. In rough water, if you keep your fingers just above the surface of the water, then you are quite likely to have an unexpected wave come along and cause your hand to enter the water below your shoulder. This is not ideal! In order to allow a reasonable stroke, you need to have a much higher recovery with your hand in open water. Get it out of the water and in the air quickly. Then when it comes time to put it back in the water, get it quickly from being well above the water to being in the water. The less time your hand spends at the water surface, the less likely it will be affected by waves and chop.

And since waves generally move in the same direction (the wake from a boat is an exception), imagine what will happen if the waves are coming from your right and you can only breathe to the right. Unless you happen to have a set of gills, you probably will not be too comfortable. This is one good reason to learn bilateral breathing.

Breakers (this is not relevant for most races in Hong Kong, including the Sheko Challenge, but worth knowing if you want to try other beach races)

For some people, breaking waves are loads of fun. For others, they are a source of terror. If you are in the latter group, then think twice before entering any ocean swims. It is best to become comfortable with breaking waves before having to negotiate them in a race. Waves break because of interaction with the bottom. Bigger waves also affect water motion at a deeper depth, so they interact with the bottom and break further from shore. Watch it sometime: the little 6 inch waves break right on the shore and the big waves break quite a ways from shore.

For the most part, the maximum size of the waves is pretty predictable. Watch them for a few minutes and see how big they are and how far out they break. It would be very unlikely that they will change much in the time it takes you to do your swim. This is important because the best place to swim is directly affected by where the waves are breaking. Between the breakers and shore, a lot of water goes in and goes out with a lot of force. Most people with a functioning self-preservation instinct do not just stand around in this area. And even if they try, they tend to get moved around by the water.

Just beyond the breakers, the swells are quite large, and make swimming quite difficult. Besides, if one slightly larger than usual wave came in, you might not be past its breaking point. Involuntary bodysurfing is not the same as open water swimming. As you get further beyond the breakers, the swells are not nearly so large, so swimming becomes much easier. Beyond a certain distance, going further beyond the breakers doesn't affect the size of the swells at all, it only gets you further beyond the breakers and further from shore.

So the trick is to get beyond the breakers as quickly as possible, swim around out there, and then get from the breakers back to shore again as quickly as possible. When getting past the breakers or back into shore, the biggest thing to remember is not to fight the water! It will win. Don't be afraid to let the water push you around a little - it is better to give a little than to break. There are lots of tricks that can help keep your body intact when getting past the breakers.

- Go under/through the wave. This is probably the most useful technique. Just before a wave breaks, you can dive under the wave or through the vertical wall of water and go through the wave. You can actually just stand

there (preferably sideways so it doesn't have as much to push on) and let the wave go around you. If the wave has already broken, don't try to go through the whitewater that results. That is another good way to become an involuntary bodysurfer. Instead, go under the wave. All that whitewater is headed for shore on top of comparatively calm water down below. Find that calmer water before the whitewater finds you. It will still be pretty turbulent, but it won't be headed for shore and trying to take everything along with it. Once the turbulence subsides, the wave has passed and you can come to the surface again. Just remember to keep some air in your lungs in case you get to the surface just before another wave reaches you. If that happens, get a quick breath if you can, dive back under, hope you can get a real breath after this wave and try to stay calm and relaxed. It doesn't take much water to provide protection. If you are in a tough situation with a big wave coming and you can't outrun it, you can flatten yourself on the sandy bottom and wait out the turbulence.

- Go over the wave. If the wave is small, then you are probably still in shallow water and can jump over it. If the wave is not very small and is just beginning to break, then you can float up and over it. You can probably imagine what happens if you try this and the wave has really started to break - you find yourself halfway back to shore when you finally surface.
- Force yourself through the wave. This is useful only for waves that are too big to jump over but still too small to dive through or go under. The idea is to turn sideways and lean your shoulder or hip into the wave as it breaks. Turning sideways allows the wave to go around you instead of through you. By leaning into the wave, it is likely that it will stand you back up as it passes, but it shouldn't knock you over.

Once past the breakers, remember to move with the swells. It is quite possible to be standing in waist deep water one second and have water over your head the next. Don't fight it, when a swell goes by, allow yourself to float over it. It will push you toward shore a little bit, but you are past the breakers, so it won't push you all the way. And once it is past you and you are in shallow water again, you'll feel the water pushing you away from shore. Don't fight it, just move with it. It will move you back to the same place you were before the swell pushed you a little bit towards shore.

Although swimming past the breakers is relatively calm, very few people want to stay out there forever. This requires that you be able to get back to shore. This usually can be done much more quickly than getting out past the breakers in the first place since the breaking waves can help you in this case. The waves travel to shore much more quickly than you can swim, so in this situation, you want to become an intentional bodysurfer.

The basic idea of bodysurfing is simple - get into a streamlined position and let the wave push you. But that alone will not get you very far. On your bike, have you ever drafted a tandem on a downhill? If you start the descent with the tandem and accelerate with it, you can get up to some pretty incredible speeds.

Yahoo! However, if you start the descent after the tandem, then you have no hope of ever catching it. If you start ahead of the tandem, by the time it passes you it will be going too fast for you to accelerate and catch its draft. Bodysurfing waves is similar.

If you are behind the wave when it breaks, then it is pretty obvious that you won't be riding it. But most people don't realize that if they are in front of the wave when it breaks, it will give them a good push and throw them around a bit, but will ultimately pass by them. But if you are on the top of the wave as it begins to break, you can stay right on the front of it and ride it all the way to shore. Just as the wave is breaking, take one or two strong pulls, hold your breath, get in a good streamline, and kick like crazy in order to stay on the front of the wave. As insurance in case you run into someone, people who value their fingers make fists, and people who value their heads keep their hands together (grabbing a thumb with the opposite hand works very well). If you become very adept at bodysurfing, you can ride waves all the way to shore and emerge from the water looking like a sand monster, with enough sand in your hair and on your body to get a good start on your own sand volleyball court. If you don't think you would enjoy doing the bike ride like this, then you should stop riding the wave when the water gets shallow and run the rest of the way.

Current (This is not overly critical in Hong Kong swims, but worth knowing)

There really isn't any special technique for swimming with or against currents. It is just like swimming in calm water. But mentally, it can be very different. Swimming against a weak current, it can take substantially longer to cover a given distance (you don't get anywhere swimming against a strong current). Swimming with a current, you can finish a given distance much faster than otherwise possible.

Swimming across a current can require some different tactics, though. With a continuous current, like in a river, you have to aim upstream of your target. Some of your effort will go into getting you closer to the finish and some will go into fighting the current. Many races in areas affected by tides are timed to be held at either high or low tides. This way, the current comes from one side for the first half of the swim and then reverses for the second half. The result is that you naturally swim in an arc toward the finish, so it is best not to fight the current in this situation.

Undertows and Riptides (not an issue in Hong Kong swims – but it can be an issue if you are swimming in Tai Long Wan in Sai Kung)

It makes sense that currents usually run parallel to shore. If they ran perpendicular to shore then they would need a source for their water or some destination. Dry land is not very good at either of these. Whenever a wave breaks, a lot of water goes into the shore. Unless this is flooding the shore, all this water

is somehow returning to the ocean. There are a couple of ways it can do this: undertows and riptides.

An undertow is when the water returns to the ocean underneath the incoming waves. It can be pretty strong near shore, but shouldn't really affect anyone on the surface. A riptide channels the water into a river that runs away from the shore and perpendicular to it. It moves quickly and can quickly carry a swimmer far from shore. Naturally, the way to handle it is to get out of the riptide. Riptides may move a lot faster than any of us can swim, but they aren't very wide. So don't waste your energy fighting them; swim to the side of them and head back to shore in more friendly water.

Cold Water (not an issue in the Aquafest swims – but worth knowing)

When you first try swimming in cold water, your body's natural reflex is not to inhale or exhale when your face is in the water. It is very difficult to get a smooth stroke when you don't exhale until your face is out of the water. The trick is to force yourself to exhale when your face is still in the water. Being prepared for this before races will help you get into a smooth stroke much more quickly.

Some of the new wetsuits are great for keeping warmth, and also flexibility with the thinner arm insulation so you can still do normal strokes. Orca Wetsuits are good for this. Note that some open water races do not allow wetsuits, so check before you enter if it will be a cold water situation.

In Closing

In our "very serious" pursuits to be athletes, many adults miss out on one of the best ways around to become comfortable in the water: playing. Go to a local pool some time and look at all the kids splashing and diving around. Listen to their laughter. They are enjoying themselves. They are also becoming very comfortable with their surroundings.

The best way to get comfortable with the water is to play and to experiment. What are the different ways you can get past a breaking wave without being pulverized? How far can you ride a wave before it passes by you or you get ground into the sand? What does it feel like to swim barely past the breakers?

Maintain your respect for the water, but experiment, and by all means, remember that this is supposed to be fun!

See you at the Aquafest or other open water swim events!