

OPEN WATER PRO SWIM TRICKS BY GLEN GORE

Use these pro tactics to save valuable seconds in the swim section of your next race.

The professional triathlete does the sport for a living. The age grouper does it for the love. What can you as an age grouper learn from the pro? Don't forget, they too started off in the amateur ranks and worked their way up to the elite level. They too needed guidance and had to learn from their predecessors. You can pick up some valuable tips from the pros when we go open water triathlon racing. By keeping it simple and incorporating the following five open water tricks into your swim race routine, you too can save valuable time at the next triathlon event

1. Position, Position, Position

You can easily shave up to a minute off your overall swim finish time simply by standing in the right place before the start. How? Well, let me recall my own exploits at a world cup race in Sydney way back in 1997 and the World Triathlon Championships that followed about a month after that in Perth. For Sydney, I had the idea of starting on the far left of the pontoon whilst the rest of the pro field huddled on the right. I figured that to have some open water to myself on the left would be a lot faster than the washing machine boxing match on the right. By the time we reached the halfway point, I was trailing and came out 3rd last as I plunged back into the water for lap two. Fortunately with a lot of effort I managed to get back into the 3rd pack during the swim and that was enough to move me up the field on the bike leg. Had I missed that pack, my race would have been history before it even started. All this because I botched the swim start by standing in the wrong position. Fast forward four weeks and I am lining up at the World Champs in Perth. This time I opted for the huddle on the right and figured I would gun it from the start and hope for the best. I managed to get myself in front by turn one and eventually came out of the water in 3rd spot just behind Lessing and ahead of some of the best in the world.

How did I do it? I stood in the right position before the start of the race. I did not swim much faster than I did in Sydney but managed to get to the front of the pack this time. How will position help you? By standing in the right spot, you get to swim with faster swimmers and more often than not, are virtually "pushed" from behind into a faster swim time. You also gain more self-confidence from swimming closer up front in the field and that often delivers faster swim times.

2. Warm Up Before the Plunge

You might notice that the pros often go through a rigorous warm-up routine before the start of any race they participate in. They need to be ready to go when that gun goes off. Their heart rate will go from 70 bpm to 160bpm in less than 50m. Without a good warm-up routine, these pros will lack the power needed to swim hard from the start and by the time they find their rhythm, the race leaders will be long gone.

You never feel fantastically good when you first climb into a pool to start your swim training sets, do you? You need a couple of laps before you find your rhythm and settle into a good pace. The same rule applies at the races. You cannot expect to swim fast if you dive into the water "cold". What you need to do is get in the water prior to the race start and swim for a few minutes. A couple of 20m sprints with some easy swimming in between should do the trick. We are talking maximum 5 minutes in the water before you get out and wait for the gun. You can certainly save at least 30 seconds plus by warming up adequately over an Olympic distance triathlon.

Obviously, at some events it may not be possible to get into the water and warm up, either due to the water being extremely cold or due to the race organisers and logistics. You then need to take along a set of rubber cords and do some dry land swimming with the cords where you simulate the freestyle stroke and loosen up the arms and shoulder. It isn't ideal, but it is certainly better than no warm up at all.

3. Swim Straight

This sounds pretty self-explanatory but you would be amazed at how badly many people navigate once they start swimming. If you lack the skill to swim straight to the marker buoys and instead end up adopting a twisty swimming approach, you could end up swimming up to an extra 200m over a 1500m swim. That extra 200m can add on at least 4 minutes to your finishing time over an Olympic distance. You need to be sure of the exact course yourself and not be content to rely on the athletes in front of you, hoping they will swim straight and you can just follow.

Before the swim start, look for land markers on the route that you can use to navigate your way around swim course. A good pair of goggles is also essential to ensure that your vision is not restricted and you can see the marker buoys easily enough. If your goggles do mist up or take in water during the swim, stop and take a few seconds to fix them, look up and make sure you are on the right "straight" line before continuing to swim on.

4. Draft

Yes it is legal to draft in the swim section of any triathlon. It does not produce the exact same benefits as drafting does on a bicycle, for instance, but it can certainly help you swim faster and save energy during a race. The idea is to find an athlete or pack of swimmers that are swimming slightly faster than you and hook in and try to swim off their pace.

You'll often hear stories after the race of how someone "just missed" the swim pack in front of them and had they managed to get on the feet, how much faster their swim time would/could have been. They are not just talking big as drafting in the swim can potentially save them and you both time and energy reserves at the next race stop.

The ideal position to draft off in the swim is either to the left or right of the swimmer in front of you with your head positioned around their knee/hip area. However, it does take some practice swimming so close to someone without actually hampering their stroke or yours.

The second best spot to draft off would be to swim on someone's feet. The problem with being directly behind someone is the lack of vision as their kicking motion will produce air bubbles which can make the swim extremely annoying and uncomfortable. To remedy this, position yourself just off the feet and to the side of the swimmer in front of you. You will be amazed at how much easier it is to swim faster when the swimmer in front of you "toes" you around the swim course.

5. Start Fast! What?

This last trick relates directly to the idea of drafting off the swimmers in front of you. If you do not start fast, especially over the shorter distances of Sprint and Olympic triathlon, you often end up swimming with the slower swimmers and chasing for the entire duration of the swim. The problem with starting fast is that you need train your body to be able to do it. Starting too fast for some will result in them tiring out at the half way point and dragging themselves home for their slowest swim times ever.

You need to simulate a race start in training and open water swim practices. “Fartlek” swim training is the best method of training your body to adapt to starting fast during a race, then settling into a comfortable pace and rhythm (lowering your heart rate), while still being able to pick up the pace again near the end of the swim. Fartlek training requires you to swim fast, then slow, then fast again during training. Using these mini speed intervals during some of your sets will help condition the body to handle the rigours of starting fast during a race and then swimming comfortably the rest of the way. If you can start fast and then adjust to remain comfortable during the rest of the swim, you will swim faster overall.

These five open water swim tricks will go a long way to helping you swim faster. They all seem pretty obvious so put them into practice and you will be sure to improve your swim times at your next race.

Email info@tri-lab.co.za for swim coaching/swim video analysis.