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# OPEN WATER SKILLS

A Guide To Help You Develop Great Open Water Skills

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## Intro

We've been running open water skills sessions with triathletes and open water swimmers for the past four or five years. During that time, we've seen hundreds of different athletes come to our group sessions, based at the Liverpool Watersports Centre.

Swimmers come to the sessions for very different reasons:

- Improve their confidence in open water
- Swim with others in a group
- Learn new skills
- Prepare for race day
- Meet up with their friends

These swimmers have gone on to have great success in their triathlon swims or open water swim events.

We've produced this **Open Water Skills Guide** to further help the swimmers who come to our group sessions - and to reach out to those who cannot attend.

In the Guide, we cover topics such as:

- Developing Confidence
- Sighting
- Turn Buoys
- Drafting
- Race Day Anxiety & Pacing
- Other Tips

We hope it's a useful tool in your quest to be a better open water swimmer / triathlete. If you have any feedback, or anything you wish we'd covered, please get in touch.

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# Improving Open Water Confidence

For those swimmers who are new to open water or a bit nervous doing this type of swimming, we need to start with building some confidence in training sessions.

## Typical Anxieties

Everything seems different, unfamiliar and even a little bit frightening.

- The water is cold.
- Visibility in the water is poor.
- There are no lane ropes to keep you swimming straight.
- The distance to swim seems too far.
- It's deep.
- What lies beneath?
- People. Lots of people.
- Wetsuit is tight.
- What if I'm not as good as everybody else?

The list goes on.

## More-Or-Less The Same

But you know what? Once you start, swimming is more-or-less the same. Your technique is more-or-less the same. The water is more-or-less the same. In short, if you can swim in a pool, you can swim in the open water. In fact, with a wetsuit on, swimming in open water is actually a little easier.

## Some Strategies

However, if you do find yourself on the edge of the water, a little bit anxious, I would suggest the following:

- Pick a nice quiet spot where you can get in at your own pace. No rush. Walk into the water or lower yourself in. Spend a moment just taking your surroundings in.
- Take a minute or two dipping your head underwater, feel the water and get used to it.

- Let a little water into the neck of your wetsuit and feel the cold of the water. It'll help you acclimatise when you start swimming.
- Then, the moment you've been waiting for. Start swimming!
- Start easy. Relax. Get a nice rhythm going. Just like in the pool, the warm up is often the hardest part of the session. It takes a few minutes for your heart rate to rise and your breathing to level out.
- Breathe often and find a nice rhythm. Every two strokes – or every three at the most.
- Some people count their strokes to help them stay relaxed. The more you are counting your strokes, the less you are thinking about things that could go wrong! It helps reduce anxiety.
- Try and enjoy your surroundings. A lot of people find open water swimming very relaxing because they are swimming outside, in nature. Find your zen!
- Just because the course is a 1,000m rectangle doesn't mean you have to swim this continuously. Stop every now and again (particularly in your warm up), tread water, have a moment to recover and reflect and then go again. (Just be aware of other swimmers when you stop).
- If you find yourself panicking or feel the urge to stop, just lift your head up and get your bearings. You can continue swimming slowly water polo style whilst you sort yourself out. You can even stop and tread water for a moment. Take a few deep breaths and then start swimming easy again.

Hopefully, the tips above will help you stay relaxed and enjoy the open water experience. If you need any further guidance on this, or would like a specific 1-1 session to help you develop your confidence, I'd be happy to help.

*I have deliberately avoided talking about anxiety on race day. It is not uncommon for people to panic in races. Strong, confident swimmers too. I have some tips and tricks for that which you'll find a bit later in this guide.*

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Remember, this is fun. We're swimming in the great outdoors. Relax. Breathe. Take your time. Enjoy!

## Sighting: Some Tips

This has been the topic of many posts and the subject of many conversations, during Swim Squads, Open Water Swim Sessions and 1-1 sessions.

In open water swimming, if we want to swim straight (and we really do), then we need to be looking up and making sure we are swimming in the right direction. If we don't, we are guaranteed to go off course.

How do I know?

We do an exercise in our open water swim groups where I ask swimmers to swim about 50 metres to one of the buoys. I ask them to do this without sighting. To go off feel. Swim as straight as possible, without the benefit of a black line to follow, a lane rope to keep us in line or any looking up to guide us. There are very few swimmers who manage to stay in a straight line. The rest look up after 40 or 50 strokes, shocked to discover they are 10, 15, 20 metres wider than they should be.

So, if we think sighting is a good idea (it is), then what should we think about?

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- Frequent & Regular
  - Rhythm Of The Stroke
  - Spot Landmarks
  - Double Sight
  - Increase Frequency
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### Frequent & Regular

Firstly, we should sight often. I ask swimmers to sight every 6 - 8 strokes. This way, if we're starting to go off course a little, we can make mini corrections.

### Rhythm Of The Stroke

We want to use a sighting method that fits in with our stroke rhythm because we don't want to disrupt our swimming whilst we're sighting. Ideally, we want to lift our head to spot our target and then quickly turn to the side to breathe, all in one fluid movement, with zero impact on our stroke rate. We do a lot of this in our race phase in our Swim Squads and every session at our open water sessions. Mastering that rhythm takes practice.

### Spot Landmarks

Turn buoys are usually what we're trying to spot whilst in the water. We want to swim from one swim buoy to another, in as straight a line as possible. However, these are usually a few

hundred metres apart, and in amongst other swimmers, with sun in our eyes or waves in our face, they can be quite hard to spot. Instead, depending on the course, we want to try and sight against landmarks that are more or less in line with the buoys. A church spire, a tall building, a cluster of trees. Much easier to see in the distance, even with the splashing of the swimmers around you.

## **Double Sight**

If you come up to sight and don't see what you're looking for, you need to sight again on your very next stroke. Don't wait another 6-8 strokes before looking again.

## **Increase Frequency**

As we approach turn buoys, we want to increase the frequency of sighting - to spot trouble, to identify the line we're going to take, to know when to turn. The same applies when we're approaching the finish - making sure we're heading towards the exit ramp and being aware of what's going on around us.

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Remember, good sighting doesn't happen by accident. It takes deliberate practice. Include some practice in almost every swim session you do during this race phase of training, in open water and in the pool. Do this and you will reap the benefits on race day!

# To Draft Or Not To Draft

Drafting in a triathlon swim takes practice, but if you can get it right, it is well worth it.

When you're in the pool and you're swimming right behind another swimmer it feels much easier than when you're leading the lane doesn't it? You can hang on to feet and swim at speeds you may find difficult if you had clear water ahead of you.

If we think that we can swim quicker on somebody's feet, and it feels a bit easier, wouldn't we want that same benefit on race day?

This depends on how confident you feel being close to other swimmers, of course, but if you do, here are a few things to consider.

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- On The Feet Or On The Hip?
  - Finding The Right Draft
  - Try To Overtake
  - Do Your Own Sighting
  - Close, But Not Too Close
  - Drafting Takes Practice
  - Not For Everybody
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## On The Feet Or On The Hip?

There are two ways to draft a swimmer in front.

The first and most common method is to swim directly behind them, following their feet. Keep about a metre behind (no tapping toes).

The second method is to swim on their hip. If you are drafting a swimmer on the hip, there are a few things to think about. Don't get too close - you risk being hit and / or annoying the other swimmer! Breathe towards the swimmer so you can see where they are and make sure you're not getting too close. The advantage of drafting on the hip is you get two chances to draft - if you start getting dropped, you can tuck in and follow their feet.

## Finding The Right Draft

This very much depends on what you want from the swim, how aggressive you want to be and how much energy you want to spend.

You can draft off swimmers who are quicker than you, meaning you swim quite strong but you are benefiting from the faster swimmer's efforts.

Or you can decide to conserve energy and swim behind swimmers who are your sort of pace. Doing this will feel easy.

## **Try To Overtake**

A good measure of whether you are following the 'right feet' is to try and overtake. If it feels easy and you wonder whether the swimmer in front is a bit slow, try pulling out wide and overtaking. If you glide past easily, you've made the right decision to go past. If you find yourself swimming side to side, unable to make much progress beyond this swimmer, then slow down, drop back, draft and save energy.

Practice this in your open water sessions. If you find yourself swimming side by side with somebody, drop back and see how it feels to draft them.

## **Do Your Own Sighting**

I'll say this again. DO. YOUR. OWN. SIGHTING. Do not rely on the swimmer in front to swim in a straight line. Make sure you are looking up frequently and checking you're still on course.

## **Close, But Not Too Close**

Drafting requires you to be quite close to the swimmers in front. But don't get too close. Constant tapping on the swimmers' feet can often result in a breaststroke kick to the face! Be warned. Also, expect the lead swimmers to do something daft at some point. At turn buoys usually. Be aware of sudden stops. You need to be focused when drafting.

## **Drafting Takes Practice**

Drafting takes practice. It's so easy to lose focus for a minute and then suddenly realise that swimmer in front has gone. On a lapped course, or a race with wave starts and lots of swimmers around, it is especially easy to lose those feet in front if you're not paying attention.

Spend some time in your open water training sessions swimming behind others - swimmers the same pace as you and swimmers slightly faster.

## **Not For Everybody**

Drafting takes practice. You need to be comfortable being close to others. It is not for everybody, and that's fine. You might want to swim in some nice clear water instead - the comfort and reduced stress outweighing the increase in speed or energy savings. Absolutely fine.

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So, that's drafting. Try it. Practice it. Decide if it's for you. If it is, stay focused whilst doing it and enjoy the ride!

# Turn Buoys

Turn buoys: the great mystery and a source of fear and trepidation.

In our open water swim groups we do quite a bit of work with turn buoys. Our course is deliberately small so we have lots of opportunities to master the turn!

*"If you are going to get into trouble, if you are going to get hit, if you are going to find yourself in an uncomfortable situation anywhere in the swim, it will be around turn buoys. You want to get in and get out quickly, avoiding trouble where possible."*

Quote by me, every single session!

Here are some things to think about ...

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- Sighting Before The Buoy
  - Don't Let It Happen, Take Action
  - Picking Your Line
  - In And Out As Quickly As Possible
  - Anticipate Trouble
  - Sight Immediately
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## Sighting Before The Buoy.

The first thing we need to remember, is that we should be sighting regularly as we approach the turn buoy. Several reasons for this. To make sure we swim direct and turn at the right point. Secondly, to spot other swimmers around us, anticipate trouble and take some action. Thirdly, to plan our route around the buoy.

## Picking Your Line.

Pick your route into and out of the turn buoy nice and early. Don't wait until you are a few metres away from the buoy before you decide what to do. I would start to make decisions 20 - 30 metres away. If you are on your own, with no other swimmers around you (lucky you!), then you can take the inside line of the course, turning immediately around the buoy. If you find yourself surrounded by other swimmers, in front, behind, to the side, then you need to take some action.

## Anticipate Trouble.

Most swimmers will want to take the direct line around the buoy. If you have clear water in front of you but see swimmers swimming out wide, be aware that they will cut in for the turn buoy. What seems like clear water in front of you will not be there at the turn. Or that swimmer who you've been drafting for a while may not swim so smoothly around the buoy, be alert for any sudden stops in front of you or worse ... the breaststroke kick! You might be

courteous and polite when swimming, but don't expect everybody else to be - be aware of close contact, flying arms and people swimming over your legs.

### **Don't Let It Happen, Take Action.**

Try and be proactive here. You've been sighting regularly and you know who is around you. At most corners, you will have a decision. Inside line or stay out wide? Allow others to go first or take the initiative? From my point of view, that extra few metres of swimming wide around a buoy is well worth it if you come out of the turn unscathed!

### **In And Out As Quickly As Possible.**

If possible, 20 - 30 metres out, accelerate towards the buoy, dropping any other swimmers around you, giving you a little space at the turn. Keep the speed going around the turn and for the first 10 metres after the turn. Once around the buoy, in clear water, settle back down to your previous pace. You want to spend as little time as possible near the buoys, and this is a great way of achieving that.

### **Sight Immediately.**

The first thing you should do after the turn buoy is sight. Make sure you know which direction you need to be swimming in. Don't wait 6 or 8 strokes, assuming you're going the right way. Sight and make sure!

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Practice being efficient around turn buoys during your open water sessions and keep in mind the guidance above, and I'm sure you'll sail smoothly around each corner.

## The Race Day Swim: Staying Calm

Race morning. Your big event. You're excited and nervous. The gun fires. You start quickly. You follow others. It feels easy and manageable ... until it doesn't.

You are surrounded by other swimmers. You are breathing heavily. You are starting to tire but you've only done 300m and have lots more swimming to do. You start to doubt yourself. You panic.

What now?

**You need to regain control. You need to control your breathing. Reduce your heart rate and reduce your demand for oxygen.**

What do you do?

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- Reduce your leg kick. This helps bring heart rate down and reduces the perceived effort.
  - Make sure you exhale fully. You don't need (or want) to hold your breath, instead relax and release the air. Try to 'sigh' your breath out - rather than blowing forcefully.
  - Breathe every two strokes to maximise oxygen intake.
  - Control your stroke rate. Often this means slowing your stroke down a little. Controlled rather than frantic.
  - Take your mind out of the situation (the chaos) and focus on your swimming. Think about each stroke. Perhaps count strokes. Doing this makes you focus on what you're doing rather than the chaos of the swim.
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All of this will help you settle and re-establish your swim rhythm. Once you've settled, you can then get on with - and enjoy - the rest of the race.

If you've experienced this, do you have any other tips? Anything that's worked for you?

## **Other Hints, Tips & Tricks**

Other things we focus on during our open water skills sessions to help swimmers develop their open water skills include:

### **Breathing**

The ability to switch breathing pattern during the race is really important. Being capable of breathing on both sides gives you an advantage in the swim. Imagine, you only breathe to the right-hand side but that happens to be the side the waves are rolling in and you swallow water every time you try and take a breath. If you struggle to breathe to the left, what are you going to do? Or perhaps the glaring sun is in your eyes every time you breathe. The ability to switch sides for a bit gives you a little respite.

### **Leg Kick**

Triathlon swimming is not the place to have a strong leg kick. Even a sprint triathlon, at 750m would be considered a long-distance swimming event. Swimming anywhere between 750m and 3,800m with a strong leg kick is going to wear you out – for very little propulsion. Try and develop a swim technique that requires very little leg kick. A two-beat kick that complements the rhythm and timing of the stroke works well, but can be tricky to master. Not needing a big leg kick is a big plus in most cases (and it has nothing to do with saving your legs for the bike and run – just reducing heart rate, oxygen demand and conserving energy on the swim).

### **Swim Technique**

Having the ability to deliberately change technique a little can be useful e.g. really choppy water, swimmers everywhere – you might use shorter strokes and a more assertive hand entry. Moving into some clearer water, you will want to revert to your longer, more efficient swimming stroke.

## **And ... That's It**

I hope the advice and guidance above has stimulated some thoughts, and helped you think about your open water swimming differently.

It's not exhaustive. There will be other things to consider. It is based on the most common skill needs of triathletes and open water swimmers that I have come across.

It is based on my experiences and the way I would suggest you develop those skills.

Open water swimming is brilliant. Always something different. Always a challenge. Develop your skills alongside your swim technique & swim fitness and you will enjoy it all the more!

Have fun!

Bryan

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## **Feedback**

I hope you find the guide useful. Put the advice into practice and see how you get on. I would love some feedback if you can spare the time to let me know what you thought and how you got on.

Email me on [triathlonswimsquad@gmail.com](mailto:triathlonswimsquad@gmail.com).

## **Services**

Here are a few of the services we offer. If you want to know more about any of these, simply send me a message and we can explore further.

### **Swim Squads**

Squad sessions on Mondays, Wednesdays and (some) Sundays

### **Open Water Group Swim Sessions**

Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings

### **Introduction To Open Water / New Triathlete Session**

Saturday mornings

### **Open Water 1-1 Swim Sessions**

Thursday afternoons / evenings, Saturday mornings, plus other times on request

### **Personalised Swim Training Plans**

Swim plans produced to suit the individual athlete achieve his/her swim goals

### **Triathlon Coaching**

1-1 online coaching

### **Triathlon Training Plans**

Triathlon training plans produced to suit the individual athlete achieve his/her triathlon goals

### **Other Services**

Support athletes to race half marathon and marathon races through 1-1 online coaching and training plans

For information on any of the above, contact me on [triathlonswimsquad@gmail.com](mailto:triathlonswimsquad@gmail.com).