

Lock the Open-Water Bogeyman in the Closet

Tips for Successfully Competing in an Open Water Swim

by Lisa K. Harris

"I have never been so scared in my life," Margaret Norem, an experienced triathlete, said, remembering her first open water swimming event, the Sahuarita Triathlon.

"I wore a full-length wet suit and felt claustrophobic," she said. "The water was murky, almost black. I can't see well to begin with, and with the water conditions and the tight wetsuit, I panicked."

Norem said she felt weak through most of the race.

"I thought I would throw up and had to stop many times," she said, adding that she couldn't finish with a freestyle stroke, opting instead for side stroke. "I'd swim a few strokes, stop, then swim a few more. I had one of the lifeguards pull the suit's zipper down so I could breathe."

Triathlete Jane Kattapong coped with a similar experience while preparing for and competing in the Blue Water Triathlon in Parker, Ariz.

"I couldn't see," she said. "It felt like swimming in liquid mud. I couldn't find any markers or see my destination."

Kattapong wore a wet suit to protect her from hypothermia, but "was shocked by the intense cold." Like Norem, Kattapong was unable to swim freestyle. "I had to swim backstroke to calm down. I'm sure I was last to finish that part of the tri. But I felt lucky to have finished at all."

Norem and Kattapong are not alone with their fears; the open-water leg of a triathlon can be a challenge for many athletes. Most swimmers practice in pools with perfect water clarity, are guided by lane lines, swim in water set to a comfortable temperature, practice set distances, and swim by themselves or with a limited few.

Racing in a lake, river, or ocean is very different: the water is murky, course markers may be absent or difficult to see, waves and currents may be present, and the water temperature can be uncomfortably cold. On top of these hindrances there is the mob scene at the beginning of a race, where everyone is competing for the best spot. The shoving, jostling, and even being swam over can frighten even an experienced triathlete. Both Norem and Kattapong found advice

for overcoming their panic in open water and can't wait to race again.

You can lock the Open-Water Bogey Man in the closet and swim a successful triathlon leg with the help of these 12 suggestions.

1. Like-setting practice: Acclimatize to similar water temperature, clarity, and currents before the race. The best situation would be to practice at the actual course the day beforehand. Become familiar with markers and landmarks that can lead the way to the finish. If this isn't possible, be creative. Try practicing at night in a pool to get used to murky water.

2. Choose the right wet suit: If a wet suit is allowed in the race, a swimming shortie (half legs and armless) will help protect from hypothermia and will not be as constrictive as a full body wet suit. Choose a wet suit made for swimming, not one for diving or surfing. A swimming wet suit allows extra room for the extensive rotational movements.

3. Wet suit practice: Work out several times in the wet suit to acclimatize to its constrictive nature.

4. Soak the wet suit beforehand: Soak the wet suit in water a few days before the race. On the day of the race it will still retain some moisture and won't feel as tight as it would if it was completely dry.

5. Wear corrective goggles: Purchase corrective goggles if your eye-sight isn't perfect and you don't wear contact lenses while swimming. Seeing properly will minimize disorientation and aid in finding markers and landmarks while in the water.

6. Use an underwater watch: Using a watch in low visibility conditions will help gauge distance, both how much has been swum and how much is left to go. Determining how much time has elapsed will help prevent disorientation.

7. Let the pack go: Unless you want to set a record or win the race, slow down and follow the mob into the water. This strategy will minimize initial start-of-the-race panic. It will also lesson or eliminate potential injury associated with the mob scene's shoving and jostling. (If you do feel swimmers coming up behind you, using the breast stroke kick will keep them from climbing up your back.)

8. Buddy swim: Participate with a friend. You can help each other locate race markers and landmarks, and keep track of the distance left to swim. Buddy swimming will help minimize panic attacks and disorientation. Sometimes four eyes are better than two.

9. Breathing meditation: Concentrate on taking deep breaths. Deep breathing will slow your pulse rate and act as a calming agent. It's almost impossible to have a panic attack while deep breathing.

10. Visualize: Pretend you're a fish swimming in a school and the adjacent swimmers are also fish. You're all swimming together aiming for the same destination. This visualization helps minimize panic associated with swimming with a group.

11. Alter your stroke: Alter your stroke to raise your head, allowing sighting of landmarks and course markers. Select a landmark before you start, and use it to help keep yourself from getting off track. If the course has turns, select new landmarks after you round the buoy.

12. Draft: Drafting off other swimmers will help conserve energy, just as it does for road bicyclists. However, to prevent injury be careful not to swim too close.

Don't forget to lather on the sunscreen. While it may not help overcome the challenges of swimming in open water, sunscreen will protect your skin from being fried to a crisp.

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.



Jane Kattapong (left) and Andrea Hilden (right) responding to the cold water after swimming the Blue Water Triathlon in Parker, Ariz.

Andrea Hablin Photo

411- Open Water Swimming Resources

Open Water Swimming Events

La Jolla Rough Water Swim – ljrws.com
Bermuda Round the Sound Swim – aquamoonadventures.com
Bonaire Ecoswim - aquamoonadventures.com

Masters Swimming

United States Masters Swimming – usms.org
Ford Aquatics Masters Swimming – homepage.mac.com/jimstites/fordaquatics

Arizona Triathlons with open-water swims

Sahuarita Tri — triticson.com
Blue Water Tri — mountainmanevents.com

Beijing Summer Olympics 10K Swim Marathon

10kswim.com



Hitting the icy waters at the Blue Water Triathlon in Parker, Arizona.

Andrea Hablin Photo