



FACE FORWARD:  
CONFRONT YOUR  
OPEN-WATER FEAR

# Open-water Anxiety

FOLLOW THESE FOUR STEPS TO GET RACE-READY  
By Lance Watson

Swimming in open water is an instinctively foreign experience. Humans are land-based mammals, and while some veteran competitors have come to prefer salt water over chlorine, it's natural for many novice triathletes to feel safer in a pool when faced with the daunting mass start of an open-water swim.

Regardless of ability, triathletes should prepare specifically for open-water competition and adopt a strategy that maximizes their safety, race experience and performance. The key to a successful and enjoyable open-water swim is a race plan that can keep your head in the game—and in the water—at all times.

Follow these four steps to stay grounded, figuratively, when the going gets tough in an open-water race.

**1) LEARN FROM THE PAST AND PREDICT RACE-DAY ANXIETY**  
Prepare mentally for the race by imagining what it will be like the morning of the event. Consider your surrounding environment—how the morning air will smell, the buzz of the transition area and the air and water temperatures. Think about your feelings race morning. Will you have butterflies in your stomach—and the nerves and adrenaline that accompany them? Make a commitment

to yourself beforehand to be calm and composed on race day, even if negative self-talk or feelings of worry manage to wiggle in. It's normal for most athletes to have feelings of self-doubt and anxiety, but the key to success is how we process these feelings.

If you start to feel uncomfortable during the swim, re-center by remembering how you felt in a past situation when you were in total control, either in your professional life or during

a past sporting experience. This state of "flow," when you are completely engaged in what you are doing, is optimal for performance. By recalling past experiences, remind yourself that you are capable of creating this state of mind. Flow is not a fluke, so strive to achieve it and take ownership of the mindset.

**2) CREATE A PRE-RACE ROUTINE**  
It is important to develop and practice a race-day warm-up routine in training. Realize that you will probably not have access to such things as paddles, pull buoys and fins on race day, and don't include them when formulating a pre-race warm-up routine. Choose drills for warm-up that will make you feel fast, efficient and loose in the water.

On race day, make sure to get to the race venue early to set up your transition area. Also include enough time to do a 300- to 400-meter warm-up in the water, which, coupled with the physical preparation, helps settle unruly nerves. During your warm-up, don't be afraid to do a few pick-ups at race pace to open the arteries and get your muscles firing for the start. These pick-ups are even more important if the water is cooler than usual, so plan for a more vigorous warm-up in cold conditions.

Before the race starts, take a few moments to say a handful of self-affirmations. Remind yourself that you have done all the training necessary and are ready to compete. Think about the way you felt in some of your best workouts and promise yourself you'll remain calm if you get bumped during the race or need to swim to the outside to regroup. If it's your first open-water race, have a backup plan if your anxiety gets overwhelming.

Finally, pick an accurate and safe starting point. Beginners should start near the back of the pack, while more advanced swimmers who feel they can either get out in front or take advantage of drafting should start closer to the front. In the last few moments before the gun goes off, set your focus on the first 50 meters of the swim to avoid distracting thoughts and last-minute worries.

**3) SEGMENT THE COURSE TO PREPARE FOR THE EFFORT**  
Breaking the course into manageable pieces is easier mentally and physically. As part of your mental preparation, picture how you will feel physically at the beginning, middle and end of the swim. Be realistic so you can be ready (and excited!) for the work at hand.

Before the start, make a mental note of what you'll see during the swim. Does one side or position have smaller waves or less current? Is one side closer to the first turn? Are there any holes or rocks along the starting area? Are there any dangers such as boats, rocks or coral