



WARNING



**DANGEROUS
SHORE BREAK**
Can cause serious injuries
or drowning
IF IN DOUBT, DON'T GO OUT

A warning sign is mounted on a red pole. The sign has a red top section with the word "WARNING" in black. Below this is a white section containing a yellow diamond-shaped warning symbol with a black silhouette of a person falling into a wave. At the bottom of the sign, the text "DANGEROUS SHORE BREAK" is written in large, bold, black letters, followed by "Can cause serious injuries or drowning" and "IF IN DOUBT, DON'T GO OUT" in smaller black letters.

OPEN WATER SWIMMING

Managing the Risks

by Jim W. Harper

Swimming started in open water. There were no chlorinated pools in ancient Greece, and even the modern Olympics operated for years without a natatorium. All events were outside, including an intriguing 200-meter obstacle swim through the River Seine in Paris in 1900. An obstacle swim? That event didn't last to the next Olympics.

To keep such competitions safe, the competitors had to be good swimmers, period. At the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896, swimmers were dumped from a boat into the chilly Mediterranean and had to swim 1,200 meters to shore. The winner, Hungarian Alfréd Hajós, was well aware of the water's dangers. When he was 13, his father had drowned in the Danube River.

More than 100 years later, the first official "marathon" 10-kilometer event came to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Can swimming be headed back to its roots?

Since the early days of competition, swimming has become more standardized, and some may argue that it has become too sanitized. Swimming in the controlled environment of a pool is relatively safe, but the black line on the bottom is terminally monotonous. This type of swimming can never match the experience of taking on the elements in a river, lake or ocean. But the question that must be asked about any open water event is: How safe is it?

Several members of the U.S. Masters Swimming Open Water and Long Distance Committee offer their views on the safety issue, and some say the inherent risk in open water swimming may be part of its appeal.

"I love it when we have waves, currents, surf to contend with, because it really sets it apart from pool swimming," says Randy Nutt, who organizes open water events through Aqua Moon Adventures.

Many pool swimmers are

terrified of open water. This instinct, although often over-inflated, is a useful barometer. If you think a body of water is dangerous, then don't get in it. Do not attempt any distance in open water that you could not complete in a pool.

Open water competitions tend to be safe, however, because organizers prepare for potential emergencies, and many eyes are watching the swimmers, both from land and from watercraft such as kayaks. If something goes wrong, help is close at hand. Nutt says that the most dangerous element is a potential heart attack.

"I know that recently there have been several deaths, mainly to do with triathlons. But I've never had an incident in 20 some years of events," says Nutt, the coach of Boca Masters in Florida. "I don't see many swimmers getting trampled over and drowning."

Getting trampled is a real possibility in an open water

race, especially when the gun goes off and the adrenaline rush hits dozens of swimmers at the same time.

"Most problems happen in the first 200 meters," says Bob Bruce, coach of Oregon Masters Aquatics. "People freak out because there's so much thrashing and splashing going on around them. Triathlons are the worst."

Triathletes tend to wear wetsuits, which Bruce calls "neoprene armor." Many open water swimming events discourage or prohibit the use of wetsuits, and wetsuit-assisted swims often are scored separately. Crossing the English Channel in a wetsuit, for example, is not recognized as a traditional

Editor's note: The information in this article is not intended to replace official guidelines or procedures of particular events, nor does this information mean that there is no risk involved in open water swimming. Open water swimming always involves some risk.

crossing, and the same is true of the Catalina Channel Crossing, the U.S. equivalent of the English Channel.

Regardless of the equipment you use, no swim is really safe if you cannot finish. The fate of the first person to cross the English Channel, Matthew Webb, was determined ultimately by his choice to take on the rapids in the Niagara River. The rapids won.

Swimming in a safe locale is the first of Bruce's three basic guidelines for open water. The other two basics are to swim with companions and at an appropriate level of challenge. Beginners should choose flat water

for a short distance, and their companions should have experience at that specific location.

At the world championship level, races are held for 5, 10 and 25 kilometers, but many local events will offer shorter distances. (The shortest open water swim of all may be the annual "K-9 Challenge" in Miami, which teams a dog with its owner for about 200 meters.)

U.S. Masters Swimming has been at the forefront of efforts to create standards for safe open water competition, which were not recognized officially by FINA until 1986. USMS has produced several documents about safety, and guidelines

for competition recommend the following elements:

- A designated safety coordinator, as a distinct person from the meet director.
- Warning statements on entry forms regarding specific hazards.
- Optional personal escorts.
- Medical services onsite.
- A public address system.
- A medical evacuation plan.
- A cancellation plan.
- A pre-race briefing.

Personal escorts may not be practical in many situations. Further USMS recommendations are available in a document titled "USMS Long Distance Safety," and in the USMS Open Water Manual. The manual states that safety monitors in boats "should be positioned on the course in a minimum ratio of one station per 25 entrants or a minimum of one station for every 1/8 mile of course length, whichever number of stations is greater." In other words, a one-mile race would require at least eight kayaks on the water.

The issue of safety monitors brings up the number one concern of the Open Water and Long Distance Committee members. Committee chair Marcia Cleveland, former chair Peter Crumbine, and member Bruce agree that the main threat to open water swimmers is boats.

"Boats and swimmers don't mix well," Bruce says. "Especially personal watercraft, like Jet Skis."

Many people renting jet skis are beginners, on vacation, who have little control and who may be willing to throw caution to the wind. You are an ant in the road.

Motorboats are not only dangerous for collisions but also for their propellers. Swimmers have been cut when trying to enter a boat from the rear. When a motorboat must be used for evacuation purposes, the U.S. Masters Swimming manual specifies that nonmotorized transportation must be used first to rescue and trans-

port the distressed swimmer.

The pre-race briefing should make such procedures clear to all participants. They should also be informed of a cut-off time for the event, after which all swimmers will be removed from the water.

Event organizers also must be experts at counting heads. They must devise a system to track swimmers during the race, such as at a turning point, and to account for all participants at the event's conclusion, regardless of their ability to finish.

One of the biggest risks of open water swimming is hypothermia. Water conducts heat away from the body 25 times faster than air, and prolonged exposure to even relatively warm water will cool your core body temperature. Any swimmer chilled to the bone should dry off immediately and seek warmth.

A recommended minimum water temperature for swimming without a wetsuit is 68 degrees F. Some swimmers would find that temperature intolerable, while others have a God-given internal furnace that enables them to dip lower. All open water swimmers should be aware of the signs of hypothermia, which include shivering, numbness in the extremities and changes in skin color. Cleveland says that a swimming buddy can help with this assessment.

Even when conditions seem ideal, something could go wrong, and that is why Cleveland advises swimmers to use their intuition.

"Keep an open mind. Leave your ego on dry land. Listen to those who are advising you, and to your body," she says.

Get out of the water when you sense a danger or feel uncomfortable.

Contrary to the mania, large sharks are not a major source of injuries or drowning, but these top predators deserve respect. Sharks typically feed at dawn or dusk, and they con-

On the other hand ... here are a few open water threats you may not have thought about before:

- **Weeds.** Getting ensnared on an underwater vine is not fine.
- **Drains.** Water rushing off of the street and into your mouth is not a tasty treat.
- **Fish hooks.** They catch fish, and discarded ones could catch you.
- **Poor swimmers.** A drowning person will pull you down, and you too will drown.
- **Lifeguards.** These are people, not gods of safety. Don't test them.
- **Sunshine.** Maybe you will learn after today's sunburn.
- **Salt.** That funny sensation could be dehydration.

Questions to Ask for Open Water Safety

To proceed with an open water swim, you must first answer "Yes" to all of these questions. If you answer "No" to any question, you should NOT attempt open water swimming.

- **Health check:** Are you healthy enough to withstand vigorous exercise in unpredictable weather?
- **Buddies:** Are you swimming with companions? Are lifeguards or other safety personnel nearby?
- **Unknown entities:** Has anyone ever swum here before?
- **Weather:** Is lightning unlikely? Does the weather seem relatively stable?
- **Hypothermia:** Is the water temperature tolerable?
- **Currents:** Are you stronger than the waves and currents? (Note: Riptides can be escaped by swimming parallel to shore, not toward it).
- **Obstacle course:** Is the water clear and free from boats, debris, submerged objects and people fishing?
- **Feet only:** Do you plan to enter the water slowly, feet-first?
- **DUI:** Are you clear-headed and free from the effects of alcohol and drugs?

If you are not ready for an open water swim, try your luck in a pool and wait for a better opportunity.

gregate in areas with seals and other preferred prey. Experts says sharks do not prefer humans, but a person wearing a wetsuit may be confused with a seal.

Most coastal areas have registered few fatalities, and you can check out the history of shark attacks online through the International Shark Attack File at the University of Florida (www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/sharks/isaf/isaf.htm). A much more common risk is jellyfish, which can also be deadly.

Fresh water may not have some of the risks associated with the ocean, such as jellyfish, waves and rip currents, but it is not necessarily safer (recall the guys in the Danube and Niagara Rivers). One of the greatest risks is lightning.

Cleveland warns swimmers to pay attention to the power of Mother Nature, such as when a quick-moving fog rolls in. Swimmers in open water may lack access to escape routes or shelter, and they must account

for the possibility of quick changes in the weather.

Another consideration is the water quality. Nutt once canceled a swim around Key West because of high bacteria counts reported by the health department. In 2007, one-third of beaches were affected by health advisories or closings, according to the U.S. EPA.

Open water swimming is a great way to move beyond the routine of the pool, but it is not for everyone. Some people will never be able to overcome their fears, and some people are simply not strong enough to face the elements. But an experienced Masters swimmer makes a good candidate.

“One of the coolest things about open water swimming is that you can find all kinds of challenges. Most any ocean swim is a decent challenge,” says Bruce.

For the open water beginner, the best introduction is in the pool. Clinics can introduce

swimmers to the unique challenges and techniques for open water swimming, and they can be found on the USMS website. Teams can sponsor and organize their own clinics.

To train for a race, Coach Nutt recommends working out with a coach on weekdays and experiencing longer, open water swims on weekends. As for the competition, he advises beginners to “pick a friendly race. Just enter and do a mile swim along the coast.”

Use your common sense. Never swim alone. Wear a bright cap so that onlookers can see you. Check weather advisories before leaving home. Swim parallel to the shore instead of away from it. Bring warm clothing to wear after the swim. Take things step by step.

“All in all, open water swimming takes a lot of experience,” Cleveland says. “It takes years to learn many of the basics. After 23 years, I feel like I’m nearly through chapter one of this

very long book because I learn something every time I go out.” She recommends learning from the old-timers, regardless of their speed.

The constant challenge and learning curve is part of the great appeal of swimming in the great outdoors – not to mention the fresh air.

Safety must always be first and foremost for any swimmer in any condition. Swimming in open water presents many additional variables that have to be considered, but these complications should not stop you from taking the plunge.

Take a lesson from those who went before you. Learn how to swim well, but know your limitations. Pay attention to the environment and to your body. Never forget that you are a tiny speck in a huge ocean.

Get out there and swim. <<<

Jim Harper is a freelance writer from Miami. He is a swim coach and a Masters swimmer.

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