

Taking On the Open Ocean

A Seasoned Swimmer Shares His Secrets of Success in Competing in the La Jolla Rough Water Swim

By Susan Dawson-Cook

The prospect of transitioning from pool to open ocean can make a swimmer's heart race with anticipation and dread. The lure of escaping to the beach with friends or family and the challenge of a new experience is countered by concern over the sport's hazards, described in fine print on the race liability waiver.

Yet with a little preparation, even a desert rat can succeed in open water. Most open water swimmers today, including 10K Swimming Marathon Olympic hopeful Micha Burden of the Mission Viejo Nadadores, began as pool competitors and train primarily in the pool.

Jim Stites, longtime coach of the Ford Aquatics Masters program in Tucson, says about 20 percent of his swimmers, including himself, compete in open water events. A former University of Cincinnati distance swimmer, Stites now competes in the Masters 50-55 age group; he has competed in hundreds of triathlons and open water events.

Occasionally, he and his open water swimmers travel to Phoenix for events at Tempe Town Lake. Stites, who often did lake swims while living in Ohio, says lake swimming can be a good stepping stone to the open ocean.

One of his team's favorite open water events is the La Jolla, Calif., Rough Water Swim. The race program includes two races for adult swimmers; a 1-mile and a 3-mile swim known as the Gatorman. The Gatorman attracts some of the fastest open water swimmers in southern California. Stites has placed in the top five in his age group in the 1-mile event nearly every year since 2001. And for the past two years, he has swum both events in a single day.

When Stites and his swimmers travel to Southern California for the La Jolla Rough Water Swim, they arrive a day early for a practice swim in the ocean. Half way through the swim, the group pauses to hear Stites make suggestions on managing currents and staying on course.

"Most years, the currents are the same. They're moving perpendicular to the shore," says Stites. Swimmers in the 1 mile follow a triangular course, swimming against the current during the second leg of the swim. 3 mile swimmers (who swim roughly parallel to the shoreline) must aim at a slightly outward angle from the shore to compensate for the current's inland pull.

Although currents in La Jolla tend to be minimal, Stites says swimmers competing in the Waikiki Rough Water Swim and the Maui Channel Swim have shared stories of swimming in place for nearly 15 minutes before escaping a current. Especially dangerous are rip currents, also known as rip tides, which can occur near any beach with breaking waves. Encountering these can be particularly alarming because they rapidly pull a swimmer from shore. Randy Nutt, race director of annual ocean swims in Bonaire and Bermuda, says "the trick is to swim parallel to shore and then once out of the rip current, you can safely swim back in." Fighting a current can result in exhaustion or even drowning.

For swimmers prone to motion sickness, Stites' pause for discussion and analysis can be uncomfortable.

"Usually when they are swimming, they don't feel as nauseous as when they're just floating there," Stites says.

Rapid changes in head position can cause vertigo, or an impaired sense of balance and equilibrium. During open water events, severely disoriented swimmers often have to be rescued by patrol boats when they swim out to sea or into the rocks. Motion-sensitive swimmers may benefit from medication or a motion sickness patch that can alleviate discomfort and potentially hazardous vertigo.

In addition to acclimatizing swimmers to the ocean and alerting swimmers to their individual vulnerabilities, the practice session enables swimmers to identify landmarks they can locate from the water to stay on

course during the race. Stites says many swimmers erroneously assume they will have the same point of view in the water as on land. Once in the water, these swimmers have difficulty navigating when large waves or other competitors obscure their view.

In the first leg of the 1-mile race, which starts at the La Jolla Cove, Stites aims toward the mission tile roofs of the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club. Swimming toward the second buoy is a challenge, since only open ocean lies beyond it. The third part of the triangle, heading toward the finish, can be navigated by aiming for buildings above the cliffs in the Cove. And when approaching the finish, a staircase rising above the beach offers a final target.

The Gatorman 3-mile swim roughly involves swimming from the La Jolla Cove to the Scripps Pier and back again. On the outward stretch of the Gatorman, Stites shoots for a set of canyons behind the Scripps Pier, since the pier isn't visible from water level. On the return, he aims for a high rise condominium.

"I, more than most people, lift my head and site" to keep from swimming off-course, says Stites. He lifts his head toward the front whenever he breathes, which is almost every stroke. But he has a head position where even when his eyes are underwater, they are looking forward. In salt water, "when you are floating really high in the water, to me, lifting my head within the stroke cycle is no big deal at all." It doesn't slow him down.

Many open water swims, including the La Jolla Rough Water Swim, do not allow wet suits, since they are considered buoyancy devices. On average, the Pacific Ocean around La Jolla is 69 degrees on the second week of September, when the race is held. Stites recalls a record-cold race back in the mid-90s when the water temperature was a frigid 63 degrees.

Swimming back from the pier, Stites encountered a distressed Billy Daniel, an ultra-lean University of Arizona distance swimmer with less than 5 percent body fat. Suffering from hypothermia, Daniel was blue in the face, disoriented, and treading water. Jim waved his arms until a lifeguard on a rescue board came to Daniel's aid, transporting him to the safety of shore.

"This is a guy who is usually very, very strong, who should have been in the top 10 or 15 overall," Stites says. "If you are skinny and you can't keep that body heat in, you lose control."

Most swimmers find the mass start the most intimidating aspect of open water swimming.

"I've always been a distance swimmer," says Stites. In open water, "you can't really pace the event properly. Unfortunately, at the sound of the gun, everyone takes off in an all-out sprint. That's completely the wrong way to swim a distance event but you have to in order to get with the lead

group and be able to slipstream."

Just like race cars draft off each other, drafting off of other swimmers conserves energy.

"If you swim a steady pace at the beginning, you're not going to be able to latch onto the feet of the fastest swimmers."

Even worse, the pack will swim over you if your pace is too slow — an occurrence which almost any open water swimmer will tell you is a nightmare. You can lose your goggles, be pulled underwater or even break a bone.

At the recent FINA 10K Marathon Swimming World Cup event in Santos, Brazil, Micha Burden's rib was fractured when an adjacent swimmer elbowed her in the face and chest.

Starting in the center and front of the pack, Stites uses up front speed to cling to the fastest swimmers. Drafting is especially important in shorter distances like the La Jolla 1-mile event, says Stites. If you can slipstream off of lead group, it offers the drafting swimmer an opportunity to swim faster than he is accustomed to swimming. If you can draft without making the swimmer aware of your presence, not touching their feet or ankles, you can conserve energy and use that to your advantage, overtaking the exhausted swimmer at the finish, he says.

Stites says when swimmers are fired up, they can behave in an unpredictable manner and he has observed that drafting or lightly touching a swimmer's feet can get fists flying. People's personalities tend to change with all that adrenaline going. When you are literally swimming for your life at the start, there is some fear, and people are out there for themselves, he says.

Staying off to one side or toward the back can be safer in the Gatorman unless you are super fast, Stites says. And by super fast, he's talking about swimmers who train an excess of four hours per day, six days per week.

Usually semi-pro type world class swimmers will be in the middle along with many who shouldn't be there. "A couple of years ago, I did start in the middle and it was a really big mistake," says Stites.

After swimming the La Jolla race for several years, Stites knows the competition. Now that he knows how stronger competitors swim their races, he plans accordingly.

"If I'm swimming with someone who I know has a lot more speed in the pool than I do, then I'm not going to let it come down to the last 100 meters," he says.

Regardless of whether a swimmer trains in the pool or in the ocean, proper training is requisite. Many swimmers enter the Gatorman for a challenge, says Stites, without putting in sufficient yardage in the pool. If you usually swim intervals in the pool for an hour a day, it's going to be tough to swim for 90 minutes

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straight in open ocean. Fortunately, most open water venues offer two or more distances to choose from to accommodate different abilities and training levels.

Some pool swimmers find that open water isn't their cup of tea for one reason or another. Top-10-ranked Masters sprint distance freestyler Barry Roth, who swims for Ford Aquatics, swam the Maui Channel Swim in 2001 under the roughest of conditions.

"Open water spooks me a little bit," he says. "I kept seeing shadows freaking me out, was sure there were tiger sharks out there." He also didn't like "having to fight for my position in the water." He chose to steer clear of open water after that. It is safer for a swimmer to recognize a lack of affinity for open water and bow out, rather than continue with anxiety that could lead to panic.

Other swimmers discover a whole new world in open water. Dianne Wygal-Springer, a Ford Aquatics Masters swimmer who won two butterfly events in the 40-44 age group in the 2007 USMS LC Meters Nationals, bubbles over with enthusiasm about her open water experiences in Hawaii. Her love for open water began eight years ago when she swam on a relay team in the Maui Channel Swim relay with two other women and three men from Lanai to Maui.

She recalls the ocean as "the most blue you have seen in your whole life – it's just indescribable."

Last summer, Wygal-Springer competed in the 1.2-mile King's swim



Ford Aquatics Masters coach Jim Stites takes a hand count of swimmers who will attend a group dinner after the practice swim. by Christopher Ferko

at the Iron Man start in Kona, Hawaii. "That was most amazing swim I ever had because as soon as we got out of the shallow part there were dolphins swimming, 3 feet away."

Many swimmers are feeling that magnetic pull toward open water; it holds the promise of excitement, of beauty, of stepping into a fresh competitive arena. This opportunity

awaits pool swimmers as well as competitors who lost their baby teeth learning to swim in the ocean. And even desert rats. *W*