

## Preparing for the Triathlon Swim

If you are one of the many people new to triathlon, known as “newbies,” the swim may well be the part that is holding you back. Even if you learned to swim as a child and swam recreationally, most newbies find that they have a long way to go before they feel up to taking on a triathlon swim. First, I cannot stress enough the importance of learning a good swim stroke. This will likely take longer than you would like simply because the rules that apply in the water differ from the rules that apply in air. It will take a while for you to become comfortable in the water. After you have built a good swim stroke, there are other issues. You need to learn to swim in a crowd, to deal with low visibility in open water, and have a strategy to deal with the triathlon swim start. Here are some tips:

Practice swimming in a crowd. During a triathlon swim, you are likely to get jostled about and be hit with hands, arms, or feet, so practice swimming at close quarters. Try swimming lengths of a pool with 3 people side by side in a lane. To get used to passing others and drafting, try this drill. Start with the same 3 buddies, but arrange yourselves all in a line, so that you are swimming close to each others’ feet. The swimmer in the back must swim quickly past the two swimmers in front, slide over to the front of the line, and slow down. Repeat this. Realize how much energy it takes to pass and swim in front as opposed to how much easier it is to swim behind in the draft created by your friends.

Triathlon swimming can be a contact sport, so you may have your goggles knocked off or out of place. Prepare for this. Practice putting your goggles on in deep water while you tread water or float on your back. Don’t dread this happening, get ready for it.

### Visibility and Sighting

In open water, lack of visibility can be particularly disorienting for beginners. On an open water swim course, you must lift your head or “sight” to aim toward the buoys marking the course. You need to learn to sight quickly and efficiently because lifting your head causes your body to drop and creates more drag. Sight often enough to stay on course, no more. Lift your head just enough so that your goggles are above the surface of the water, then resume your swim stroke. If you see swimmers around you looking forward frequently, you don’t have to look as often. Pick a frequency of sighting, for example every 10 strokes, and decrease the frequency if you find yourself on course.

In a pool, you can practice dealing with lack of visibility by swimming a length with your eyes closed avoiding running into the lane lines. You will quickly learn if you tend to swim to the left or to the right. Then, try opening your eyes only once or twice per length, when you sight.

### Starting a Race

The start of a race can feel overwhelming. Whether you are starting a sprint triathlon in a pool with 200 people spaced 15 seconds apart or starting Ironman Louisville in the Ohio River with 2,000 people, it can be intimidating. To deal with these feelings, have a plan.

First, seed yourself. If it is a pool swim, swim a time trial of the race distance and submit your swim time to the race director. This will lead to a better flow of the entire swim. If it is an open water swim, do not start at the front where swimmers are likely to be most aggressive unless you are one of the fastest swimmers. Seed yourself according to your ability. Start wide, off of the buoy line and toward the outside of the pack where you will have more swimming room, and angle in toward the first buoy. You may swim a bit further, but you will avoid being so crowded by others as you round the first buoy.

The easiest mistake is to go out too hard. You will be tapered and excited about the event, so you will likely be swimming faster than you realize. I have heard many athletes complain that they were gasping for air at 200 yards and wondering if they could continue. Pace yourself at the beginning – you have a bike and run ahead of you.

Finally, the tips above help, but nothing can simulate an actual open water swim. While the pool is the perfect place to do most of your training, it is important to practice in open water. If possible, swim at the site of your race. Overcome the fear factor so you are ready to race!