

Training for the 5k and 10k Distances

Greta has asked me to discuss how to train for the 5k and 10k open water distances. I guess she has decided that since I have done a bunch of these things I have something to share. Actually, everyone is a little different when it comes to training for these races but there are some things that everyone has in common. There is a whole subculture of folks that travel around the country and do these swims. I have had a great deal of fun talking to these folks after the events and here are the training rules that seem to be the same everywhere;



1. **Age matters** – Training for these races is much different when you are over the age of 50. If you look at the National results there is a huge drop off over the age of 50 in finishers. Over the age of 60, from 5k and up, you are lucky to find 3 finishers in these events. There may be a thin line between courage and stupidity when you get older, or age just may be a real problem in training and competing in these events. Age doesn't seem to slow the guys down from Bend Oregon. Whenever any of those guys show up you are usually swimming for second place.
2. **Miles matter** – One unequivocal fact that everyone who swims these events will tell you is that the “secret” to doing well in these events is to swim a lot. You cannot swim a 10 k or 25 k on 2000 yards a day. There is a little gremlin out there that suddenly gets real big and stomps on your body if you haven't done the miles. The general rule of thumb is to start at least 9 months ahead of time and gradually build up your miles. How you do the miles matters as well. A good workout is 6 x 1000 on 15 minutes (or whatever interval you can make). Coming back for a second workout is smart, also, if you can find the time. Finding someone else to train with helps. When you both get to that time in practice when you really don't want to go any farther it helps to have some one to whine with.
3. **The type of miles matters** - Swimming the 200 IM is not the same as swimming the 10K. I sometimes think that long open water swims are not even the same sport. The difference is even greater at the master's level in the older age groups. If you work your mileage up to 10, 000 a day in 2 workouts forget the 100 freestyle at Nationals. Your changes in the 1650 or 1000 have probably improved greatly. In addition to the daily training it is good to have one day that you swim at least 3 hours. A typical workout on those days could be repeat 1000's on say 15 minutes, dropping the repeat to 500's when you start to come apart on the 1000's. You may end up with 6 x 1000's followed by 8 x 500's on 7 minutes. If you haven't decided you might have better things to do you could then go 10 x 100's on 1:30/1:15.

4. **Stroke really matters**- One thing that affected me personally was how much an effective stroke mattered to really long swim training. Stroke matters when the inefficiencies get multiplied from a long swim. Breathing to just one side causes an imbalance that causes an overload on the opposite side. It is true that the elite swimmers look like they are breathing only on one side. If you look at them closely you'll see they are breathing every 2 strokes and can do that on either side.
5. **Going straight Matters** – If you cannot go straight from buoy to buoy your day may become a lot longer than you had planned. It is hard to sight efficiently and still maintain a good stroke cadence. If you do not practice this until the day of a long open water swim, be prepared for a really sore neck. The best method that everyone appears to use is to lift the head while just starting the vertical forearm phase of the stroke. The head isn't a lift so much as a slight rotation back that just allows the eyes to sight. If you cannot sight the buoy on the first try, nothing prevents you from coming back on the next stroke and doing it again.
6. **Cold or Hot** – Water temperature matters tremendously. Franny Grippen, the great distance swimmer, died in 84 degree water in an open water swim. A highly trained athlete like Franny Grippen could not handle being overheated. His death caused the rules for open water swimming to be rewritten. The cold end of things can be just as dangerous. Once the water gets below 70 degrees tread carefully. Once your body core starts to go on either end of the temperature scale you don't think rationally. If you are older than 60 be very careful of temperature.
7. **Current** – Some of the swims have current in a river or ocean. I have swum in river swims where the current was so strong we were passing runners on the shore. Talk to the race organizers and realize where the eddies and the currents are. If you need to go against the current figure out how to angle across it or hug the shore to capture the eddy. Bottom line is to know the course really well and if you are going with current know where to cut over to the finish so the current doesn't sweep you on by.
8. **Eat** – In the really long swims of 5k and up you may need to replenish your calories. Learn to do this in practice. Eat every 14-30 minutes and learn to do it comfortably. There is nothing worse than barfing repeatedly throughout the swim. Ask me how I know this.
9. **Draft** – Have no pride and draft off of every person you can. Watch the Nationals or the Olympic 10 k. Everyone drafts. A good way to train for this is to get in a lane with a good open water swimmer and play with drafting. Do not be shy. Male or female you will be crawled over during the first 1000 until the race settles down.
10. **Have Fun** – Open water swimming is fun. There is a whole group of Masters swimmers that travel around the country doing these races. They are great folks and I have made a lot of friends at these races. Just think. You can swim a 5k and be finished well ahead of a big pool meet. You can also pick up a great suntan even though it is mostly on your back. So go do an open water swim. You might try the mile before stepping up to the big distances.