Nylon
Nylon caps are not widely used in competition due to the drag factor. Many swimmers will not use them in the pool because of the water flow through the cap—there is no protection from chlorine and other pool chemicals for hair. The upside of these caps is the comfort—the head stays much cooler when it is not encased in rubber. Our testers all agreed that the best use for them was in open water, fresh or salt, in warm weather and water conditions.

Although all the nylon caps are great for long hair, Arena’s Smartcap put a new twist on things with a two-piece construction featuring an inner band that makes it easy for someone with very long hair to keep it neatly tucked away inside the cap. Testers with long hair loved this cap, but they commented that the price seemed high.

1. Arena Smartcap ($30)
2. Speedo Lycra Cap ($10)
3. Finis Spandex Cap ($8)

Latex
Most swimmers have worn a latex cap at one time or another. They are the standard freebies when you join a team or you may find them in your goody bag at an open water swim or triathlon. Latex is cooler than silicone and does not slip as much initially. Swimmers who swim every day go through them quickly as the latex stretches and starts to slip or tear in as little as a few weeks for some. For the investment of a few dollars or less, all the latex caps function properly with very little differences between the brands.

4. Regular
We tested Arena ($4), Barracuda ($2.50), Finis ($3), Kiefer ($1.40), Nike ($2.70), Speedo ($2.50), Sporti, presented by SwimOutlet.com ($1.60), and TYR ($2.70). The one notable difference was that the Barracuda, Nike, Speedo and TYR caps all had more pronounced ridges inside the rim, which minimized slippage better. Kiefer has a variety of latex caps with fun designs and pictures ($3), all of which can be viewed at kiefer.com.

5. Special
Speedo’s Elite Latex ($4) is double thickness, although not quite as thick as a silicone cap. This gives it more durability than a regular latex cap. Testers who overheat in silicone caps loved the Elite Latex and felt like they got the best of both types of cap in one, at a great price. Kiefer’s Superflex Latex ($1.60) cap looks and feels like a regular latex cap with slightly more elasticity.

Manufacturers and distributors provided samples for this review of products available in the market.
Flat silicone caps are also popular. They cost more, but are far more durable and generally cause less hair breakage, as they are softer and don’t pull on the hair as much as latex can. While kinder on the hair, silicone slips more on some heads. Initially we expected the silicone caps to be almost identical; however, testers found some differences:

6. Thicker
Arena ($8), Finis ($8), and Kiefer ($7) were thicker, stiffer and fit more tightly. Testers with smaller heads and those looking for more warmth appreciated the snug, secure fit of these brands. Testers with larger heads felt constricted. There were two brands for those with a flair for fashion: Arena Sunrise ($10), which has a groovy raised wave design in several colors, and the Kiefer Fun Cap ($7), which, like their latex caps, comes in a variety of fun prints.

7. Flexible
Barracuda’s ($11.50) and Nike’s ($8) flat silicone caps were slightly thinner and more flexible, allowing for a greater range of comfort and sizing. These caps fit well with no slippage.

8. Thinner
Sporti, presented by SwimOutlet.com, sent a colorful array of solid ($4) and print ($7) caps, which caused quite a bit of excitement during distribution—there was a design and color for every personality. Aside from the great style selection, testers noticed that the Sporti caps are thinner and more flexible than the other flat silicone caps. Testers with longer hair, larger heads or those prone to overheating in a silicone cap loved the Sporti line. Almost all testers commented that the Sporti caps stayed put without needing any adjustments during practice.

9. Ear Cap
Sporti by also sent us their Ear Cap ($5). This was the thinnest, most flexible of all the silicone caps, and features excess material that swoops down and forms a pocket to cover the ears. Although some testers didn’t care for the odd appearance of the Ear Cap, it has lots of room for longer hair and larger heads, and testers appreciated the reinforced band around the rim to prevent tearing. The cap was secure and did not slip. Testers who wear earplugs liked this cap as well.
Silicone (Seamless)
The seamless silicone caps are distinguishable from flat caps by their rounded appearance before they are donned—they will not lie flat on a table. With the rounded seams, we thought they would conform to the natural roundness of most heads a little better than flat caps, but there was no discernible difference. This may be due to the wide variety of head shapes and hair lengths.

1. Arena Teamline ($10)
2. Finis Reversible ($10)
3. Speedo Silicone Swim Cap ($8)
4. TYR Wrinkle Free ($10)

Silicone (Racing Domes)
Many swimmers have only seen these sleek racing caps on TV during the Olympics, but more and more we are seeing them at Masters meets. Their primary purpose is to reduce drag by eliminating the wrinkles that occur at the top of the head with standard caps. The multi-thickness construction and, in some cases, panels and/or a “hard” shell on top all work together to compress hair flat against the head and form a sleek surface over the entire head.

Arena, TYR and Speedo all have hard shell racing domes. These are the most expensive and performed the best under race conditions. They all stayed securely on the head with no slippage—even for women with longer hair. Several of the other domes are more affordable, but without the hard shell top, did wrinkle on some of the testers—head shape became more of a determining factor in...
fit with the more flexible domes.

5. Arena 3D Ultra ($25)
The Arena 3D Ultra, which will be available in March or April 2011, is Arena’s new top racing dome. The aforementioned features compressed the cap tightly and kept it secure in race conditions. Testers noted that the cutout at the nape of the neck did allow some hair to escape, which had to be tucked back inside.

6. Arena 3D Race ($20)
This cap in size medium proved to be too small for most of our testers; however, it is available in a larger size. It was shorter on the sides and did not completely cover the ears, which some testers preferred and some did not.

7. Nike Swift Cap ($15)
The Swift Cap had a secure fit. Instead of a hard shell, Nike increased the thickness of the entire cap, which kept it snug and wrinkle-free. Testers appreciated the ribbed rim, which held the cap in place. Several testers remarked that this cap made the head feel neutrally buoyant. Another tester remarked that, due to the extra thickness, the cap felt too warm for an entire practice or a longer race, but was fine in sprint or middle-distance race conditions.

8. Nike Team Dome ($12)
This cap was very small and only fit a few of our testers properly. For the testers with smaller heads and shorter hair, the cap was comfortable, snug and did not wrinkle.

9. Speedo Aqua V ($20)
This cap was a tester favorite. The Aqua V’s hard shell top eliminates any wrinkling or gapping. Testers commented that it felt tight, conformed to the head and never slipped. The contoured sides allow for full ear coverage. Testers appreciated the excess material that covers part of the nape of the neck. This is often an area where hair escapes. One tester who already owns this cap says he has had it for several years with no noticeable deterioration of the silicone.

10. Speedo Racer Dome ($12)
A more affordable racing dome, the Racer Dome has a little more flexibility and did wrinkle on some testers. Testers commented that this was a more comfortable cap than the hard shell and would make a durable practice cap.

11. TYR Tracer Edge ($18)
The Tracer Edge is generously sized with a smooth rounded top, and contoured sides covered the ears and the nape of the neck well, preventing hair from creeping out the back. The cap compressed tightly but not uncomfortably. The Tracer Edge performed well in race conditions and testers who had used the Aqua V liked the Tracer Edge as well.

more caps on the next page
Neoprene
Neoprene swim caps, while not allowed under English Channel rules, are a great investment for anyone swimming in cold water. For the many folks who swim open water and are not worried about participating in Channel recognized swims, a neoprene cap will keep the head warm and spirits high. Our testers who sometimes perform under Channel rules still liked the caps for training purposes, even though they would not be permitted in a recognized event. All the testers agreed that the neoprene caps allowed them to stay in the water longer, as they were losing much less body heat.

Testers noted that all this warmth does come with the price of not being able to hear as well, since the chinstrap covers the ears. Caution when swimming in areas with boat traffic is critical.

We sent some of the neoprene caps up to New Jersey to some hardy testers who swim outdoors year-round, without wetsuits. They tested the caps in water that ranged from the low to mid-50s. Our testers in Florida tested the caps in water in the high 60s and low 70s.

1. Barracuda “The Hothead” ($21)
Barracuda’s cap is well made with a cloth liner and a Velcro chinstrap. Testers had trouble with the chinstrap while standing on the beach—cold fingers had a hard time threading the tab through the buckle. Once on, it was easy to adjust. The Hothead is not as sleek and streamlined as the other two neoprene caps tested, but it fit well and stayed snugly in place while swimming.

Not anticipated during testing, The Hothead became a favorite of the paddle boarders and kayakers who accompanied the testers during training swims. The ability to leave the chinstrap hanging open but still have the ears covered meant warmth without feeling constricted while paddling.

Best features: This cap is available in a bright orange-red color that provides excellent visibility for swimmers and support craft alike, and it comes in small, medium and large.

2. blueseventy Skull Cap ($28) and
3. De Soto Neoprene Swim Cap ($26)
Our testers loved the comfort and fit of the blueseventy and De Soto caps, which were very similar in construction and fit. The stretchy neoprene slips on easily with no buckles or adjustments and fits snugly. While standing on the beach, the chinstraps felt tight to some testers initially; however, any notice of it disappeared while swimming. All the testers loved these caps and found them quite comfortable and effective against the cold.

One drawback is that the dark colors (black, blue) do not offer any visibility to boats or safety craft. During testing, we resolved this by wearing brightly colored silicone or latex caps over the top of them. In addition to making the swimmers visible, this trick kept everyone’s heads even toastier.

Size-wise, blueseventy comes in small or large, and De Sotos is one size. We found that De Soto’s one size was comparable to the large blueseventy.

Thermal
The thermal caps, made of polyurethane or silicone-coated nylon, are considered legal under Channel rules. They slid on easily without hair breakage and provided more warmth that an latex or silicone cap. Testers initially thought the caps would not be warmer because cold water seeps in through the fabric, but the body heat generated during swimming heated up the water and kept their heads warm. However, the best warmth was achieved when using the thermal caps as an extra layer of warmth under a silicone or latex cap. It should be noted, however, that under English Channel rules, only one cap is permitted.

4. Arena Fusion Pro ($16)
5. Finis Thermal Swim Cap ($15)
6. TYR Warm Wear Cap ($10)