

BEGINNERS' SWIM BOOSTER COURSE

We're bang in the middle of the summer season now, but there is still work to be done to hone our technique. **Rick Kiddle** explains how to make your final preparations for any event, plus what you'll need on race day

PART FOUR: FINISHING TOUCHES

▶▶ You've done the training, both in the pool and outside, and you're confident you can do the distance. Now it's time to put it all into practice. But it's not enough to just turn up at the start line and plunge in – if you do that, you're unlikely to perform to your potential. To swim your best, whether you're in a race or taking on a long-distance challenge, you need to put together the final pieces of the puzzle: the all-important taper, to ensure you are fully mentally and physically prepared.

The key to successful racing is to relax. Although it sounds contradictory, you really do go faster if you're not tense. But to be able to relax you'll need to be in total control, which means doing a lot of preparation and planning.

I always advise my swimmers to write an event plan that starts a few days in advance of the big day (longer may be necessary for major events). The plan should include the training you will do in the final few days, what and when you will eat, how much you will sleep, what kit you need, how and when you will reach the venue, any overnight accommodation needs and your event tactics, including strategies for dealing with mishaps and the unexpected. Preferably share your plan with your coach or a training partner, and encourage them to suggest improvements.

Let's look at some of those elements in turn, starting with the pre-event training. Many people refer to their pre-event training as 'the taper'. The idea is to reduce, or 'taper down', the volume of training to give the body a chance to recover and rebuild from the months of hard training. Many people also get a mental boost from this and find they can focus on the event.

For a typical mass-participation event lasting up to two hours, I suggest halving your training volume about a week before, and then halving it again two to three days before the event. But do maintain the intensity of your sessions and, most importantly, don't do nothing!

MAKING PLANS

You should plan your nutritional intake in the same way you plan your training. If your event is likely to take more than 90mins, you will also need to plan your event day nutrition (see the H2Open article on race day nutrition in issue two).

My advice is to keep things simple, stick to foods you know well and eat a normal healthy diet. If you're going to use any energy drinks or gels leading up to the start, make sure you've tested them in training and make a note of it in your plan.

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Making a kit list is incredibly useful (see our checklist over page as an example). It sounds simple but, if you leave it until the last minute to pack, it's so easy to forget something. The start line is also not the best time to discover that your goggles have broken either, so pack well in advance, check everything and bring spares. It should go without saying that you have tested your kit in training, but it still amazes me how many people show up to races in brand-new wetsuits.

Think of all the things you might need to do before you start swimming. Park your car, register, use the toilet, change, review the course, use the toilet again, hand in your kit bag, brief your supporters, walk to the start, warm up. Write these down on your list. Allocate a time for each and then add some. Who knows how long the queues will be.

Plan how you will enter the water. Acclimatise yourself carefully rather than leaping in. Cool the skin on your feet, hands, face, and neck. Lower yourself into the water without the head going under,

float on your back to let the water seep into the suit, slowly turn onto your front, put your face into the water and breathe out slowly, then move off gently to warm up. Stretch out with long strokes. Do this for several minutes and intermittently add some bursts of effort with a strong kick.

PLANNING YOUR RACE

Once you've decided everything else, it's time to plan your swim. How are you going to tackle it? Where will you position yourself at the start? How hard will you start? Are there any key competitors you want to keep an eye on? Whose feet do you want to follow? What will you focus on while you swim? How fast will you swim? When will you kick for the finish? The answers to some of these will come with experience; for others there are things you should do that will improve your chances of a good race.

Firstly, not everyone can (or should) start at the back. Many newcomers to the sport are apprehensive about getting swum ►►



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over and so hide at the back. Can you imagine any other race where everyone is fighting to be at the back? Quite a spectacle, with all the, "After you!" "No, after you!" going on. I recommend moving up a little and making sure you start effectively.

Don't worry about those around you – try to concentrate on your own race. Once the signal sounds, kick hard and settle into a controlled, efficient start. Don't go out too aggressively. The first 100m is an important part of the race and many people just try to survive. But with a little preparation you can set yourself up for a great race.

The first turn on a course is often a pinch point. Plan how you will deal with it. Don't stop or slow down, but kick hard to keep your legs up. You'll also need to kick hard to catch another swimmer, to draft or for a sprint finish, but otherwise I recommend a gentle two-beat kick throughout.

Previous features have covered finding the right pace to race at (see 'Swim Plus' in issue three). If you want to swim at your best you need to hold your threshold pace throughout. Hopefully you will have maximised your threshold pace through your preparation and taper, but remember that stress (caused by poor preparation) lowers your threshold, while experience and practice will help you learn pace judgement.

Tactics can play a significant role for experienced swimmers, but you do need to prepare. It can be difficult to identify competitors in the water but look for distinctive signs. What combination of wetsuit and goggles are they wearing, for example? Some women wear brightly coloured nail varnish. Race organisers make it more difficult by giving everyone identical hats but, if you swim against the same people often, you might recognise aspects of their stroke or breathing pattern.

If you are drafting, be careful not to touch the swimmer in front; you might not want them to know you're there. Decide in advance how much effort you're going to make to stay on a particular person's feet, but be prepared to change tactics if they prove faster or slower than expected on the day.

TROUBLESHOOTING

All the above is useful, but where a pre-event plan really comes into its own is when things go wrong. Remember that stress harms performance, and things going wrong causes stress, but that stress can be minimised by preparing for upsets in advance.

Remember the motto: prevention is better than cure. Many of the things that can go wrong can also be prevented. These include: an ill-fitting wetsuit; chafing; fogging and leaking goggles; not being able to relax in the water; hyperventilation, and so on. For example, anti-chafing cream must be on your kit list, as should anti-mist spray for goggles. The risk of going off-course can be minimised by a thorough route reconnaissance. Think every eventuality through carefully: if you do hyperventilate, what is your strategy for dealing with it?

Some things can't be prevented and have to be dealt with if they occur: the foot in the face that knocks off your goggles; the swimmer who dunks you; getting boxed in. Learning to deal with these things should be on your race plan and be part of your preparation. For example, if you get bumped, keep swimming. If you get boxed in, relax and wait your moment to escape. If someone persistently taps your feet, kick harder.

Leaking goggles – a big worry for many – can generally be prevented. Ensure you have a pair with a good seal that work properly in a stress-free, non-event situation. If your goggles do start to leak suddenly, the seal might not be working because of

RACE DAY KIT LIST

There's no hard-and-fast law about what you need on race day but hopefully this checklist will mean you don't forget anything you might need.

- Costume and spares
- Goggles (two pairs: one tinted and one clear)
- Anti-mist spray for goggles
- Swim hat (if not provided)
- Wetsuit (if needed)
- Anti-chafing cream
- Plastic bags to cover feet and hands to assist with putting on wetsuit
- Drinking water
- Energy drink (if required)
- Pre-race snacks / gels (if required)
- Post race snack / recovery drink / bar
- Towel
- Warm clothes
- Warm shoes
- Flip-flops
- Photo ID (sometimes needed for registration)
- Directions to venue
- Emergency contact numbers
- Any medication



grease on your face, or your swim hat or hair caught underneath: these are simple things that can be missed during the nerves of a race and can usually be fixed during the warm up.

If they continue to leak once the race has started, it is possible to clear them very quickly without stopping, if you have practised in training. This requires a strong kick and one arm stroke for several strokes. Try this the next time you are in a pool; you will be surprised how it can be done without affecting your rhythm too much. Many people carry on and struggle along not seeing where they are going. Others stop and get in everyone's way. With a little bit of practice beforehand, it can be done on the move.

Losing your goggles completely can be a show stopper. I have only raced once in this situation. It wasn't pleasant. I know of several top triathletes who actually practise swimming without goggles to prepare for this eventuality. You could do the same. It won't be enjoyable but at least you'll know you can cope if it happens.

Once you have planned your race, read your race plan daily in the lead up to your event. Use it to help you visualise your perfect race and to mentally rehearse dealing with difficult situations so that you're less troubled if they occur. After all this preparation and training, you should be able to relax and just enjoy the event. So, take some deep breaths, and I wish you the best of luck. Happy racing! ●

Have you missed any of Rick Kiddle's swim booster course for beginners to open water racing? Get parts one, two and three in the first three issues of *H2Open*, available from escosubs.co.uk/h2open