

## Ironman Open Water Swimming—Tips to Get Faster

By Marc Evans

An Ironman by its very nature call for workouts objectively aimed at completing the distance in the best time possible—and the swim is no less important. For many the swim is less important—a nuisance; yet I consider a strong swim *sets up* a great race. Pool swimming is different as the varying conditions in open water create an array of physical demands.

This article will help you get faster in an Ironman distance open water swim by simulating race situations. Practice these tips during race preparation—about eight weeks before an Ironman. Do so with companion triathletes and you'll be *on course* for a PR Ironman swim.

First, open water workouts are more productive when you include the deliberate practicing of *drafting*. 2003 World age group champion Holly Nybo with over 100 triathlons including a top 20 placing in Hawaii and overall winner of Ironman Canada knows her best swims are achieved by "...assertively defending my space and that's right behind the feet ahead...I bust my butt in the early stages to get position...consciously looking for the best opportunity..."

Drafting reduces energy expenditure by a marked reduction of *resistive forces* against a swimmer. And lessening this resistance unequivocally fosters faster open water swims. The water pressures immediately in front of a *drafting* swimmer are higher than the pressure behind the lead swimmer. This pressure differential *pulls* the trailing swimmer to the lower pressure—swimming behind requires less effort.

Drafting another swimmer may set aside valuable energy for the trailing swimmer. In 1989, Mark Allen continually tapped Dave Scott's feet (not recommended) and this really "pissed" Dave as he described to me the most competitive Hawaiian Ironman in

history. Perhaps, it was this energy savings deposit Allen (the winner) discovered following 8 hours 9 minutes of racing—a mere 58 seconds difference at the finish line?

Drafting reduces the trailing swimmer's effort and, if the right feet are selected, reduce swim times. The start of the swim sets the stage. Very simply, the smartest open water swimmers draft slightly faster competitors by getting out fast. And they do this by assertively pursuing feet and swimming through the *slipstream* created by swimmer in front.

For each scenario that follows practice going over beach run ups, in water treading, standing with water at the knees and waist, and dive starts for the professionals. You'll need to coordinate the lead and trail swimmers roles. Two up to six swimmers works well in developing an assortment of skills. Practicing in open water under varying conditions improves performance by familiarity.

The lead swimmer (a different colored bright swim cap) holds a line and chosen pace. The *trailing* swimmer starts in various positions and time delays behind the *lead* swimmer(s). First, practice each thirty seconds to a minute before progressing to longer intervals. Start out building pace gradually to a strong intensity (not a sprint) until drafting for up to 400 meters or about five to seven minutes (or set up a course). Slower swimmers can use fins to lead out faster swimmers.

### **Right, Left and Center Starts**

The trailing swimmer(s) start on each position above *targeting* one swimmer to draft. A strong gradually effort is made to *attach* to those *feet* until in the draft. Remain in the draft for the above distances or time.

### **Hypoxic (breath control)**

Sometimes in normal breathing patterns are interrupted in open water. Taking a mouthful of water or finding *no air* as water is disarrayed from kicks, swells and the close quarters of flailing arms and legs. Some non breath swimming practice may

help. Hypoxic training had its origins in mountaineering in an attempt to simulate high altitude training. In swimming, hypoxic swimming is commonly used as a *breath holding technique*. Holding the breath elevates carbon dioxide and the urge to breathe increases correspondingly.

Try drafting breathing every second, fourth and sixth (or third and fifth strokes) strokes. With fewer breaths the intensity increases along with elevated carbon dioxide. As a result, securing a draft and managing intensity is very important.

### **Weak Side Breathing**

One more important open water skill is the ability to breathe on the weak or offside. Those swimmers who effectively breathe bilaterally are able to switch comfortably as conditions require. This maintains a streamlined body position, navigation, and technique and to be sure reduces the amount of water inadvertently taken in while breathing. Practice weak side breathing by taking a breath each third and fifth stroke or swim the time, distance or course breathing on the weak side only. Swim in the draft then alongside the lower legs and returning to the draft alternating the timing of each breath.

### **Out Hard and Settle Down**

To be sure, the start of any open water swim is critical. In the Ironman distance losing the draft in the early stages can cost significant more time and position. I want my athletes to get out of the water in the best position possible. To do so, they must *draft* and *hunt feet* from the beginning. Practice going out hard and settling in behind the feet or off the shoulder of another swimmer.

Practicing these and other swim situations prepare you for the open water where a pool simply cannot compare. You'll gain confidence and competence that will carry you through to your personal best Ironman swim.