

OCEAN and OPEN WATER SWIMS

Guidelines for Swimmers and Organisers



Written by John Bamberry; edited by Paul Ellercamp, March-April 2013

OCEAN and OPEN WATER SWIMS

Guidelines for Swimmers and Organisers¹

Summary

This guideline is written to provide basic tips for ocean and open water swimmers, mainly targeting those wishing to get into the sport. More seasoned swimmers may find useful tips or strategies here.

It also provides guidance for organising committees to ensure events run smoothly and meet the objectives of the swim and the needs of the swimmers.

Swimmers:-

1. Come prepared.
2. Follow reasonable instruction from volunteers and safety personnel.
3. Accept rules and conditions and understand risks you are taking.
4. Be aware that there are no central rules in ocean swimming. Rules vary from swim to swim. This can be confusing, but it also reflects the different “personalities” of the swims.
5. Ask questions if you are unsure of any detail.
6. Respect the safety of others.
7. Be honest with your abilities and understand your limitations.
8. Do not deliberately hinder others in the swim by blocking or kicking, and take reasonable care not to injure others, particularly when rounding buoys.
9. Do not be overtly aggressive. Ocean swimming can be a body contact sport, especially when you’re swimming in a peloton. When someone knocks or hits or kicks you, it’s usually unintentional, so react accordingly.
10. Seek help if you need it; stop to assist people in distress.
11. Respect and applaud the efforts of all those involved in the event.
12. Provide constructive feedback to organisers.
13. Leave nothing behind but your footprints.

Organisers:-

1. Risk-assess the safety hazards and plan risk-mitigation strategies.
2. Plan the event early, considering the resources required to undertake the task, the date and time, the facilities, venue and details of the course.
3. Obtain permission and licences from relevant authorities early.
4. Provide clear and adequate information on entry forms/web forms.
5. Consider safety of swimmers, safety personnel, volunteers and spectators.
6. Lay out the swim course logically, providing clear information for swimmers in entry forms/websites, and posters or displays on the day.
7. Set out registration, start-finish and other facilities in a manner that allows swimmers to be processed efficiently.
8. Brief volunteers and safety personnel.
9. Run the event on time and consider the need for food and drink facilities.
10. Determine results efficiently and quickly and run presentations on time.
11. After the event, hold a de-brief, look at what worked well, what went wrong, and be open to feedback.

¹ Written by John Bamberry (21 Clare Close, Eleebana, NSW) ; Edited by Paul Ellercamp www.oceanswims.com

Introduction

More than 80 per cent of Australians live near the coast, so it's no wonder that ocean and open water swimming events are extremely popular. Australia's extensive and beautiful coastline offers many opportunities for the sport. The variety of swim distances on offer is as variable as the conditions that may prevail on the day. Large swim events can attract swimmers in their thousands and many spectators. Both place strain on the organisation, the environment and the facilities available to host the event.

No central authority exists for ocean swimming. Events have sprung up spontaneously as fund-raisers run usually by community groups. As such, ocean swimming has no central code of conduct or any central standards or protocols. This might be considered one of its beauties.

Surf life saving clubs, swim clubs and triathlon clubs organise swim events to raise funds for those clubs. They rely heavily on the efforts of volunteers, who may be experienced hands at running such events, or they may be new to this organisational challenge. Likewise, swimmers range from novices, just in it for the fun of it, or seasoned competitors, often using the swims as a staging post to further their ability.

SWIMMERS

Ocean Swimmers

Ocean swimmers range from young Nippers to octogenarians, come in all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life. For the most part, they all share a passion for swimming, whether it is for personal challenge, fun or competition (or all of the above).

The following provides some guidance for swimmers, largely for those undertaking their first swims. How this guidance relates to you will depend on your swimming background, but this article is written with the "average Joe and Joelene" in mind.

Many Australians are brought up at the beach. Our paths of learning surf sports are very different but, for most of us, we would have swum our paddled out the back and been familiar with the changing surf conditions. Saying that swimming in the ocean is "somewhat" different to a swim in a pool is an understatement.

No black line sits on the sea bed for you to follow, and you may be subjected to tides, currents, rips, waves, varying sea-bed depths, sea life, surf craft, salt, stingers and tsunamis. Ocean swimmers adapt their swimming style to the conditions, with a need to navigate, dealing with swimming in a pack, passing others or being passed, handling surf and all the other variables the ocean can throw up.

Thinking about open water swimming?

The swimming season for ocean and open water swimming events in eastern Australia runs from October to June with the majority of swims held during the summer months. Many swimmers swim informally all year 'round, and more events are being held at non-traditional times, such as autumn and early winter.

Swimmers planning to do their first ocean or open water swim can look up event calendars such as those published on www.oceanswims.com and local tourism websites to find out what is on offer. Swim, triathlon and multi-sport club or promotional websites may also provide good sources of event information.

When undertaking an open water or ocean swim for the first time, consider your surf skills, your fitness level and any apprehension that you may have. Passing over the shark nets for the first time can be daunting. You may simply need to get use to swimming with others and with no line on the bottom to guide you. Start small if you are unsure, have a swim in a sheltered bay, do a short race or just do a solo swim at your local beach past the break.

Consider having a go at a number of swims throughout the year. No two swims are the same as conditions vary and your first experience will not always be your best. During the season, find your favourites and provide feedback to organisers if you think the event is poorly scheduled or organised. You may wish to consider having a go at swims at the start and end of the seasons; enjoy the cooler water and get a kick-start to the season.

Talk to other swimmers about swimming and find out what they enjoy doing. Don't be shy; ocean swimmers dwell on the discussion of the swims; the pre-race discussion of the course and tactics, the post swim analysis, the critique of the event, the appraisal of the course, etc. They do tend to go on, so breaking the ice is easy. Research the internet to read swim reviews or feedback on what others are saying on a particular swim event. Contact the organisers if you have questions beforehand. You may also want to consider getting yourself on mailing lists for swim events.

Entry for swims

Most swims allow on-line entry and on-the-day entries, which usually incur a late fee. A few swims have cut off dates for entry and no on-the-day entries.

Entry into the swims will require that you sign a waiver. When you sign waivers, you need to understand the risks that you are taking. Enter and register for events early as numerous late entries commonly delay swim events. Early entries assist organisers in planning for the event by providing an indication of numbers of swimmers. Be aware that most swims in Australia are run as fund-raising events for surf life saving clubs, which are registered charities. Those clubs face considerable expense just to arrive at swim day. It's convention that, if an event is cancelled or postponed, entries received are not refundable, because the organisers still have costs to cover.

Don't expect the World in every swim; inaugural and smaller events may not cater to everyone's expectations. Depending on the organisation (or size) of the event, all services, including the provision of water, might not be provided, so come prepared. A simple checklist for swimmers might include;-

- swimmers
- goggles
- sunscreen
- petroleum jelly (for chaffing)
- water

Goggle care

Your goggles are the most personal item in your ocean swimming ensemble. You must look after them. If you look after your goggles, then there is a much better chance that they will retain their clarity, security, and anti-fog qualities. After each use, you should –

- Rinse your goggles in fresh water
- Let them air-dry
- Store them in their original container and
- Every so often, wash them gently in detergent or shampoo, rinse in fresh water, then air-dry.

Anti-fog spray, spit or the tiniest drop of shampoo may prevent goggles from fogging up. (Be careful with the application of shampoo!). Some people love View Goggle Goo. Others just use their own spit. We've found that, if the goggles are dry, and we're dry, then our spit into the inside of dry goggles, washed around then rinsed out, is all you need to activate the anti-fog properties.

On the Day

Parking arrangements are not the responsibility of the swim organisers, but often the organisers may make specific arrangements with councils on the day. Swimmers should consider limitations on parking, the possibility of being fined if parked illegally, and acknowledge that such things are likely to be beyond the control of the swim event organisers. Even if organisers make arrangements with the council, this generally allows only free parking, not illegal parking. You still must comply with general parking rules.

If the swim event has a start and finish in different locations, organisers often arrange transport and security for your gear, and yourself between the start/finish. Consider the security and size of your belongings; a zip up small back pack is ideal.

On the day of the swim event, you should allow enough time to get to the swim, park, register and kit up. Registration usually involves getting your name ticked off (if pre-registered) or your entry and payment received for entries on the day, receipt of a swim cap and application of your number (and/or timing band). Do not put sunscreen on where your numbers will be written or wipe sunscreen over your numbers, as it will erase or smudge them. Sunscreen will ruin a black texta.

Late swimmers can hold up the event. You will be more relaxed if you prepare properly. You may wish to warm up, have a chat to others, or allow time to study the conditions.

Where possible, study pre-race published information on the swim course. Study the course plan and relate the plan to layout on the day. Listen carefully to the race briefing and seek clarification when unsure. The race briefing is often hard to hear, and requires your full attention. Don't be embarrassed to ask questions.

Help other swimmers understand the course. Most swimmers are happy to help if you don't understand the course. Encourage newer swimmers by sharing your knowledge.

Provide feedback to the organisers about the venue, particularly any safety hazards that you encounter.

Swimmers should:-

- Come prepared,
- Accept the rules and conditions of the swim event,
- Follow any reasonable instruction from volunteers and safety personnel,
- Securely fasten timing bands if supplied and double-check them,
- Share your knowledge of the event with newer swimmers,
- Bring water and food for recovery.

At the Start

Swim starts may be mass starts or wave starts, based on age groups, gender-based, or a combination of both. The starts may be in deep water, or with a short run into the water. The start of swims is by some form of starter (whistle, verbal, hooter, a starting gun) and is often counted down. Ocean swimming is a popular sport and you may well be in crowded swims. Regional swims are smaller and more relaxed.

Swimmers should:-

- Respect the safety of others; treat other people with the same courtesy that you would like them to treat you
- Not stand at the front of the start line if you are a weak swimmer; you are likely to be pummelled and get in the way;
- Not stand at the front if you are small or a junior swimmer; you are also likely to be pummelled;
- Consider starting towards the back of the pack if you are a first time swimmer, and watch what the swimmers ahead of you do, including the route they take through the break;
- Study the depth of water before the swim; you may drop into a gutter, or find that you can wade some distance;
- Study the swell to see where the sets are breaking, and watch what swimmers in early waves do, or where/how they get carried;
- If you know how to identify rips and sweeps, study them to see if you can use them to advantage;
- Understand your own abilities and limitations;
- Clear the start area after warming up to allow the event to start on time;
- Be mindful of starting arrangements made for disabled swimmers.

In the Swim

During the swim, it is rare, unless you are extremely cautious, a wayward navigator, or very slow, not to have some interaction with other swimmers. The most common place for interaction is the convergence rounding marker buoys. You will often find people at your side, swimming with converging paths.

You should expect contact with other swimmers.

Swimmers should:-

- Respect the Safety of others
- Be honest with your abilities and understand your limitations
- Not deliberately hinder others in the swim by blocking or kicking
- Take reasonable care not to injure others, particularly when rounding buoys
- Not be overtly aggressive and do not interfere with other swimmers
- Seek help if you need it; stop to assist people in distress
- Swim around slower swimmers (not over them);
- Swim wide if you are a slower swimmer, to avoid being swum over;
- Swim wide around buoys if you may cause injury (using a wide breaststroke kick when in crowded conditions near buoys);
- Not cut buoys - this is cheating;
- Swim to your own ability; don't bludge on the efforts of others. Drafting is bludging, because you are using others' efforts to get yourself through the water.
- If you do draft, do not sit on another's feet so that you regularly, often or continually touch their feet. This is invasion of personal space. It's a form of assault and is grossly discourteous.
- If you catch a wave in, try choosing a clear path that avoids clashing with other swimmers.

Getting out

Getting through the break fast is a skill. You can practise this doing "ins and outs" at the beach. In shallow water, you can wade or lift the legs high and wide to get through the water. At waist height, you may dolphin dive, and dive under waves, being careful not to hit bottom. That said, when you dive under waves, grab hold of the sandy bottom to give you a bit more resistance to a swell pushing you back towards the beach. When you start to swim, and are confronted with waves, dive under them, deeply enough to avoid the turmoil of the break. Keep your head down, chin on chest. Lifting your head under water creates resistance and offers you up as a target to the onrushing waves. Maintain your streamline as much as possible.

Swimmers should learn to navigate their way through the course. Good navigation is essential to improving your times. Don't assume that all swimmers are heading in the right direction. You will develop your own skills in navigation around the course. In many events, you may find that the course set out is shorter or longer than the advertised distance, even up to hundreds of metres. After you turn a buoy, look up mid-stroke to sight the next turning mark or way-point. Rely on your own navigation, not the often wayward direction of others. In a swell, you may be able to sight a point on land which is higher than the buoy, and which will help you maintain direction even when you can't see the buoy.

At the start, you will be aiming for the first can or buoy. Experience will teach you to head in the right direction from the start and once you are past the surf zone, you will likely sight the first buoy. You are also likely to sight water safety sitting a little off line to guide you.

Don't look where you are going with every stroke. An occasional stroke akin to that used by water polo players ("heads-up") is enough, or you can peer forward with your goggles just above the water level. If you attempt to navigate with every stroke, your body and legs will sink as you hold your head up, slowing you down. While there are no black lines on the bottom, you can follow the bubble trails of other swimmers ahead of you, provided you trust that they are heading in the right direction. Once you gain enough confidence (and strength) you will find that sighting where you are going is only required occasionally (six to twelve strokes). When you have passed the first buoy, sight the next one, and make a bee-line for it.

Trust your judgement. Some swimmers are like sheep and will follow some random swimmer heading in the wrong direction. Passing slower swimmers presents its own challenges. You may catch up swimmers from earlier waves; they may be swimming awry, and you could well see their bubbles before you see them. Pick a line to accelerate past them; you will need to judge their speed and direction, and the potential for converging swimmers, to avoid becoming a swimmer-in-a-sandwich.

Swimming in open water requires often changing stroke, to match the conditions: the swell, chop, wind, nearby swimmers. Learn to breathe bilaterally (both sides), since you may find wind-blown chop constantly hitting your face from one direction. Open water swimmers tend to have slightly higher arms and a quicker hand entry to pierce through waves. Swimming through bouncing water is a skill that is acquired by practice and not by lessons in a pool. But remember to maintain your streamline. The more your body is like a "torpedo", the easier will be your course through the water.

Rounding buoys

Swimming around buoys is more difficult when the angle of turn is sharper, or more acute. For shallow turns, you are likely to continue normal freestyle; otherwise you may have to do a few strokes to one side to get around, with slight twist of the body. If you breaststroke around buoys, you are likely to kick someone in the head.

Drafting

Drafting is a common practice in swimming, although it's seen by many as cheating, and bludging on the efforts of others. At the elite level, swimmers take turns to lead and turns to draft. That way, each puts in effort, and each gets an opportunity to "rest". In ocean swimming, it's gratuitous, because drafters rarely then offer the opportunity to the target to draft on them. Usually, a drafter sits on another swimmer's heels, then pulls out near the end, when they're fresher, to swim and run past to the finish. This is why it's regarded as bludging and cheating. Often, the drafter will swim so close to the target swimmer that they continually stroke their feet. This is rude, discourteous, disrespectful, an invasion of personal space and a form of assault.

That said, drafting offers advantage in many sports, including ocean swimming, and cannot be effectively policed or stamped out. The best that can be done is to encourage a culture that discourages cheating and bludging behaviour. If you are drafting, then you should not interfere with the victim swimmer by touching their feet. Swimmers who constantly hit the feet of swimmers in front of them are displaying no respect for the swimmer in front. Feet tapping – heel wafting -- drives the swimmer in front to distraction. Avoid doing it, and you will avoid confrontation.

The finish

Finishing through the surf requires more skill than starting. The quickest way out is to bodysurf, but experience tells most that if you hang around waiting for a wave, you will be likely to lose many places. You have to be in the right place at the right time. Many swimmers, too, don't feel, by the time they reach the back of the break, that they have the breath to chase and hold a wave. You can ride a broken wave in if you streamline with the wave. If you have studied the surf at the exit beforehand, you may realise that a bee-line for the finish is not always the best line. You may find a break to give you a bit of a ride in. Avoid coming in through rips, because they will push you back out again. Look for banks and come in with breaking waves. Even if you don't catch a wave, the break will push you towards the shore.

Don't stop swimming until you can touch the bottom. The water depth always looks shallower than it really is, and if you stop to stand, you may find that you can't. You then have the choice of dolphin diving, running or wading through shallow water. Beware of that last dump of a wave onto the shore. It can be dangerous.

At the finish

The swim finishes will involve running/walking up the beach or shore to a finish line and chute.

The procedures at the finish are different depending on the timing procedures involved. The finish line can be congested if swimmers congregate in these areas. They should clear the finishing area quickly to allow following swimmers a clear run through -

- Don't get carried away at crowded finish lines;
- Don't congregate on the finish line, move through the finishing chutes/time recording areas in a quick, orderly manner;
- Congratulate fellow swimmers on their achievements;
- Seek assistance if you need it.
- Applaud the efforts of other swimmers.
- Be courteous when receiving your award;
- Pose for the cameras.

Don't be disappointed if you miss out – there's always the next event.

After the Event

- Leave only your footprints behind;
- Provide constructive feedback to the event organisers.

A note on buoyancy and swimming aids

Flippers, fins, socks, gloves, paddles or flotation devices provide swimmers an advantage. Swim event organisers might have a "Back of the Pack" category to cater for swimmers who wish to use such devices.

Wetsuits

Wetsuits provide buoyancy and give a swimmer a significant advantage. They are worn customarily in the southern states – Victoria and Tasmania – but not so in other states, where the water is warmer.

Organisers may use their discretion over wetsuits but many swimmers consider that it unfair to allow wetsuited swimmers to compete in open company against "newd" swimmers. In the warmer states, wetsuit swimmers generally come from triathlon. In triathlon, wetsuits are mandatory at temperatures less than 14 C (for shorter events) and 16 C (for longer events). The upper limits for wetsuit wear ranges from 20 to 24 C depending on the length of the event. However, for open water swims held on the East coast of Australia, water temperature is normally 19 to 23 C, and wetsuits would not be required for most swims.

That said, some swimmers feel the cold more than others and wetsuits can be a perfectly understandable aid. It's up to swimmers to make their concerns about unfair competition known to organisers, and for organiser to heed those concerns.

The organisers of the event should decide whether they will award places/prizes to wetsuit wearers. Race entry information should clearly state the organising committee's position on wetsuit wear.

(This practice is different in Victoria and Tasmania, where wetsuits are the norm, rightly or wrongly.)

A similar issue arises in regard to "fast skin" and other "hi-tech" suits worn to provide swimmer with an advantage over other swimmers. One of the beauties of ocean swimming is that it offers an absolutely level playing field in terms of entry to the sport: just cossies and goggles are required, and a nominal event entry fee. If "hi-tech" suits become commonplace, then all swimmers may feel it necessary to invest hundreds of dollars in such suits – as with wetsuits – just to remain competitive. This would raise the entry barrier tithesport considerably.

Again, organisers may not feel able to ban such suits, but they may consider whether wearers of such suits should be eligible for places and prizes in general and/or age group competition. It may be no argument that such suits a "approved by FINA", since FINA has no standing whatsoever in the sport of ocean swimming.

ORGANISERS

Planning

Organisers should begin planning early, learning from the feedback from other swim events. Plan carefully, and ensure that mitigation strategies are identified to deal with the risks associated with running the event.

Risk assessment should consider the potential for serious injury or death to participants, damage to equipment and facilities, financial and reputation loss. The impact on the environment and local community should also be taken into account. Templates for risk assessments can be found via internet searches; an explanation of the risk assessment process is presented in Appendix 1.

The Date

Organisers should:-

- Plan the date of your swim carefully. Check that the planned date of your event does not clash with other swim events, especially events nearby, as this may reduce the number of swimmers you attract;
- Check event calendars, such as those published on oceanswims.com and local tourism websites;
- Check with event calendars for multisport events, surfing competitions, Surf Life Saving events and other aquatic sports for potential clashes;
- Check event calendars for potential road closures that may affect access to the beach or swim venue.
- Consider the start time – you need to consider whom you wish to attend; for example, a country swim held early in the morning might not attract city folk if they can't get there in time.

The Venue

Plan the venue of the swim with prime consideration for the safety of both swimmers and safety craft personnel.

Consider the following environmental factors when considering a swim course:-

- Tides, waves and currents;
- Sandbanks and gutters;
- Submerged reefs and rocks;
- Pollution and the potential for pollution, such as stormwater run off after heavy rain;
- Marine life (stingers, bluebottles, sharks, razor fish, oysters, etc);
- Boating channels;
- Submerged rubbish;
- Seaweed;
- Water temperature;
- Conditions underfoot at start and finish.

Organisers may have a choice of swim venues in their local area, such as adjacent bays, lakes, lagoons or rivers. Alternative venues should be planned as contingency where possible in case of adverse conditions such as dangerous surf. Swim event information should describe the process for cancellation, whether this is online updates, numbers to ring for event updates or deadlines for decisions on going ahead with the swim.

The Course

Plan the course to follow a logical path that can be understood by swimmers. The swims may start and finish in the same location (a "circuit" swim), or may have start and finish at different locations (a "journey" or "point-to-point" swim).

The swim course should be shown on a map, scaled plan or drawing and displayed on a whiteboard or pin-board, and posted at convenient locations at the swim event. The map should be easily understood by the average reader and be in large and clear fonts. Publication of a diagram on a website will provide swimmers with the chance to study the course prior to the event.

Plans or drawing of the swim course should show:-

- The start and finish positions of the swim;
- The position of marker buoys;
- The direction that swimmers are expected to take, represented by lines and arrows. The lines and arrows should indicate the route around marker buoys;
- The relative distance between buoys.

The plan could also show:-

- A sketch of the position of the shoreline, headlands and other geographic features;
- Description of line of sight features such as distinctive landmarks or buildings that assist the swimmer along their way; eg "sight the house on the headland after the first buoy".

Marking the course

Rarely are swim courses set out by survey; some swim courses may be set out by up to 20% more/less than the planned swim distance. The location of major turning buoys can be set out by use of the following, if available:-

- Handheld GPS;
- Theodolite or reflectorless laser;
- Handheld range finders.

Estimation of swim course distances from aerial or satellite photographs is dependent on the resolution of the image (a function of the pixel size) and may be unreliable for accurate measurement.

Marker buoys should be:-

- at least 1.5m high in the water and should be highly visible to swimmers. Best colours are yellow and orange, which stand out in all conditions;
- of a shape that allows them to be seen easily by swimmers from water level (eg cylinders). Conical buoys have the visible area, the fat bit, at their bottom and cannot easily be seen in a swell.
- be fixed in a position so that they do not move with the tide or waves;

-
- be of a highly visible colour (see above) and different from that of the competitors' swim caps or the clothing worn by water safety personnel;
 - perhaps have a large helium balloon on key turning buoys;
 - be set out such that there is little confusion to the swimmers as to which one is next.

The placement of the first turning buoy is most important to limiting an aggressive or congested start to the race. Ensure that the buoy is placed directly out from the start line. Otherwise, swimmers will congregate at one end of the start. Ensure that the first turning buoy is sufficient distance offshore to enable swimmers to separate according to their abilities after making their way through the break. Avoid sharp turns which can lead to congestion and conflict.

Licences & Community Services

Organisers should:-

- Contact relevant authorities to ensure that they have event licences;
- Inform/get permission off Local Government authorities and anyone who may be responsible for the management of the venue, such as council lifeguards;
- Allow sufficient time for dealing with Government Authorities and public servants;
- Retain copies of licences and pay relevant fees;
- Inform police and ambulance services.

Volunteers

Organisers may wish to seek help from volunteer organisations if you need additional manning. SES, scouts, canoe clubs, friends and family, might offer assistance.

- Ensure that volunteers clearly understand their roles and duties;
- Be enthusiastic about the efforts of volunteers – you may wish them back again;
- Ensure that you have accounted for the safety of volunteers, particularly those on surf craft.

Race Information (Entry Forms, Race Flyers, Website, Emails)

The entry forms should provide the following information:-

- Location of the swim, informing the swimmers of the start and finish venues, and location of presentations;
- Date and time of the swim, including registration start and finish dates and times, race start times, indicative wave start times and an estimate of the presentation times. A well planned event will provide a schedule for the day;
- Description or diagrams of the course/s; including safety arrangements and water conditions (eg surf, lake, sheltered bay);
- Race categories (age groups etc);
- Entry Fees, detailing single, multiple and late entry fees. Optionally discount entry fees for swimmers planning to do more than one swim;
- Rules with respect to swimming aids;
- Entry form and mailing address;
- Waiver, release and indemnification.

The Race Information may also include;-

- Instructions on how to get to the venue;
- Parking arrangements;
- Recommended accommodation;
- Transport arrangements / options to start;
- Security arrangements for personal gear;
- Special awards;
- Cancellation conditions or alternative venues;
- Sponsors;
- Beneficiaries of the swim profits;
- Special advice to swimmers about the event;
- Ruling on buoyancy aids.

You may wish to advertise with local swimming clubs to try and attract pool swimmers to the sport.

Facilities on the Day

The facilities on the day should include areas for:-

- Registration;
- Numbering;
- Signage;
- Race briefing;
- Marshalling;
- A start line;
- A finish line;
- Timing devices and or time recorders;
- Recovery area;
- First Aid facilities;
- Presentation venue;
- Timing and results display.

These facilities may be combined and may be set up in shade tents, around or inside buildings.

Optional additions

- Merchandise stalls;
- Portable toilets;
- Secure area for swimmers bags;
- Pick up point for swimmers, if transport provided;
- An area for fundraiser food stalls.

The facilities should be set out in a logical sequence, allowing for the flow of people from registration to numbering, etc. Appropriate signage should be displayed on facilities, eg "Late Entries", "Pre-registered", etc. Adequate means of communication should be arranged for announcements, control of the event, race briefing and presentations. PA systems or megaphones should be tested for operation and effectiveness.

Communications amongst personnel involved with the organisation may include hand-held radios, mobile phones, or runners. Shouting of race instructions usually results in a repeat of the race briefing.

First Aid facilities should be clearly designated by signage.

If transportation has been arranged for swimmers, ensure sufficient time for the transfer, and consider arrangements for the transport of personal items to the finish area.

Timing facilities

Electronic timing can deliver results quickly but is no guarantee of accurate results, and comes at a cost of several thousand dollars. Electronic timing systems can reduce the labour requirement of organisers. Manual timing systems require more human resources including people to write down times or places, people to record times or places, and people to finalise the results. But a well-organised manual system – the “Post-it note” system, when swimmers are handed notes as they cross the line with their time, to check in at a finish table – can be just as, if not more reliable than electronic timing, and considerably cheaper.

Apps are available for iPad and iPhone use that can record finishing times with data being transferred easily to a computer for final processing. One particular app, Race Splitter, which has been proven in ocean swims, costs \$36.99 from the App Store.

On the Day

Organisers should:-

- Make sure that sufficient time and volunteers are available to prepare for the event;
- Hold a briefing session at the start of the day, or evening before;
- Develop a schedule for the day to work to and allow sufficient contingency for the possibility of unforeseen events, such as wild weather or higher than expected numbers;
- Leave a reasonable time gap between the close of registration and the swim start;
- Have pens that work and provide clear instructions to volunteers on number placement;
- Have a closing time for late entries and enforce the time limit. Many swims are held up by late participants.

Race briefings and starting instructions may need to be given separately. Rehearse the instructions and give clear, relevant instructions. If multiple wave starts are required, advertise these prior to the event or have a board advertising a timetable for the day. If you have access to a PA system, consider delivering information to the swimmers during race registration.

At the Start

There is no perfect method for starting an ocean swim. It all depends on numbers, the spread of entrants through age groups, the surf at the start, the distance to the first turning buoy, and so on.

- Do not complicate the start.
- Marshal swimmers into order for wave starts;
- Keep wave starts on schedule;
- Consider gender-based wave starts;
- Limit wave starts to <100 swimmers (where possible) and let the faster swimmers go first;

- On mass starts, have a wide start line;
- Deep-water starts require boats or poles and volunteers to marshal swimmers into position. Do not stall the start in this circumstance as it becomes more difficult to control swimmers who are keen to go;
- Have support craft in the water and ready to go;
- Have poles, traffic cones, bollards, banners and/or a line in the sand to designate the start.

In the Swim

- Ensure that volunteers on surf craft spread around the course, providing leads to lead swimmers and watching, particularly, slower swimmers at the back;
- Monitor the progress of swimmers and, where necessary, provide a cut-off time to complete the swim (very slow swimmers may need to be pulled out of the water if their safety is compromised);
- Ensure volunteers muster swimmers who go astray, but water safety personnel should not be gratuitously restrictive on the courses swimmers take or efficacious in pushing swimmers onto their "preferred" course;
- Provide commentary on the swim event that adds to the excitement for swimmers and onlookers;
- Encourage crowd participation, eg providing commentary on, say the oldest swimmer, presence of celebrity swimmers, such as Channel swimmers, etc;
- Clever announcing could include crosses from a commentator in an IRB with reports on individual races within age groups.
- Have marshals provide direction to the line.

At the finish

- Ensure timekeepers are well versed in their duties;
- Ensure that the finish line and time-recording areas are well set out;
- Have marshals control swimmers at the finish line and keep spectators from interfering with the swimmers exit from the water.

Presentation

- Announce the time or estimated time and venue for presentations;
- Try not to keep swimmers waiting too long;
- Lay out awards or rewards and plan the sequence that you will present;
- Thank swimmers for their participation and volunteers and sponsors;

Awards and Trophies

Some of the best swims have no prizes, official timing or age groups. These swims emphasise ocean swimming as a shared experience. Having no age groups or prizes removes much of the tension and potential for conflict and argument post-race.

That said, prizes are normally given to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd placed male and female swimmers. If you have an Open category, then those swimmers may or may not be eligible for Age group prizes. There are no hard and fast rules about Age Group categories and the awards need to fit into your budget. Awards are usually awarded up to 3rd place, but you may decide to only award 1st place-getters in each age group. This depends on time, budget and sponsorship,

particularly if you run a number of swims on the day. If you do limit prizes to first, for example, you should still acknowledge minor placegetters by announcing their times.

Age groups depend on how many swimmers are taking part. "Small" swims, for example, might not burden themselves with five-year age groups. The multiplicity of age groups is a major cause of cost and conflict between organisers and swimmers.

Typical Age Group categories

<i>5-year increment</i>	<i>10 year increment</i>
12-15	12-15
16-19	16-19
20-24	20-29
25-29	30-39
30-34	40-49
35-39	50-59
40-44	60-69
45-49	70-79
50-54	80 & over
55-59	
60-64	
65-69	
70-74	
75-79	
80 & over	

Consider having special awards, such as the oldest swimmers, the youngest, or swimmers who have done the event since its inception. Awards or rewards for place getters may range from rating a mention, to whatever your budget allows. Have random draws to give all other swimmers, the chance at a prize.

Some of the most popular prizes are those for having done the event a large number of times, eg 10 years, 15 years, etc. This emphasises the experiential character of ocean swimming.

Some swims award prize money in the belief that this attracts swimmers. Whilst it may attract a handful, there is no evidence that it is a significant drawcard. Prize money thus can be seen as a waste of money, particularly by smaller swims and swims run by charities, which supposedly need all the funds they can raise. It usually rewards only "the usual suspects".

After the Event

- Have enough volunteers to help you clean up;
- Try and leave the place as you found it;
- Conduct a review of how the event run while you have ideas fresh in mind, ask yourselves, what worked well, what can be done better next time.
- Consider advertising dates for your next event.

Publication of results

- If you have used electronic timing, plan to print out results for display at the end of the race;
- Publish results on websites as soon as possible, but be ready for complaints of errors and omissions;
- You may post out certificates to swimmers, or give them out on the day. Some electronic timing systems offer swimmers the capacity to print out their own certificates online.

Further reading on the web..

FINA Open Water Swimming Manual

NSW Swimming – Recommendations for Organising an Open Water Swimming Event

Appendix 1 – Risk Assessment

Risk assessment is a process of identifying what can go wrong, quantifying the risks in terms of the probability of consequences that could result from the risk events, and identifying risk mitigation strategies or controls to reduce risk to an acceptable level. The risks may include injury to personnel, damage to equipment, financial loss, loss of reputation, and/or damage to the environment.

The following describes the steps of risk assessment:-

1. The first step of risk assessment is to identify the risks. For swim events, this can be done by brainstorming a list of what can go wrong with your organising committee.
2. Write the risks down and discuss the probability of those events happening and the potential consequences. This is a process of risk ranking to identify what the highest risk components of running an event. Below are tables showing qualitative measures of likelihood (probability) and consequences. A risk matrix is also shown below and can be used to quantify risk.

Likelihood

Level	Descriptor	Description
A	Rare	May occur only in exceptional circumstances (0-5% probable)
B	Unlikely	Could occur at some time (5-30% probable)
C	Possible	Might occur at some time (30-70% probable)
D	Likely	Will probably occur in most circumstances (70-90% probable)
E	Almost certain	Is expected to occur in most circumstances (>90% probable)

Consequence

Level	Descriptor	Description
1	Insignificant	No injuries; no damage; no financial loss
2	Minor	First aid treatment; minor damage; medium financial loss
3	Moderate	Medical treatment required; moderate damage; high financial loss
4	Major	Extensive injuries; major damage; major financial loss
5	Catastrophic	Death; very serious damage; huge financial loss

RISK MATRIX

	<i>Consequences</i>				
<i>Likelihood</i>	1 Insignifi cant	2 Minor	3 Moderate	4 Major	5 Catastrop hic
A (Rare)	Low	Low	Medium	High	High

B (Unlikely)	Low	Low	Medium	High	Critical
C (Possible)	Low	Medium	High	Critical	Critical
D (Likely)	Medium	High	High	Critical	Critical
E (Almost certain)	High	High	Critical	Critical	Critical

- Quantify the risks using the risk matrix. Discuss what can controls can be implemented to reduce the risk event, and then re-rank the risks if the controls where in place (the residual risk).
- If the residual risk is critical, then you have no control on the risk and you may have to cancel the swim event, or seek an alternative venue.
- Identify who is responsible for implementing the risk controls and when they should do it by.

An example of part of a risk assessment is given below:-

Risk Event	Before Treatment			Risk Mitigation Strategy /Treatment	After Treatment		
	Likelihood	Consequence	Rating		Likelihood	Consequence	Rating
Injury from submerged objects	C	2	MED	Inspect swim course for submerged objects, such as rocks. Adjust course or starting area to avoid hazards. Warn swimmers in pre-race briefing.	B	2	LOW
Death or drowning due to high seas	B	5	CRIT	Inspect conditions on the day, cancel race if conditions are too dangerous if no alternative venues designated	A	1	LOW
Injury due to marine stingers	C	3	HIGH	Inspect beach and waters for marine stingers; warn swimmers of their presence; ensure first aiders are well prepared	C	2	MEDIUM