

# BEGINNERS' SWIM BOOSTER COURSE

For those training for a summer of racing, it's time to get out of the indoor pool and embrace the great outdoors. *Rick Kiddle* explains how to make the best of sessions in the open water...

## PART THREE: TAKE IT OUTSIDE

▶▶ Your first swim outside can completely change the way you feel about open water swimming. A good first experience in the open water can set you up for a lifetime of swimming joy. And a successful springtime session, where you meet or exceed your expectations, is a good omen for the season ahead.

If you're training for an open water race, then exposing yourself to the elements in advance of the event should be an essential part of your preparation. But what exactly should you be doing when you get to an outdoor venue?

As we have mentioned previously, competitive open water swimmers do the bulk of their technique work and intensity training in a pool. You should aim to be up to speed before you transfer your skills to open water. While it's easy to fall in love with swimming in the lake or sea, where there are no lines to follow, no chlorine and no walls to enclose you, it is equally easy to neglect the intensity of measurement and focus on technique you can achieve in the pool.

However, it is possible to have the best of both worlds if you follow the necessary steps to get your body fit to compete in the pool and acclimatised to open water.

### IDENTIFY THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS

People lose time in open water. That's a fact of life. Despite the fact that nine out of ten swimmers will swim faster in a wetsuit (go on – try it in the pool), they will be slower as soon as they enter a mass participation event. But why?

Firstly, the stress of having other swimmers near you. This can slow anyone if they are not relaxed and confident in their own abilities. Secondly, not having lane ropes or black lines to follow can turn a 750m swim into 1km if you cannot sight properly and adjust any stroke imbalances that are taking you off course. Finally, remember that just wearing a wetsuit can be incredibly tiring, even if you have the right fit and have put it on correctly. Your arms feel heavy, you are sapped of energy and your speed declines.

These pitfalls can only really be countered by training in open water. On our NOWCA courses, we recommend at least two open water sessions a week for two to three weeks prior to any event. This allows you to gain the valuable muscular endurance and strength needed to counter fatigue, and start to speed up to your potential. However, while simply jumping in and swimming will bring some benefits, you need to structure your approach if you are to perform to the best of your ability.



## DESIGN YOUR PROGRAMME

If you are working without a coach you can still design an open water training programme for yourself. This should, if possible, be organised around an on-going pool training schedule at least twice a week for short intervals of 25m to 200m, which allows you accurate measurement of intensity and performance feedback.

Many open water venues have courses already set up and marked out. The standard distances are 400m, 750m and 1.5km. But just getting in and swimming these distances time after time will only give you the confidence that you can complete the distance, not the valuable ability to sustain speed. To gain more endurance you need structure. Get this by limiting the long swims to once per week. For other sessions, try to create interval sessions using closely spaced marker buoys, or incorporate time trials over, say, 400m. These elements can be built into three different sessions, balancing intensity and duration, based on the types of swims you are training for. I have added some sample sessions at the end of this article.

## RACE SPECIFICS

Most open water races start in the water – the “deep water start”. There are specific techniques you should master to ensure your race starts well. One advantage of the deep water start is that you don’t have to start racing as soon as you enter the water. Use this time to get used to the temperature and warm up. Then, quickly take up your preferred start position.

The optimum body position for a deep water start is horizontal, with your feet floating behind you and your hands sculling gently in front to hold your spot. You will need to create a space for yourself while not upsetting anyone else. Be confident and don’t drop your legs, even if someone complains. You are planning a quick getaway, not setting yourself up to be swum over.

Calm your breathing and focus on what you need to do to reach the first turning point. On the start signal, kick and swim hard for 50m or so before relaxing into your threshold technique with minimal leg kick to save energy (unless you train six or >>



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more times a week, in which case you should have the fitness to incorporate a strong kick throughout for propulsion).

Some races, including the British Gas Great Swim Series, have opted for a “beach start” where competitors run into the water. This is spectacular and exciting but brings with it some technical and physical challenges. Depending on the depth of the water as you enter, you will need to incorporate two different techniques.

The first one is the high-knee skip to run efficiently through shallow water. Alternate each leg and lift one knee up as you skip forward with the other. Once it gets too deep to do this, go into dolphin dives. Spring up from the bottom and dolphin dive forward, with your arms over your head in streamlined position. If the water is still shallow enough, bring your legs forward, find the bottom and jump up again. Do this until you get too deep and then commence swimming. Both these techniques are used by beach lifeguards and are by far the quickest way to enter the water.

Even if you know which type of start your race will involve, it’s worth setting aside some time during your open water sessions to practice both.

## URNS AND FINISHES

Part of your open water training should include turns, and it’s worth practising these in groups. In a race, turns tend to be pinch points, where everyone converges. You can go from swimming in relatively clear water to finding yourself in a mêlée of flailing arms, legs and bodies in a matter of seconds, and you should be prepared for this.

Always kick hard around a turn to keep your legs high and to maintain momentum. Some people find the technique of flipping onto your back as you go through the turn to be quite effective, but this needs a lot of practice, so, if you want to do it, make sure you know what to do.

In a race, valuable places can be won or lost in the approach to the finish, so again, finishing should be included in your open water training. Unlike pool-based races, many open water swims finish on land so you need to exit the water to cross the finish line. Moving suddenly from horizontal to vertical can cause dizziness and disorientation as blood suddenly drains from the upper body to the legs. To minimise this (and to maximise speed) kick hard as you approach the end. This seems to prepare the legs better for running.

In training, find the best depth of water to stop swimming and start running. I recommend swimming in as far as possible – there’s less chance of standing on something sharp, and in most cases it’s quicker.

## TAPERING

To race at your best, you need to reduce your training and increase your recovery as you approach key events (a set based on ‘Session Three’ would be ideal for this phase of training). If you have been doing 400m as your long swim, reduce this to 200m. If it was 750/800m then 3x300m, with good recovery of a minute between is ideal. If your long swims were 1km to 1.5km, then 4x400m repeats with two or more minutes recovery is great for a taper.

If you have more than one key race, then be careful not to over-train but bring the distances down, taper a little later by a day or two, reduce the distances by 25-50 percent but keep or increase intensity.

Whatever you’re training for, remember that half the fun of training outdoors is enjoying the scenery, so take the time to get your head out of the water and breathe in that lovely summer breeze. It won’t last all year! ●

## SESSION ONE

### Endurance (45-60mins)

#### Warm up

5-10mins gentle swimming to stretch out

#### Pre main set

1. Build pace for 10s or 10 strokes,
2. Build for 15s or 15 strokes,
3. Build for 20s or 20 strokes  
(ensure you have a nice relaxed stroke.  
Recovery is 5-10 easy strokes between each ‘build’)

#### Main set

Endurance swim set (pick the relevant endurance distance for you)

Build from 200m to 2-3x400m or

Build from 3x300m to 2-4x750m or

Build from 2x500m to 1-2x1000m or

Build from 400m to 1-2x1500m

#### Recovery

5mins steady to easy stretch out,  
followed by 5mins upper-body stretching

## SESSION TWO

### Medium distance and strength (45mins)

#### Warm up

6-8mins gentle swimming to stretch out

#### Pre main set

1. Build pace for 10s or ten strokes x3, swim easy for 10s recovery
2. Focus on higher recovery arm (some open water swimmers incorporate a slightly straighter and higher arm recovery to counter the stretch in the neoprene, which can fatigue a swimmer much quicker than pool swimming),
3. Bilateral breathing for 20s, breathing to non-dominant side for 20s, hypoxic breathing (breathing every 3, 4 or 5+ strokes until out of breath then back down again) for 20s and increase pace with dominant side breathing for 10s. Repeat 2-4 times.

#### Main set

1.5km divided by shorter alternating efforts. For example, swim hard between every other buoy (this obviously depends on where the marker buoys are). Ideally every 30-45s switch from hard to easy and then back again

#### Recovery

5mins steady to easy stretch out and T1 followed by 5mins upper body stretching

## SESSION THREE

### Threshold and Speed (30-45mins)

#### Warm up

8mins gentle swimming to stretch out

#### Pre main set

1. 4x20s @ 80 percent effort
2. 3x15s @ 85 percent effort
3. 2x10s @ 90 percent effort

#### Main set

6-8 x (250-300m or 2-4mins or 120-200 strokes approx).  
Recovery between each interval and effort is 20-60 seconds at 60 percent effort.  
10x20s hard effort with 10-20s recovery time between each

#### Recovery

5mins steady to easy stretch out,  
followed by 5mins upper body stretching