

Out of Sight

When swimming in open water, you need to know where you're going. Swim coach Wayne Goldsmith has some pointers.

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Images: Supplied

So you've arrived at your triathlon feeling fit, fast, fabulous and ready to race. You've got a new bike. You've got new running shoes. You've slept well, had a great breakfast and everything is going wonderfully. You can't wait to plunge into that water and have a fantastic day of triathlon competition. You walk down to the beach towards the race start with a smile on your face, wearing the latest super-fast goggles with your low-resistance silicon swimming cap in hand – it's all coming together beautifully for you – then suddenly it hits you...there are no lane ropes.

Navigating in open water is often the most challenging, most daunting and most difficult aspect of triathlon – particularly for the newbies.



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However, it doesn't have to be.

Here are a few simple tips and tricks to help you find your way and turn your next triathlon swim leg from a maze...to amazing.

1 Practise, practise, practise

Include some navigation skills in every pool session. For example, if you are swimming 100-metre efforts in the pool, breathe normally to the left or to the right most of the time but include one or two 'sightings' per lap. For example, you might place a brightly coloured water bottle on the blocks at the end of the pool and lift your head once or twice each lap to briefly look at it. You should aim to keep your head movements as small as possible when sighting. Your head position is the key to everything. If your head is in the correct position, then your hips will be in the correct position and your feet will also be in the correct position for optimal kicking power.

2 Landmarks and watermarks

When you arrive at your next triathlon, head down to the water and start looking for easily identifiable landmarks like big trees, brightly coloured buildings, distinctive wharf and jetty pylons and watermarks like large and distinctive boats, large and brightly coloured buoys. Identify landmarks and watermarks that make sense to you and ideally markers that will not move during your triathlon swim leg. For example, many a triathlete has been lost, dazed and confused when the red car or yellow truck parked near the course they were using as a navigation marker drove away during the race.

3 Allow for conditions

Swimming pools are constant, controlled environments – particularly indoor pools. You don't



have to face wind, rain, swell, chop or currents in the pool. These can impact on your navigation in open water. Think of it in terms of your bike training. The difference between pool swimming and open water swimming is like the difference between using rollers or doing a spin class and riding on the road.

Real life triathlon example:

In the Devonport Triathlon last year, conditions were challenging. It was a beach start and competitors were up against all the difficulties the ocean has to offer. The course was set as a straight swim to a buoy, a right-hand turn across the beach to another buoy, followed by another right-hand turn back to the beach – a simple right-hand turn rectangular course.

However, with large surf, strong winds blowing towards the shore and plenty of white caps, competitors faced some real navigational hazards.

As expected, most of the competitors diligently mapped out the swim course and identified their own markers (landmarks and watermarks) before the race.


The problem, however, was that the winds were so strong, the best 'line' from the first turning buoy to the second was not a straight one – it was in fact a line that ran around 100 metres to the left of the second buoy. In short, competitors had to swim at an angle of approximately 45 degrees to the left of the second buoy to allow for the surf and wind conditions.

4 Whose line is it anyway?

When planning the swim leg of your triathlon, take some time to study the course and pick the line that suits you and your style of racing. For example, if you are an outstanding swimmer, select a line that allows you to take advantage of your swimming

abilities. If you are a triathlete without a strong swimming background, it may be better for you to identify a more conservative line where you follow the pack. (Note: relying on following the pack as your only navigation strategy is not recommended. While sitting on the feet of other swimmers does have its advantages as you tend to get dragged along by those in front of you, which means you'll save energy for the bike and run legs, you are also relying on them to get you where you need to go. If they go off course, you will also. By all means sit on the feet of faster swimmers in the swim leg – much in the same way as you sit the wheel of other riders during your bunch training rides, but be mindful of following your own line and be prepared to dump the swim bunch if they make a wrong turn and start heading across the Tasman.

Summary

1. Navigation in the swim leg of triathlon is like all triathlon skills – it needs to be practised regularly.
2. Include some elements of navigation in all your pool swimming training sets. You're a triathlete – not an Olympic 200 freestyler. There are no lane ropes or pool walls where you're going.
3. Think outside the box. Look for navigation markers that make sense to you and can help you swim the leg you want to swim.
4. Fail to consider environmental conditions at your peril. Wind, surf, swell, chop, current and water clarity can all play havoc with even the best-planned swim legs. You need to consider all these factors in your swim course navigation.
5. Following feet is an option sometimes, but at the end of the day you are responsible for finding and following your own course. 



Wayne Goldsmith is a triathlon coach who has worked for both Triathlon Australia and Swimming Australia

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