

How to be a Better Triathlon Swimmer

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This weekend at the Timberman Triathlon, I had an opportunity to sit in a kayak and watch 2500 athletes negotiate the 1900 meter (1.2 mile) swim, as I worked as a volunteer at the half ironman. I had had a very good race at the Sprint the day before, and the only thing I would have done differently would have been to position myself at the front of the swim. Because I don't lead the swim, and because I had been having issues with cramping during the swim early in the season, I had been positioning myself at the back of my wave, so as to not get in anyone's way. Each and every time I got caught in traffic, and assumed that I just wasn't working the draft well. This weekend changed my thinking.

First of all, "fast" is a relative term. I'm not sure I'll ever use the adjective "fast" to describe my swim, but I shouldn't be comparing myself to Cait and Tim Snow, or even Mike Lamie. Second, often people who are fast swimmers in the pool swim very differently in open water. I am very comfortable in the water and I sight well, so regardless of my pace, I keep moving along and don't waste time. Also, the wetsuit can be a great equalizer. So maybe the back isn't the place for me

When the gun went off at the Sprint, I stood at the back to watch people go in so I could choose a line. Unfortunately, people DIDN'T get in the water – not for a long time. In fact, because the Sprint is a very shallow swim, there were people who WATER RAN the entire way. No lie! So after I noticed that people weren't diving in, I did and tried to swim around people but got caught in traffic again – this time foot traffic as well.

The time spent in the kayak was a real eye opener, though. The pro men and women do have an advantage of always going off in smaller waves. But they get into a rhythm, sight well, and their open water swim looks exactly like their pool swim. The age group swimmers are very different.

One difference is that they don't sight very well. The pro triathletes don't always bilateral breathe, but they are able to look to their offside every so often to check on the buoys without interrupting their stroke. They also sight without stopping or lifting their heads very far out of the water (see attached).

It seems that triathletes by and large don't spend much time looking at the rules, but the rules of the swim state that you *are* allowed to swim INSIDE the buoys – EXCEPT for the turn buoys. You must go around the outside of the turn buoys. So if the buoys are set up on the 'wrong' side for your breathing pattern, swim just to the inside so you can see the buoys and keep a straight line. Just make sure that you go around the outside of the turn buoys. And keep checking the USAT/WTC rules, as these rules do change!

Another difference I noticed is that the pro triathletes are very comfortable swimming close to others. In fact, they do this on purpose. Drafting IS legal in swimming. (It is NOT in cycling. Still. Despite what we saw at Timberman this weekend). The age group triathletes tend to bump into each other or swim up on each other, but it's seldom on purpose. They don't seem to really know where they are going – even in crystal clear water. It's as though everyone's goggles are foggy.

So how does one become a better open water swimmer? Most people assume that it's simply by swimming open water more often. But six people trotting down to Duxbury Bay and swimming along the shore with no buoys to go around really doesn't prepare you for swimming with 100 people around buoys lined up to form a hexagon where the current or wave pattern is one way heading out, and another after you turn around the buoy.

If you really want to get serious about become a better triathlon swimmer, you need to enter open water swim races, or sign up for a few local sprint triathlons to practice the swim. A good way to do this without ruining you're 'A' race by racing too much would be to offer to be the swimmer on a relay team. Full disclosure about your swimming ability is recommended, but if a team is looking for a swimmer in the first place, it's probably because they don't have someone who is better than you.

Also, if I had a nickel for every person who says they don't want to do Masters at the Y because we swim 5 or 6 to a lane, I could probably take a day off every now and then! Many people who are training for a triathlon don't even do a Masters program because they'd rather swim by themselves. I stand there and watch people wait for a lane to CLEAR so they can have the whole lane to themselves to swim. At most, they will swim 2 to a lane.

All I can say is, if swimming 6 to a lane in a pool that has lane lines and a shallow end, and where you are never more than 25 meters from the wall wigs you out, you are not going to embrace the full contact sport of open water swimming. Swim by yourself for a little while, or a couple of times a week, but you should probably suck it up and join a crowded Masters program if you want to feel comfortable in a triathlon swim.

When we have full attendance at early morning Masters, we have 30 people swimming in 6 lanes. They are doing all 4 strokes, there are more men than women, they are – of course – swimming in both directions, so the pool can get turbulent. The water IS crystal clear, so you don't get to practice low visibility, but I can't think of a better way to get used to swimming in 'conditions' on a routine basis. Also, the temperature in pools can vary slightly. The pool at the Y ranges between 79 and 81 degrees. When it's 81° people complain about doing long sets because the water is too warm. When it's 79, people ease into the pool, wrap their arms around their bodies and complain if we have a kick set because they aren't generating enough body heat to keep warm. Really? This year alone in triathlons I swam in water that ranged from 65 to nearly 80. We swam in the rain, swam in the chop, swam with wetsuits and without, swam in crystal clear water and in water where you literally couldn't see your hand after it entered the water.

I guess what I'm saying is, if you are serious about getting better at triathlon swimming, I would plan over the next year to allow yourself to swim in all kinds of conditions. None should be dangerous, but uncomfortable is good!

I've attached an article about sighting like a pro, and I am going to post a video online later that I took of Cait and Tim at masters swim the other day. They did not know that I was going to video them – they were just swimming. I just wanted to show two very good swimmers with very different technique to demonstrate that I think people can get too hung up on technique when they complain about their swim results in a triathlon. Thanks for reading, and happy swimming

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