

Open Water Swimming Tips for Beginners – from Blue Seventy

Triathlons are raced outdoors so why is almost all swim training done in a pool? Wheelworx sponsored Triathlete Kevin Keane believes that swapping the pool for the sea or a lake is a great way to improve race-day performances. Here he gives a few reasons why...

“Lots of people find it hard to get used to open water swimming. Even if they glide through the pool with ease, being in the sea or a lake just isn’t the same. It’s not unusual to come across triathletes who can hold great times in the pool but who see slower pool swimmers emerge in to T1 ahead of them. Very often this is simply because they are not practising often enough in the open water. Sea or lake swims can’t replace the controlled work-out of a pool session but taking a plunge at least once a week can make you a better triathlete. Here’s why...



Kevin Keane likes double espressos, swims off the coast of Killiney, long spins over the hills and epic runs in the mountains, in that order. He also loves racing but believes that if sport isn't fun, there's no point in turning up. After starting out in mountain running, where he represented Ireland at a number of European and World Championships, he emigrated to the far more glamorous world of triathlon. When not training he likes to sleep, polish his bikes and when necessary, go to work. He still heads up the nearest mountain when the opportunity presents itself. He is a member of Belpark Triathlon Club and races for Wheelworx.

1 You Don't Race in a Pool

With the obvious exceptions of some of the early season triathlons, just about every race on the calendar is held in the open water. But to get a good performance on the day you need to be comfortable with your surroundings. Like all training, the principle of specificity applies – training should replicate racing as closely as possible. Swapping at least one of your pool swims once a week will make you more comfortable with the open water and that in turn will allow you to give it your all on race day.

2. There's No Tumble Turn in a Race.

One of the big differences between pool and open-water swimming is that every 25m or so a pool swimmer gets to rest their arms for a few seconds as they tumble turn and push off the wall. This might not sound like much of a break until you consider that in a 1,500 swim you get 60 of these breaks! Practising in the open water will help get your arms used to covering long distances without the benefit of a tumble turn (aka 'a break').

3. The Wide-Open Will Keep You on the Straight-and-Narrow

Zigzagging your way around a swim course can cost you places. Swimming in a straight-line comes naturally to some but for others it isn't as easy as it sounds.

The trick is to cock your head upwards mid-stroke without breaking rhythm. Like all training, the more you practise this the better you'll become. You don't have to keep that head out of the water for long, just enough time to establish your direction (and take a breath while your at it). Some swimmers need to sight every eight strokes but other, more practised swimmers can go a lot farther without looking up. Sighting can cause your legs to drop and thus slow you down but remember that having to look up a lot is preferable to heading off towards the horizon while the rest of the field leaves you

4. Spend Some Quality Time with your Neoprene

It's surprising the number of people who find phantom holes in their wetsuits, or that their goggles aren't adjusted properly on the morning of a race.

Using these bits of kit regularly can avoid any nasty surprises turning up on race day. Also the more you wear your wetsuit, the more comfortable you'll find it when it comes to race-day.

5. Don't Forget to Bring Your Common Sense

Finally, swimming in open-water can be dangerous, no matter how strong a swimmer you are.

Currents and other hazards often can't be seen from the surface. Conditions can change in a matter of minutes. And although the sea and lakes are usually benign, they can be deadly. Always err on the side of caution and use your common sense. Don't train where there are a lot of boats, don't go swimming off rocks or piers where there isn't any easy way to get out of the water. Talk to the locals and let them tell you what parts of the water need to be treated with caution. If the sea looks too rough for your level of swimming, it probably is. Most importantly of all though, **never swim alone.**