



OPEN WATER SWIM RACING TIPS for The Start, The Course, the Finish

Turks & Caicos Open Water Swim Training & Swim Safaris

10 Tips for each segment of open water racing: The Start, The Course, and The Finish. These tips have been compiled by Ben Stubenberg, Co-Owner/Manager Caicu Naniki Sports Adventures/Turks & Caicos Open Water Swim Training & Swim Safaris. They are based on research, comments by top OW swimmers, and Ben's own experience as OW swim competitor and co-founder and organizer of the annual Turks & Caicos "Race for the Conch" Eco-SeaSwim held first Saturday of each July.

THE START

1. Hydrate appropriately well before the race with drinks you are used to.
2. Bring an extra pair of goggles in case the strap on the one you planned to use breaks or there is some other malfunction. Make sure you have practiced in the other pair and adjusted them for proper fit. Consider tightening goggles a bit before race day to reduce risk of them being knocked off. Practice tighter fit well before the race to make sure you feel comfortable.
3. Check out the course map thoroughly and visualize each leg and turn weeks before race. Think through how you will approach the turn buoy on the correct side. Anticipate chaos and jostling.
4. Look at the size and spacing of the course buoys from the beach. During your warm up, check again to see if you can actually see the buoys from water level. If not, look for tall buildings or other landmarks that can help you navigate. Nothing more maddening than trying anxiously to find buoys that are too hard to see as you swim.
5. Get a sense for the current and tide direction so you can make adjustments. You may have to head to the left or right of a buoy to stay on course.
6. Check for potential obstacles along the race course, such as location of piers, rocks, boats, non-race buoys, non-race swimmers, and swim lines.

7. Know exactly where the finish line is before you start, as well as the course route leading up to it. You should not have to stop and think about where to go at the tail-end of the race, especially when you are likely to be fatigued.
8. Apply sunscreen at least 30 minutes before start time if it's summer or any time you are in the tropics. Be careful NOT to get sunscreen on your goggle lenses. Clean your fingers thoroughly before applying anything to your goggles.
9. Do a good warm up in the water. It's tempting to think you are going to "save" your energy for the race by limiting the warm up, but a warm up gets the heart rate up where it should be and helps you avoid shock to the system when you start the race.
10. If you are new to open water swim racing and not among the speediest, stand back a bit from the start line and let the experienced swimmers go first to avoid the early jostling for position.

THE COURSE

1. If you are new to open water swimming, don't get caught up in the mad scramble as the top (and some not-so-top) swimmers dive or dash into the water. Swim behind them but still be prepared for jostling by overly enthusiastic swimmers. Open water swimming is a contact sport!
2. If your goggles get bumped away from your eyes, stop, remain calm, put back on, and continue. If they get knocked off completely and you can't find them, consider trying to keep swimming without them. Anticipate the worst and practice for it.
3. Don't sprint in the beginning. It's easy to want to go out fast like others who are fired up by the event, but this will only tire you out right at the start and make the rest of the swim miserable.
4. Get into a steady, comfortable pace, and stay with it for most of the race. Anticipate bumps and even grabs, but always get back into your pace.
5. Good navigation is as important as strong swimming. So check your position every few strokes and make adjustments. This is best done by raising your head as little as possible while continuing to swim. In calm waters you should only have to get your eyes above the water line ("alligator eyes") to see. In rougher water you will have to lift your head a little more to get above the chop, but regardless, try to keep swimming.
6. It's tempting just to follow the crowd, but better to verify yourself the course route. It is not uncommon for a group of swimmers following a

lost leader to get off course. (If you have bad vision, get corrected lens goggles. Barracuda among others makes them. Seeing where you are and where you need to go is critical.)

7. Drafting is legal in most open water races, so you can swim next too and just behind a swimmer ahead of you and get the benefit of a little pull by the water displacement created. Be careful not to interfere with the swimmer you are drafting off of!

8. Rounding a turn buoy can be rough, as swimmers naturally bunch up trying to make the tightest turn. Look at where the swimmers are crowding and go to the outside of them to avoid getting banged. If you are confident and handle some roughness, cut a close angle around the buoy, but don't miss it!

9. When you are about 3/4's through the race, assess your energy level. If you have a lot, pick up the pace. If not, keep the steady pace and pour it on the last 100 meters.

10. Distance swimming is a mind game. You have to focus on going to the finish. Studies show that the mind often gives up before the body give out, so you probably have more reserves than you think. But if you feel overly fatigued, woozy, or get a cramp that is too painful to continue, stop and signal for help by raising your hand. If you are close to the beach, head for it, if you can, and get out. No shame in not completing the race. (Just be sure to tell the race officials that you got out early so they can account for you.)

THE FINISH

1. As you approach the finish, take time to identify the markers leading to the last stretch before the finish line. Extra buoys, lane lines, boats, and people can make some course finishes confusing and cause a swimmer to overshoot or take a wrong turn.

2. If the finish line is on the beach, swim right up to the beach until your hands are grabbing the sand or rocks. Try not to stand up in water above your thighs. Wading through water to the beach will only slow you down.

3. If there is small surf, try to catch the waves by swimming as fast as you can and then ride them in using longer strokes if you have to. Be alert to wave backwash that flows away from the shore and impedes your progress. If there is a sandy bottom, consider diving under the backwash to get through it easier.

4. When you are ready to stand up, consider doing so slowly as your horizontal swimming position may have redistributed more blood to your

head. If you feel dazed, drop down to a knee and wait a few seconds to readjust. Don't want to black out!

5. When you cross the finish line, check your time if there is a visible race clock. Avoid asking the time officials for your time during the race, as they are busy recording other times. You'll see your official time printed out soon enough after the race.

6. Try to walk around to cool down your muscles and avoid cramping up.

7. If you are in a warm water race, take off your cap, as that will help you cool down. In cooler or cold water races, dry off quickly, put on something warm, and move around to warm up.

8. Grab water or a sports drink with electrolytes to rehydrate. You sweat just as much in water as on land, but may not necessarily feel thirsty. If you can, drink liquids you are accustomed to after a workout to avoid ingesting something new that doesn't agree with you. Best to have your own refreshment (and snacks) handy to make sure you get the right drink and food replenishment, just in case organizers have run out. (Doesn't happen often, but can.)

9. If you feel ill in any way, immediately go to the first aid station or tell a race official you need help.

10. Take a moment to reflect on your accomplishment. Note what you learned but enjoy the moment. Nothing like getting that natural high and sharing the experience with others.

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