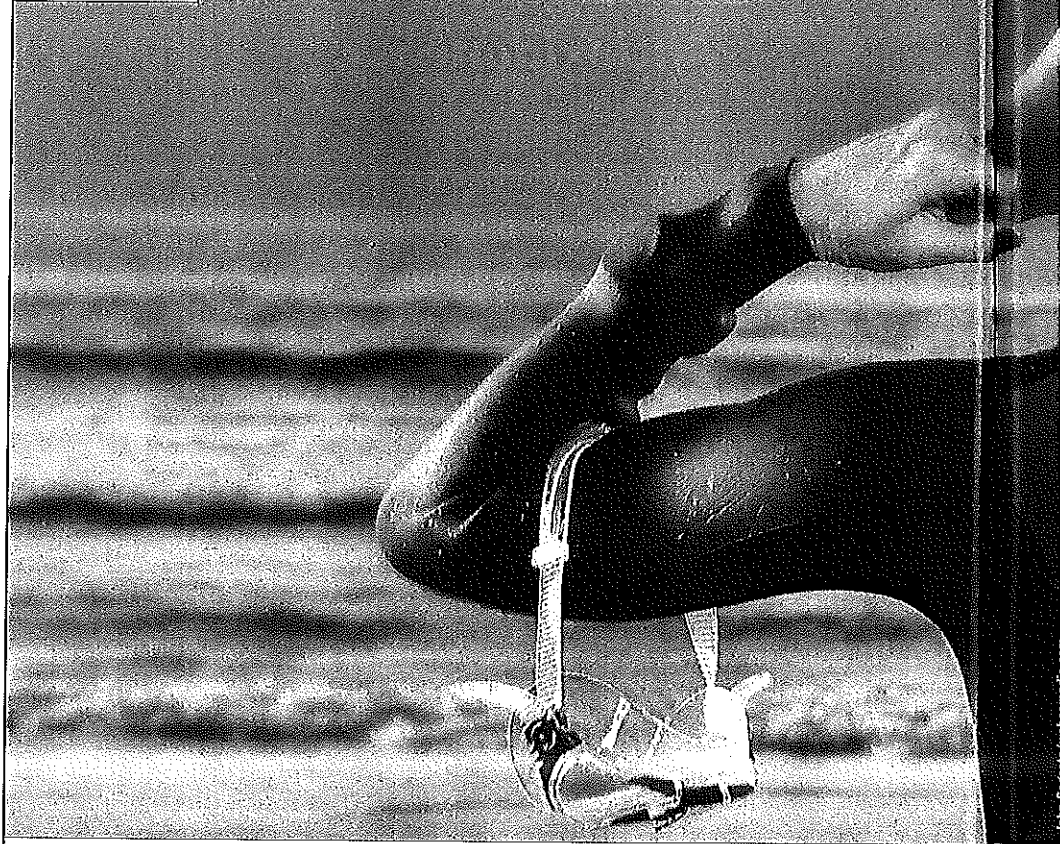


TRIATHLETE'S ●

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2008 BEGINNER'S GUIDE



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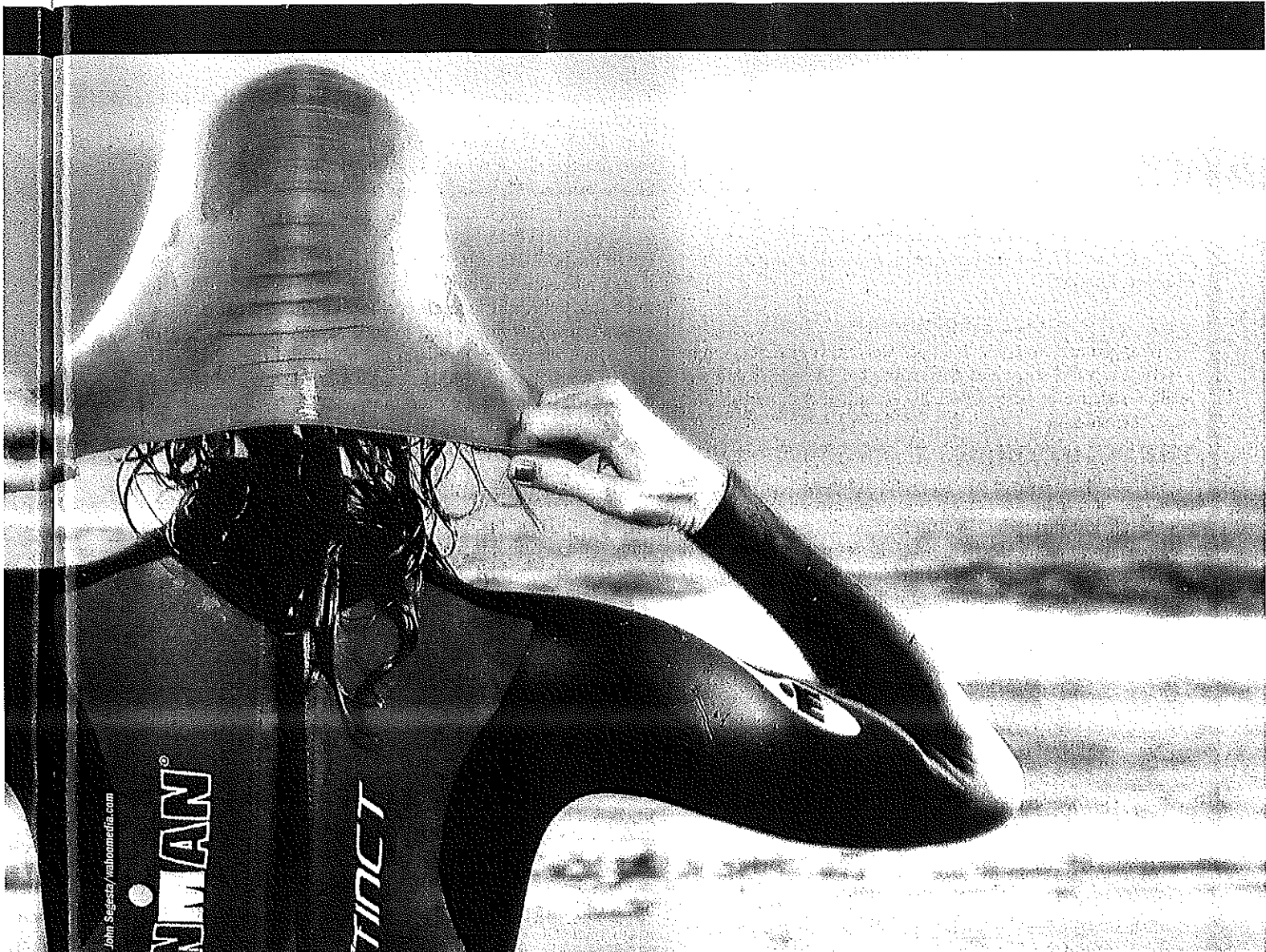


FEAR FACTOR

Six tips for conquering your open-water swim fears

By Jay Prasuhn

For a first-time triathlete, the excitement of your first race is palpable. Friends and family are there, maybe there's an office pool on your finish time. But if there's one area of apprehension, one element that makes the heart pound out of your rubber-clad chest, it's the swim. "What's underwater? What if my goggles fall off? Am I ready? Will I be the last one out?" In the following pages, we have solicited the help of two top coaches: Connecticut-based triathlon coach Al Lyman (pursuit-fitness.com) and Multisports.com coach Roch Frey (multisports.com) to demystify the swim.



GENERAL ANXIETY OVER THE SWIM

It's race day. You've racked your bike and you walk to the water—a chilly lake beset by throngs of nervous athletes awaiting their wave. The horn hasn't even blown and you're already contemplating the warm comfort of your car. Lyman notes that pre- (and during) swim anxiety is the same for nearly everyone. "It's normal to feel anxious and nervous. Everyone in this sport was a beginner and felt that way at one time, regardless of how experienced they might be now, so you're not alone," Lyman says.

THE SOLUTION:

"So many beginners think, 'I don't need to practice; I'll be okay on race day,' but it doesn't work that way," Frey says. "You gotta get out there, force yourself to get out in open water and practice." Frey recommends swimming in the open water as often as three times a week within a month of a race—and bring friends who can join you in the water. "Surround yourself with people who are good swimmers," Frey says. "If you can find someone with a paddleboard or a surf ski, even better, so you can hang onto the board if you need to. But having someone else in the water with you, that's super-valuable in getting over any fears. And even if you swim for just five minutes, each time helps build a more confident athlete."

After each training session or practice, know that you've made strides. "Find at least one thing you did well and pat yourself on the back for that one thing," Lyman says. "Finish every session with a positive affirmation and acknowledgement of your successes and you'll keep coming back. And speak the affirmation as if it is already happening, not waiting to happen in the future. That is: 'I swim like lightning,' not 'I *will* swim like lightning.'"

I WON'T BE READY FOR MY RACE

When we're trying to learn something new or improve our skills, we can get impatient and frustrated with our seemingly slow progress. But you can't rush your progress.

THE SOLUTION:

Lyman notes that adaptation takes time, and you have to give your body the time it requires to learn. "Musculature has to change, body shapes and compositions change, flexibility has to change, neuromuscular coordination has to improve, and all this takes time regardless of whether we are doing something correctly or not," he says. "But over time, if you keep focusing on the fundamentals and if you are patient, you do achieve."

Frey concurs. "You should be able to do the distance of your swim in training," he says. "So if you're doing a sprint, you should be able to swim steady for 15 to 30 minutes."

And so what if you're still just cruising along at the back of the swim? Not only do you have a swim clear of all those people ahead, think of all the people you'll likely pass on the bike and run. "I always tell people there're plenty of people behind them, but more important, the swim is such a small part of the day," Frey says. "What's the big deal if you're last out of the water? It's a lot more fun riding past people once you're out of the water than it is being a faster swimmer and getting passed—trust me, I know!"

THE FEAR: CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Wrapped neck to ankle in a tight wetsuit, your first swim in a wetsuit can feel scary and claustrophobic. "A wetsuit can feel really restrictive at first, especially around the shoulders and arms," Lyman says.

THE SOLUTION: SUIT UP AT THE POOL

Before you even don your suit at the lake or beach, do it at the pool. "You have to be 100-percent comfortable in your wetsuit in a pool first to lose that feeling of claustrophobia," Lyman says. It's at the pool, absent all the distractions of the open water, where you can just feel what a wetsuit can do for you by providing buoyancy and warmth—and that it's really not restrictive.

A drill Lyman suggests is to float. Just float. "Before you do start actually swimming, it's important to learn what water can do for you. "We are often so anxious to move and put pressure on the water that we never truly relax and just let the water support us," Lyman says. "Learn to relax with your head down into the water and feel the water supporting you," Lyman says. "Practice floating and find that perfect balance point. It is an amazing feeling when we get it for the first time." Begin working on your skills in the shallow end of the pool first so you can put your feet down when you feel the need to. As you progress, move to the deeper end of the pool with confidence.

When putting your wetsuit on at the pool—or elsewhere—be sure you put it on correctly or it will restrict your arm movement. "Pull up from the thighs and hips to give you plenty of freedom around the hips," says Lyman, "then pull up the torso, and especially pull up on the arms and from the tops of the shoulders to relieve any tightness around the arms and shoulders." Don't like the feel of it? Lyman suggests trying a different suit, noting that often retailers have suits for rent, so feel free to test suits to find the one that feels best.

THE FEAR: DIFFICULTY BREATHING

When you get out of breath, the natural instinct is to stop, pull your head out of the water and breathe. But swimming requires that you're comfortable with your face in the water—a major source of anxiety for many new swimmers. "It's the build-up of carbon dioxide in our lungs that drives our perceived need for oxygen," Lyman says. "When we're anxious and nervous, we naturally tend to want to breathe more often and get more air. As we get more oxygen in, carbon dioxide can build up, which in turn makes us think that we need more air—so we breathe in more, and so on to the point we are soon hyperventilating." This is the downward negative spiral. You may gulp in the occasional bit of water and may cough a bit, but it's quick to pass. "It's very important to learn that focusing on the exhale and breathing out is the key to learning to relax," Lyman says.

THE SOLUTION: EXHALE UNDERWATER

Exhale through your nose and mouth with your face in the water, taking in air only when you roll to the side during your

stroke. Your face doesn't even need to be totally out of the water, since your nose creates a meniscus—a sort of bowl just a bit below water level—where your mouth can find a breath of air. You can even practice this at home with a big bowl of water—blow bubbles to exhale with your face underwater, turn your head to the side to sneak a breath, then return to face down to exhale.

Once you're comfortable in your kitchen, Frey suggests moving to the pool. He also advises practicing bilateral breathing—that is, alternate breathing to each side. "In the race, you'll want to be able to breathe to another side if you have the sun in your eyes, a buoy, a swimmer next to you," says Frey. "Focus only on the exhale when your face is in the water, and the inhale takes care of itself," he says. "As you exhale more deeply and forcefully, you will naturally become more relaxed, less anxious and realize you are not out of breath after all."

THE FEAR: EXTERNAL FORCES

From waves to sea creatures to fellow athletes, external forces are a part of any open-water swim. "Expecting these kinds of things and deciding in advance how you will deal with them is key," Lyman says.

THE SOLUTION: PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Practice at the pool with friends tapping at your feet and bumping you. Also practice backstroking at the pool; it's the perfect break when rolling waves might tire you out, giving you a chance to catch your breath and gather your composure.

Once race day comes, remember the swim is only a small percentage of any triathlon and serves as a warm-up for the bike and run, so take the time you need to avoid stress. "Be sure to take the time to do a short warm-up swim just to get those first jitters out of your system," Lyman advises. "It will make the actual race start easier because you will already be familiar with the environment."

Just before the start, Lyman suggests that you seed yourself honestly and be willing to start off to the side or behind the main pack to avoid the contact and chaos of a frenzied swim start. How? Think about the swim course. Is the first buoy a right-hand turn? If so, the best place to be is at the back, off to the left of the group. As swimmers reach the right-turn buoy, they'll coalesce to the right and create a traffic jam of arms and legs.

"Stay outside, wide at the buoys," Frey concurs. "It's better to swim a bit longer and go outside than to go inside and contend with a bunch of people." If you're unsure, ask the race director or experienced athletes the best place for a beginner to be; they'll be able to point out the best place to avoid contact.

And when that horn blows? While we all get excited and want a great start to the day, novices may need to let those arms and legs go on ahead to allow for a stress-free, clear path through the swim. So as the horn blows, give yourself a second, walk in calmly and find some clear water ahead.

"It's okay to let the main pack jump out first, and then follow behind," Lyman says. "The time you will lose is only a small fraction of the race and simply doesn't matter. Let them go."

If someone knocks your goggles loose, simply clear them of water and continue on. Someone tapping your leg? Swim away to the left or right. Caught in the middle? "You may be getting banged from the left and right, but you just gotta suck it up," says Frey. Look up for a second, find an open spot and slowly veer to it and out of the melee. By the same token, be mindful of fellow competitors and avoid banging into them.

John Seigrist/visionmedia.com

THE FEAR: BIG WAVES

Open water can muster up a scary challenge: waves. These ominous walls of crashing water can thump you, or you can just let them thunder right over you.

THE SOLUTION: USE YOUR DISCRETION

For those who show-up on race day and still haven't done an open-water swim, doing it on a day with overhead surf may not be the right time to begin. The race may have cost you \$80, but discretion is the better part of valor. Save it for another day and try to get the entry rolled over to another event, perhaps a duathlon attached to the race. "If you're already timid about the race and there's big surf, don't put yourself in that position. There's no shame in backing out and saving it for another day," Frey says. "At some of the sprint races we put on, we give athletes the opportunity to skip the swim and join the race as the swimmers come out. They may not get an official time, but they get to take part without putting themselves in danger."

But if you're ready to play in the waves, Frey explains big waves are easy to contend with—just duck-dive the wave, and go deep, where the turbulent action of the wave is virtually nil. He suggests diving hands first immediately before the wave

approaches, reaching for the sandy bottom. Then wait as the turbulence passes overhead. "A lot of beginners pop up too soon," Frey says. "Go down, grab the sand for a second or two, then push off forward and up, not just up." By then, the wave has roared over you and passed, leaving you ready to continue your swim out. As subsequent waves come, just swim right underneath them, letting the turbulence pass you overhead.

Yes, it can be a challenge, but the swim doesn't need to be the scariest part of a triathlon (and of course, what would triathlon be without its challenges?). As you walk down to the water's edge, remember that you can set your own pace in the swim, complete it with a smile and head to the bike with the perfect warm-up for the rest of your race.

NEVERBE SWIM WORKOUT

Flip turns? 1:30 base minus five? Taking off at the bottom? Forget it. Organized swim workouts are a great way to build fitness, but for the first timer, they can be downright confusing. Al Lyman has constructed an easy-to-follow first-timer's swim program that will not only get you comfortable with the water but will also build your swim fitness. ▲

7 STEPS TO GET YOU STARTED

Activity	Distance	Description	Rest
Prone balance: Arms at sides	Do this 4 times over half the length of the pool	Kick very slowly on your front with your arms by your sides, and just float. Let the air out slowly through your nose, and when you need a breath, relax and let your legs drop gradually before lifting your head. This will help you stay loose. Your hips should float at the surface of the water if you are balanced correctly. Get your head down and your hips up. After half the length of the pool, go back and repeat from the wall.	20 seconds after each trip up and back
Prone balance: Arms at sides	Do this for 2 lengths of the pool	Like in the first set, kick very slowly on your front with your arms by your sides and just float. The difference here is when you need a breath lift your head momentarily to get the breath and then put it back down and reestablish balance and relaxation. Go the length of the pool. Let the air out slowly through the nose only. Work on keeping your kick consistent and avoid sculling when taking the breath.	30 seconds after each length
Prone balance: Arms in front	Do this 4 times over half the length of the pool	Same distance as the first set above but with your arms in front in a streamlined position. Remember to breathe out slowly through your nose.	20 seconds after each trip up and back
Prone balance: Arms in front	Do this for 2 lengths of the pool	Same as above, but this time go the entire length of the pool.	30 seconds after each length
Add in the arms	Do this 4 times over half the length of the pool	Add 4 to 6 relaxed arm strokes to the above. Note: do not attempt to breathe yet while stroking. It will disturb the sensation of relaxation you need to feel. Can you feel your hips drop at any time? If so, relax your head down. This helps by counter-balancing the weight of your arms. After those 4-6 strokes, return to the wall and repeat, all in the shallow end.	20 seconds after each trip up and back
Increase your distance	Do this for 4 lengths of the pool	Same as above, but this time take as many strokes as you need to go the entire length of the pool.	30 seconds after each length
Swim	Do this for 4 laps of the pool	You are now ready to swim a full lap (i.e. 2 lengths). Continue to focus on breathing out through your nose as you keep your head down and your hips up. When you reach the wall, turn around and come back to your starting point.	45 seconds to 1 minute after each lap

At this point, take 1 to 2 minutes rest, and then if you have time, go back to the beginning and repeat the entire progression, but don't deliberate on any drill or swim for too long. Your goal is always complete relaxation with no tension. Be patient and persistent and have fun.