



National Triathlon Training Centre
Centre National d'Entrainement
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"Building Excellence in Multi-Sport"

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Open Water Tactics – The Start

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Racing in the open water can challenge even the fastest pool swimmer. The number of decisions and variables is large. Water conditions can vary from cold and very wavy, to a glass smooth lake. The start itself can have from 20 to 100 racers at a time. Your warm-up may have lasted 2 to 10 minutes. Depending on your ranking you may or may not have a good line to the first turn. The start may be from a pontoon, a running beach start, a deep water start or a waist deep start. In this article we will focus on the running beach start and the first 50-400 meters of the swim.

The first 50 meters of any race presents a number of challenges. The swimming stroke changes considerably when you are being bashed from all sides, with the water is churning white with little or no smooth water to grab on to.

The issues for this segment of the race are: (beach start)

1. Anticipate the start. Getting even a slight lead on the run-in can provide you with clean water to swim in during the crucial first 25 meters.
2. Learn to use the shallow water to your benefit. As each step (keep the knees high over the water at this point) takes you deeper into the water you must prepare for the launch step. It resembles the hitch step high jumpers use on the 3rd and 2nd last steps prior to the jump. The hitch transfers momentum timing to the final leg push-off. The resulting increase in 'jump' allows the athlete to travel further over the water on the dive instead of through it. The jump occurs when the water is just above the knee. You will need to practice this sequence many times in order to feel comfortable.
3. Once you have left the ground, tuck the head in-between the arms and reach forward in a perfectly streamlined position. The speed you gained from the launch sequence must be maintained through the entry. Kick soon after entry and when acceleration has reached maximum, you are stretched out just below the water surface. If you are efficient at dolphin kick try using it for a few meters underwater. Begin the swimming strokes.
4. The first 25 to 50 meters are done at nearly full speed. Maintain a stroke rate near your functional maximum. Keep your head down except to check positioning. Use the kick near full effort also. At the same time, try to remain calm and relaxed. You can swim fast without breath holding and body tension. Keep the stroke rate up but loose. Do not over-accelerate the strokes. Apply clean smooth power to the water. This procedure will keep your heart rate from rising too quickly.

5. If there is a swell in the ocean you will need to practice moving through the waves at the start and during the race. A slight dolphin action helps transition through each wave. On the start you will have to assess each wave and how to get through it. On the run in, as long as the water is knee deep or lower you should practice jumping over and then launching into the dive. If a wave breaks in front of you, dive through the middle of it and stay under water using a dolphin kick until the wave has well passed.
6. Once you are past the critical first 50 meters, if you intend to keep up to the leaders, you must 'hurt' the next 300 or so. You will find that most people will settle into the race pace early and lose momentum too soon. Remember you have the last 1000 meters to flush out any lactate. When 300-400 meters have passed look around for someone to draft on. Settle in on their hip and draft away!