



# OPEN WATER SWIMMING



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## - An Introduction

Capt. Webb, Lord Byron and others started it. Capt. Webb swam the English Channel in 1875, considered today as one of the 3 toughest marathon swims in the world.

Open water swimming was officially recognised by FINA the world governing body of swimming in 1986 but you can go back to the 1896 Olympic Games and before to realise that Open Water swimming was the forerunner of the indoor competitive swimming that we know today.

## A Definition

Long Distance Swimming is any swimming competition in open water up to 25 kilometres. Events greater than this are referred to as Marathon swims.

Lakes, rivers, canals and the sea constitute open water. Pool events such as Swimathons, do not count.

## Organisation and Events

The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) runs swimming in England and has run an open water national championship for 100 years. Formerly over 5 miles, the event has been brought into line with world events and is now 5 kilometres. There is also a 25 kilometre event. District Open Water Championships for seniors and juniors are a more recent development.

The ASA is affiliated to FINA, the world governing body. It has run a World Championship since 1986 and now its open water events are incorporated into many major championships.

It is also important to recognise the important work that the British Long Distance Swimming Association (BLDSA) has contributed to the sport in England. They have consistently encouraged the development of the sport through organising a comprehensive programme of competitions through the British summer.

The Channel Swimming Association (CSA) regulates all swims in the English Channel.

Anyone undertaking open water swimming must be a competent swimmer.

Whilst Open water demands different skills to those of pool swimming, the differences are no greater than between freestyle and backstroke.

## Skills

1. Learn to swim in a straight line without the use of black lines.
2. Lift your head once every ten strokes or so, and within your breathing pattern (look and breath), to confirm your direction.
3. Be able to breath both sides. Wind, waves and the course you are swimming may force you to breath on your weaker breathing side.
4. Learn to swim, and breath, in wave conditions.
5. You will be more buoyant when swimming in sea water.
6. All open water swimmers need to acclimatise to cooler temperatures. This is frequently done by swimming short races and some training swims early in the season and as the season progresses, extend the distances. You certainly do not train outdoors all year!

## Considerations

1. Always consider safety - identify and quantify the dangers. Be sure you have eliminated the dangers prior to entering the water.
2. Get a map of the area of water you plan to swim in.
3. Find out what regulations exist for the water you will swim in.
4. Never swim alone or without an observer.
5. Don't swim where boats, jet skis and windsurfers exist.
6. Wear a bright coloured swim hat.
7. Check the weather. Get wind and tidal reports. Check the water temperature. The shipping forecast gives good information about coastal conditions, as will your local coastguards.
8. The water you swim in is not chlorinated. Talk to your doctor for the appropriate vaccinations to safeguard your health.
9. Wear tinted glasses to reduce the sun's glare. If you are short sighted, consider lenses in your goggles.
10. Wind chill is the greatest concern to open water swimmers. Water evaporating from the head and shoulders is the quickest way to get hypothermia. Generally, whilst skin temperatures can drop considerably, which results in discomfort, danger only exists when core temperatures drop.

Remember open water is the home of fish and weeds. There are few dangers from fish. They are generally going to be more afraid of the turbulence you are creating, and will swim away. Weed is equally harmless, but you will need to overcome your unreasonable anxieties. Jelly fish can sting in a similar way to stinging nettles. Provided you are not allergic to the sting, they will pose few problems.

## Training

All open water swimmers train in pools - the training is more structured. Swimmers undertake similar sets to pool racers, although greater emphasis is placed upon longer swims and aerobic work. Stroke technique and flexibility must also be programmed. To be a top open water swimmer, you must still be a fast swimmer, so speed work remains vital. Strength training is equally so - swimming into waves saps your energy reserves and is surprisingly tiring.

Open water training should also be included, but due to the unsuitable British climate, this can only really be pursued between May and October. The sea tends to gain and retain heat more than rivers and lakes. At the end of the day, swimmers will train in whatever open water is available to them. Many use races to develop the specific skills of open water.

Open water training focuses around swimming between point A and B; and how long it takes you, and doing a number of repetitions (dependent upon the distance involved). Work to concentrate on: "maintaining stroke count and a straight course; holding the stroke together", doing fast-slow work; and varying the leg beats. For longer swims, swimmers should take on fluid. The skill of drinking while treading water and not holding onto a boat, must be practised.

**For further details please contact**

Amateur Swimming Association

Harold Fern House

Derby Square

Loughborough

LE11 5AL

Tel 01509-618700

or contact the District Representatives:

**NORTH EAST:**

Sam Greetham

31 Highmill Drive Scarborough YO12 6RN

Tel: 01723 367714

**NORTH:**

Mr C Carter

30 Carpenter Grove Longbarn, Werrington WA2 0QR

Tel: 01925 824127

**SOUTH:**

Mrs C Butler

21 Brinns Lane Frogmore Camberley Surrey

Tel: 01252 875274

**MIDLANDS:**

Mr M Hemmings

37 Balliol Rd Daventry Northants NN11 4RE

Tel: 01327 871242

**WEST:**

Mr B Bewley

Kewstoke House Kewstoke Rd Kewstoke

Weston-Super-Mare BS22 9YD

Tel: 01934 624129

**Other Useful Contacts:**

Channel Swimming Association:

Duncan Taylor

Boldens Wood Education Lane Stowing Ashford

Kent TN25 6AP

tel: 01303 812011

British Long Distance Swimming Association:

Maurice Ferguson

16 Elmwood Rd Barnton Northwich Cheshire

CW8 4NB

tel: 01606 75298