Swim Bag: Open Water Gear

Pool swimming can mean a big gear bag. Not necessarily so with open water swimming. Depending on how you like your open water, all you may need is a suit, a cap and goggles. (And for some longtime open water swimmers we spoke with, just the cap and goggles.) However, as varied are the world’s waters, so too are the world’s swimmers.

For swimmers just venturing into cold water, a wetsuit may be preferable, which means antichafe products will be necessary. For swimmers who practice in areas with heavy boat traffic, one of the visibility or safety devices we tested may be a great addition to the swim bag.

Visibility and Safety

Swimmers venturing into boat-infested waters or out for solo practice swims have a difficult time making themselves visible when they are not accompanied by a kayak or paddleboard. A brightly colored swim cap alone probably won’t cut it. These three products serve several purposes. Primarily, they make you more visible to boat traffic, lifeguards or other observers. Not as critical, but nice to have, they offer a place to stash some supplies or personal items, which is great if you can’t leave your car keys, sunglasses or phone on the shoreline because of the possibility of theft or because you’re swimming point-to-point. Two of the devices, the Swimmer Safety Device and the Swimmer Buddy, also provide flotation in case of emergency or if you just want something to hang onto on a rest stop.

1. AQUASpotter
   getgoatgear.com $40
   This low-key, easy to use belt from GOAT Gear features a Neoprene belt with a zipper pocket and a small waterproof bag inside for a wallet, keys or phone. The storage area is small enough to be comfortable and large enough to carry a few gel packs or other supplies along with the waterproof pouch.
   A 17-inch fiberglass pole with a bright orange flag fits into a receiver on the belt. The flag needs to be seated firmly or it will fall out of the receiver.
   The adjustable belt fits snugly around the waist and is not noticeable while swimming with a wetsuit. If swimming without one, the belt is noticeable at first, but testers did not find it uncomfortable or a hindrance.

   Testers who have a lot of rotation in their freestyle strokes found that the flag got stuck in the water on every stroke if there was the slightest amount of chop or rollers, and the visibility of the flag was decreased, since the flag spent a lot of time on either side of the swimmer, rather than sticking straight up from the lower back. For swimmers with flatter strokes, this was not as much of a problem. An honest evaluation of your stroke is important when considering this product.

   Of the three devices tested, this one provided the least visibility, but was more compact and easier to carry and use.

2. SWIMMER SAFETY DEVICE
   ishof.org $30
   This device, created and sold by the International Swimming Hall of Fame, is essentially a dry bag with a separate air bladder. The storage compartment is large enough for a towel, sandals, keys, phone and other small essentials that you may not want to leave on the shore. Once inflated, the bag attaches to the swimmer via an adjustable nylon web tether and waist belt. The tether is long enough to extend just beyond the feet so it doesn’t interfere with your kick.

   In calm conditions, testers forgot they were wearing the SSD—it glided along the surface of the water with no noticeable resistance. This changed in choppy water, but was only problematic in larger waves, where the tugging became an annoyance. In getting past large breakers, not common at the Sarasota proving grounds, this device would need to be held firmly by the handle until you reached calmer waters.

   Testers found that the SSD makes it easy for coaches on paddleboards to keep track of their swimmers during group open water practices. The device also afforded some comfort for new swimmers who were nervous, as they were able to stop and rest by hanging onto it.

3. SWIMMER BUDDY
   swimmerbuddy.com $140
   Consisting of a boogie board with a polycarbonate skeg below and foam noodle and flagpole above, the Swimmer Buddy elicited some strange looks from testers and beach-
goers. However, this device provided the most visibility and storage of any of the three products tested.

The Swimmer Buddy’s adjustable belt and tether was long enough to clear the kick without interference most of the time (more on this later). In calm waters, the device glided smoothly behind testers without any noticeable drag. The skeg kept it tracking straight. In choppier waters, the device performed better if some weight was added, so testers filled up a 1-gallon bottle with water and stashed it under the handy netting on top of the board, which kept it from pitching and rolling.

Many open water swimmers don’t have a huge kick, but for the ones who did—especially to keep blood flowing when the water was cold—the Swimmer Buddy fought with the turbulence created by a large kick, and testers were annoyed by the tugging and pulling. The device was not tested in large surf, but it would require some alternative preparation or specific technique to get it beyond breakers and into calmer waters in one piece. The manual offers suggestions for use in larger surf.

Dubbed “The Party Boat” by some fun-loving testers (they are, after all, Masters swimmers), Swimmer Buddy was soon loaded up alternately with refreshments, chairs, coolers, even a small dog to test its mettle. The consensus was that Swimmer Buddy is perfect for adventure swimming and swim-hopping barrier islands or sandbars, especially in areas with traffic from boats and other watercraft.

For the solo swimmer training for long swims, a kayaker or paddleboard escort is best, but in the right conditions, Swimmer Buddy offers good visibility, some safety and a way to carry supplies.
Protection from Chafing

Open water swimmers experience chafing in two ways: from something they’re wearing (suit, wetsuit, cap, goggles), or from two body parts rubbing against one another. Suit-on-skin chafing is pretty easy to predict—under shoulder straps, around the neck for wetsuits, etc. But skin-on-skin or hair-on-skin chafing can be hard to detect until long after there is time to do anything about it. Thighs rubbing together or an unshaven chin rubbing the upper bicep, even folds of skin on the back of the neck from skin bunching up while sighting may not show up until after a first long swim. Experience will guide swimmers to where they’ll need extra protection.

Common chafe areas reported by the swimsuit-and-cap-only testers, who normally swim for less than two hours, include under the shoulder straps, upper sides of the torso near the armpits and the upper bicep area. For swims longer than two hours, see the sidebar “What the Experts Do.”

For wetsuited testers, a lubricant was deemed a necessity to prevent even the softest wetsuit from chafing around the neck, and some reported chafing in the upper torso and armpit areas, depending on whether they wore sleeved or sleeveless wetsuits.

We tested two popular ready-to-use products, as well as some homemade “channel grease.”

4. TRISLIDE
sbrsportsinc.com $14
TRISLIDE continuous spray skin lubricant is dispensed from an aerosol can, which makes it a bit more hygienic for sharing, as the applicator never touches the skin.

Testers who had used nothing and received raw, bloody lesions on the backs of their necks from their wetsuits were thrilled to find TRISLIDE. The silicone-based lubricant made the problem disappear completely. TRISLIDE did not degrade fabric or Neoprene and was easy to wash off in the shower after swimming. This product was the favorite for preventing back-of-the-neck chafing from wetsuits.

5. BODYGLIDE ORIGINAL ANTI-CHAFE BALM
bodyglide.com $6-$15

The Bodyglide dispenser resembles a deodorant stick, is easy to apply and lasted for swims up to two hours during testing without any noticeable breakdown in the water.

Testers did not report any discoloration of swimwear, degradation to Neoprene or problems washing it off after swimming—all common complaints with petroleum jelly and lanolin.

Bodyglide prevented chafing in almost all areas, providing it was applied liberally. Some testers who wore wetsuits for an hour or more experienced some back-of-the-neck chafing even with the Bodyglide.

6. ‘CHANNEL GREASE’

This was cooked up on the stovetop, with advice from experienced marathon swimmers. This round of product testing did not include any swims that would really put our channel grease to the test, but we were able to verify that it is easy to make and use, although a little difficult to remove after use. It will also ruin your swimsuit and make a goopy mess on anything it comes in contact with, including goggles, so it is important to apply it with gloves or a plastic bag.

Channel grease, even when applied thickly, does not offer any thermal protection, but will stop chafing, add sun protection (if zinc oxide is added) and offer some protection for skin immersed in salt water for long hours. We followed this recipe, using ingredients purchased at the local compounding pharmacy:

- 1 part anhydrous lanolin
- 1 part petroleum jelly
- zinc oxide powder, mixed to 10 or 20 percent, depending on preference.

We slowly heated the lanolin until it was in liquid form, stirred in the petroleum jelly and mixed until they were evenly blended. Next we added the zinc oxide powder and stirred until completely blended. We then poured the mixture into the tub that the lanolin came in and let it cool. Lanolin is a waxy substance secreted by sheep, so there is an odor involved, but it isn’t very strong. —LAURA HAMEL
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What the Experts Do

Since swims longer than two hours were beyond the scope of our review, SWIMMER contacted some well-known marathon swimmers and asked for their advice. Many of these swimmers have spent 12 or more hours at a time in salt water, so skin protection is something they pay attention to.

In a roundtable email with Marcia Cleveland, Elaine K. Howley, Anne Cleveland, Patricia Sener, Lynne Cox, Nancy Steadman Martin, Steven Munatones, Pat Gallant-Charette and Bill Ireland, different solutions were shared.

- Many of these experts use TRISLIDE and Bodyglide, depending upon the swim. In addition, the following products, which we’ll put to the test in a future issue of SWIMMER, were recommended:
  - Bag Balm (bagbalm.com): Good during the swim and after
  - Headhunter Rash Guard (headhuntersurf.com)
  - Aquaphor (for afterwards on chapped or chafed skin)
  - Petroleum jelly
  - Several of the ladies acknowledge that sometimes the best way to avoid chafing during long training swims is to swim without a suit, or wear a two-piece and remove the top.
  - Pat Gallant-Charette says that a strategically placed knee-sized adhesive bandage, treated with Neosporin and applied to a known suit-on-skin chafe spot on her ribcage, is effective in swims more than 14 hours long.
  - Lynne Cox shared that many English Channel swimmers wait until they get to England to buy custom-mixed channel grease in Dover from a local chemist.
  - Marcia Cleveland offers the following advice, which she says she learned the hard way: “Inspect where the seams fall on a suit.” Cleveland says she tried a new brand for a long swim and didn’t notice until it was too late that the seams were located on chafe spots. She went back to her usual Speedo brand suits, which don’t have seams over those spots, and the problem disappeared.
  - Elaine K. Howley adds a layer of Blue Lizard sunscreen under her custom recipe of zinc oxide and Bag Balm.
  - Steven Munatones recommends adding a layer of sunscreen regardless of the weather. He also adds that skin care includes immediately after the swim—if showers are not available, bring a jug of water to rinse off with until you can get to a shower. He also recommends coconut oil for after-swim use.

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Wonley focuses on a fast time at the UCLA Bruins Master swim meet. Photo: Susan Stone

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