

FEAR FACTOR: 6 Tips for Conquering Your Open-Water Swim

Written By: Jay Prasuhn

The Fear: General Anxiety over the Swim

It's race day. You've racked your bike and you walk to the water – a chilly lake beset by throngs of nervous athletes awaiting their wave. The horn hasn't even blown and you're already contemplating the warm comfort of your car. Coach Al Lyman (pursuit-fitness.com) notes that swim anxiety is the same for nearly everyone. "It's normal to feel anxious and nervous. Everyone in this sport was a beginner and felt that way at one time, so you're not alone," Lyman says.

The Solution: Remove Fear of the Unknown

"So many beginners think, 'I don't need to practice; I'll be okay on race day,' but it doesn't work that way." Coach Roy Frey (multisports.com) says, "You gotta force yourself to get out in open water and practice." Frey recommends swimming in the open water as often as three times a week within a month of a race. "Even if you swim for just five minutes, each time helps build a more confident athlete."

The Fear: I Won't Be Ready for my Race

When we're trying to learn something new, or improve our skills, we can get impatient and frustrated with our seemingly slow progress. But you can't rush your progress.

The Solution: One Swim Stroke at a Time

Lyman notes that adaptation takes time, and you have to give your body the time it requires to learn. "Over time, if you keep focusing on the fundamentals and if you are patient, you do achieve." And so what if you're just cruising along at the back of the swim? Not only do you have a swim clear of all those people ahead, think of all the people you'll likely pass on the bike and run!

The Fear: Claustrophobia

Wrapped neck to ankle in a tight wetsuit, your first swim in a wetsuit can feel scary, claustrophobic. "A wetsuit can feel really restrictive at first, especially around the shoulders and arms," Lyman says.

The Solution: Suit Up at the Pool

Before you even don your suit at the lake or beach, do it at the pool. "You have to be 100-percent comfortable in your wetsuit in a pool first to lose that feeling of claustrophobia," Lyman says. It's at the pool, absent of all the distractions of the open water, where you can just feel what a wetsuit can do for you by providing buoyancy and warmth – and that it's really not restrictive."

A drill Lyman suggests is to float. Just float. "Before you do start swimming, it's important to learn what water can do for you. We are often so anxious to move and put pressure on the water that we never truly relax and just let the water support us," Lyman says. "Learn to relax with your head down into the water and feel the water supporting you," Lyman says. "Practice floating and find the perfect balance point. It is an amazing feeling when we get it for the first time."

When putting your wetsuit on at the pool – or elsewhere – be sure you put it on correctly or it will restrict your arm movement. "Pull up from the thighs and hips to give you plenty of freedom around the hips," says Lyman, "then pull up the torso and especially pull up on the arms and from the tops of the shoulders to relieve any tightness around the arms and shoulders."

The Fear: Difficulty Breathing

When you get out of breath, the natural instinct is to stop, pull your head out of the water and breathe. But swimming requires that you're comfortable with your face in the water – a major source of anxiety for many new swimmers. Lyman says, "It's very important to learn that focusing on the exhale and breathing out is the key to learning to relax."

The Solution: Exhale Underwater

Exhale through your nose and mouth with your face in the water, taking in air only when you roll to the side during your stroke. Your face doesn't even need to be totally out of the water. And you can practice this at home with a big bowl of water – blow bubbles to exhale with your face underwater, turn your head to the side to sneak a breath, then return to face down to exhale. Frey advises practicing bilateral breathing too – alternate breathing to each side. "In the race, you'll want to breathe to another side if you have the sun in your eyes or a buoy or

swimmer next to you. Focus only on the exhale when your face is in the water, and the inhale takes care of itself. As you exhale more deeply and forcefully, you will naturally become more relaxed, less anxious and realize you are not out of breath after all."

The Fear: External Forces

From waves to sea creatures to fellow athletes, external forces are a part of an open-water swim. "Expecting these kinds of things and deciding in advance how you will deal with them is key," Lyman says.

The Solution: Practice Makes Perfect

Practice at the pool with friends tapping at your feet and bumping you. Also practice backstroking at the pool it's the perfect break when rolling waves might tire you out, giving you a chance to catch your breath and gather your composure.

Once race day comes, remember the swim is only a small percentage of any triathlon and serves as a warm-up for the bike and run, so take the time you need to avoid stress. "Be sure to take the time to do a good warm-up swim just to get those first jitters out of you system," Lyman advises. "It will make the actual race start easier because you will already be familiar with the environment."

Lyman suggest that you seed yourself honestly and be willing to start off to the side or behind the main pack to avoid the contact and chaos of a frenzied swim start.

How? Think about the swim course. Is the first buoy a right-hand turn? If so, the best place to be is at the back, off to the left of the group. As swimmers reach the right-turn buoy, they'll coalesce to the right and create a traffic jam of arms and legs. "Stay outside, wide at the buoys," Frey concurs. "It's better to swim a bit longer and go outside than to go inside and contend with a bunch of people." If you're unsure, ask the race director or experienced athletes the best place for a beginner to be to avoid contact.

And when that horn blows? While we all get excited and want a great start to the day, novices may need to let those arms and legs go an ahead to allow for a stress-free, clear path through the swim. So as the horn blows, give yourself a second, walk in calmly and find

some clear water ahead. "It's okay to let the main pack jump out first, and then follow behind," Lyman says. "The time you will lose is only a small fraction of the race and simply doesn't matter. Let them go."

The Fear Big Waves

Open water can muster up a scary challenge: waves. These ominous walls of crashing water can thump you, or you can just let them thunder right over you.

The Solution: Use your Discretion

For those who show up on race day and still haven't done an open-water swim, doing it on a day with overhead surf may not be the right time to begin. "There's no shame in backing out and saving it for another day," Frey says.

But if you're ready to play in the waves, Frey explains that big waves are easy to contend with – just duck-dive the wave and go deep, where the turbulent action from the wave is virtually nil. He suggests diving hands first immediately before the wave approaches, reaching for the sandy bottom. Then wait as the turbulence passes overhead. "A lot of beginners pop up too soon," Frey says. "Go down, grab the sand for a second or two, then push off forward and up, not just up." By then the wave has roared over you and passed, leaving you ready to continue your swim out. As subsequent waves come, just swim right underneath them, letting the turbulence pass you overhead.