

SWIM TRAINING

Unless you come from a swimming background you may find the triathlon swim a bit daunting.

Luckily for you the swim is generally the shortest section of the triathlon in both time and distance and typically only takes up about a fifth of the total race duration. Swim practice, especially as part of a squad, will aid improved swim technique and swim fitness. Attending regular swim sessions where drills and technique work is included can provide significant benefits:

- Improve your speed for no extra energy cost (or change in fitness)
- Draft faster swimmers and potentially gain even more time
- Hold a position in a swimming pack and save energy for later in the race.

SAFETY

Arm clashing and lane position

The occasional thump in the head can happen in the pool, especially if focusing hard on your set. Avoid this by making sure you are not only in the right position in the lane i.e. swimming up and down the correct side, and when making turns at the end of the lane, but also being conscious of your swinging arms if in a busy lane.

Open water swims

While some triathlons are pool based, most triathlons will have an open water swim. To improve your chances of a good race, it is best to familiarise yourself with open water swimming before an event. This gives you the opportunity to acquaint yourself with open water conditions, understand the surroundings, manage any nerves or concerns you may have and test out your kit: wet suit, goggles, swim hat etc. The more pre-race open water swimming you do, the more comfortable – and confident – you will become. Plus, the more experience you gain, the more you'll improve your own safety. You should try to develop pre-swim preparations as well as get familiar with how your breathing and stroke needs to be adapted to help limit the potential panic. Especially in colder water or during a group or mass start!

GENERAL TECHNIQUE / ADVICE

Whilst there are several different types of swimming styles and methods, we (as well as British Triathlon) are big fans of the Swim Smooth approach. On their website (subscription) you will find a lot of advice about technique, including the key basics. Although you can also find a wealth of information on their YouTube channel, and they have an excellent '[Swim Smooth](#)' swimming manual for sale. Their main learning points that they come back to are:

- Keep a level streamlined body position, through a low head position and a balanced kick
- Rotate from the hips to assist breathing and to engage the larger muscle groups in the upper body
- Kick from the hip, not from the knee
- Aim for 'secret breathing' with minimal disruption to the stroke
- Recover the arm loosely, enter the water without tension and gradually increase pressure during the arm stroke

TUMBLE TURNS

Watch the YouTube clips (see 'More Info' below) or follow the instructions beneath.

Start by getting comfortable with performing a tumble away from the wall:

- A. Swim a few strokes and then somersault forward onto your back. Try this in the middle of the pool before approaching the wall.
- B. Remember to exhale from your nose as you tumble to keep the water out
- C. Tuck your legs as you tumble
- D. Practice the timing of the flip by swimming closer to the wall each time until your feet land correctly
- E. Then with tucked legs touching the wall, straighten your legs to push off
- F. Remember to finish the tumble before pushing off back up the pool
- G. Once you feel confident with completing a tumble here, you can progress

Now apply this to your swim:

1. Maintain speed when approaching the wall
2. Keep arms at sides after the last two strokes (they should be pointing back down the pool)
3. Tuck head to chest. Rotate hands and push down with palms while using a small dolphin kick to engage the core.
4. Flip feet over surface of the water
5. Plant feet on the wall, shoulder- width apart, with knees bent. Stretch arms above head into streamline position and push off the wall facing the surface of the water.
6. During the streamline position, use core strength to rotate or twist upper torso then lower torso to return to facing the bottom of the pool

Open water tips

When starting in deep water (i.e. your feet don't touch the bottom) it's best to get in a "ready to pull" position with one arm out flat in front and the other in the catch position. Be as flat as you can (with your legs out behind).

Unlike on the bike, drafting in the swim is totally legal and can be a good idea if you're behind (or to the side of) someone slightly faster than you. Just keep sighting in case they're going off course and occasionally move out of the draft to check that they're moving faster than you would on your own.

Technique for turning around a buoy may vary according to where the next buoy is. If you need to adjust by 90 degrees or more then it will be helpful to pivot around the arm nearest the buoy, turn onto your back, take another stroke and turn onto your front. If the turn is less than 90-degrees then it may be sufficient to make a wide sweep under the body with the arm nearest the buoy.

EQUIPMENT

Basic kit is your swim costume or tri suit (for racing), swim hat and goggles. A wetsuit will be needed for open water (depending on water temperature!). Also bring a water bottle to training, as you need to rehydrate while swimming.

Swim toys (aka drill aids) – are used by athletes to perform technique work or to isolate parts of the stroke and develop strength in those areas. Here's how the most common tools are used:

Pull buoy

This figure-8-shaped float is designed to fit between your thighs so you can swim without kicking. It helps to work on your arm stroke and can usefully mimic the flotation effects of a wetsuit.

The pull buoy can also be used to excuse tired legs from having to work too hard if you're swimming after a heavy run or bike set. But beware! Lots of triathletes become over-reliant on the pull buoy and never manage to correct the fault that causes them to need it in the first place (kicking with a bent knee).

Kick boards

These flat foam boards are used primarily to support the arms when doing leg-only kick drills. The board keeps your upper body supported so you can breathe with your head out of the water when kicking.

Bands

You've always needed a use for those old inner tubes... cut these down to form swim bands, used to bind the ankles together when doing arm-only pull sets. They are often used in conjunction with a pull buoy to ensure the swimmer doesn't keep kicking.

Hand paddles

These are curved plastic scoops that you strap in front of your palm to increase the surface area and, therefore, resistance to the water when pulling. They're primarily used to increase upper-body strength but can lead to shoulder injuries if used incorrectly.

Fins

Swimmers use short fins (foot paddles) to assist kick drills by increasing resistance at the feet. They also improve flexibility at the ankle joint. They can be used in conjunction with a kickboard to maximise the effect on the legs, or when performing arm drills to increase speed without greatly increasing effort.

BENCHMARKING

Maybe you're heading down the pool at crazy hours or perhaps you swim so often you are now on first name basis with the lifeguards, and you begin to think might actually making progress... but how can you tell?

Have a look at the [Ful-on Tri Benchmarking](#) section under 'Train' (or see 'More Info' below) to see how to calculate your Critical Swim Speed (CSS), which can be used to gauge improvement and design effective interval sessions to maximise your training.

LOCATIONS

Have a look at the [Ful-on Tri Timetable](#) for locations and times. Also check out the National Open Coaching Association (see More info) or pop along to one of these local venues.

Heron Lake: [Website](#)

Staines

Windsor and Maidenhead

TW19 6HW

Datchet / Liquid Leisure: [Website](#)

Horton Road
Berkshire
SL3 9HY

Bray Lake Watersports: [Website](#)

Monkey Island Lane, Windsor Road
Maidenhead
SL6 2EB

Shepperton: [Website](#)

Ferris Meadow Lake
Ferry Lane, Shepperton
Middlesex
TW17 9LH

Ham Lake: [Website](#)

Thames Young Mariners
Ham Fields, Riverside Drive,
Richmond
TW10 7RX

Thorpe Park: [Website](#)

Thorpe Lakes, Thorpe Road,
Chertsey,
Surrey KT16 8PH

FAQs

Do I need to buy a wetsuit?

For most open water swims in Britain, and many in Europe and overseas you will need a wetsuit, or you will find it very cold indeed. An added bonus – for most swimmers – is that a wetsuit will improve swimming times, as the extra buoyancy puts the body in a much more streamlined position. A basic suit can be bought new for GBP 150, or check Facebook or eBay for good second-hand suits on sale. Many shops and at some event organisers will also rent out suits.

The best reason to walk into a shop to buy your suit is that you can discuss your needs with shop staff and then try on one or more suits to ensure you get the best fitting suit. If you buy one that's too loose, then water will flood the suit and you will lose the insulating benefit as well as the streamlining. Too tight and it can restrict your breathing and movement.

How do I get my wetsuit on?

Getting your suit on can be greatly assisted by wearing socks on your feet to help them slide through – or use a plastic bag to slip over your feet and hands to help slide the suit on. Many suit suppliers provide a pair of gloves to prevent your fingernails damaging and perforating the neoprene. It's so important to practice this before racing so you understand the best way to get your wetsuit on simply, easily and without damage to it.

Baby oil on your arms and legs also helps the suit slide on without destroying the rubber (NOTE: Don't use Vaseline as it tends to damage the neoprene).

Before putting your suit on it's a good idea to smear baby oil, KY jelly or Bodyglide (a Tri-specific product) around your neck and armpits to prevent chafing.

What's the quickest way to remove my wetsuit in a race?

As soon as you leave the water, locate the zip cord behind you while running toward transition. Pull back the Velcro flap – which keeps the zip cord and top of zipper in place – with one hand while pulling down the zip. Make sure it goes fully down.

Once the zip is down, pull it off one shoulder, then the other, next pull one arm out (being mindful if you're wearing a racing watch on your wrist e.g. Garmin), then the other. Pull the suit down to your waist. Leave it at your waist till you reach transition.

When you arrive at your transition spot, pull the suit down to your knees and stamp on the suit to help get it to ankle level. At this point you can use your hands to ease the suit off over your feet. Make sure you put it somewhere out for the way.

Practice definitely helps! Remember that the transition is the fourth triathlon discipline.

Should I wear my race number in the water?

Race numbers are waterproof, so there is no reason why you shouldn't pin them to your clothing under your wetsuit. However, if you are doing a pool swim or putting on additional clothing in T1, then it is best to put your race number on in T1. You can get a race belt rather than pushing safety pins through the technical fabric of your tri top. A race belt is a piece of elastic with attachments for your race number and it gives you the advantage of being able to position your number where you want it (generally, on your back for the bike and your front for the run).

More Info:

SAFETY

[Open water swim safety](#) – excellent safety tips from the Royal Life Saving Society

TECHNIQUE / ADVICE

[Swim Smooth](#) – for a huge number of excellent videos on swim technique

[British Swimming](#) – starting open-water-swimming and open water advice

[BTF Open Water Swimming Tips](#) – acclimatise, bilateral breathing, drafting, and more

[How to do a tumble turn #1](#)

[How to do a tumble turn #2](#)

EQUIPMENT

[Sigma Sport](#) – for the kit!

FUL-ON TRI BENCHMARKING

[Know your speed](#)

LOCATIONS

[National Open Water Coaching Association](#) – tips, venues and contacts around the UK