



PHOTOS: TOM MILES

Swim Straight

Zig-zagging through open water is the fastest way to a swim PW (personal worst). Luckily, **Dan Bullock's** here to keep you on track...



Dan Bullock

is a former 220 Triathlon Coach of the Year Award winner. He's also ASA-qualified and an expert in open-water swimming

The secret to saving time and energy in open water? Simple. Swimming straight. But for many triathletes those two simple words remain on dry land when the race begins. What follows will guide beginners, improvers and advanced athletes to swim straighter for a faster opening leg.

Brains not brawn

If you approach this feature with scepticism – aka you're one of the brigade convinced of brawn power over brain – this astonishing sequence of events from last year's SPW Triathlon in Hyde Park sprint race may alter your thinking...

I marshalled the swim. Numbers thinned out and three athletes set off in the last wave. The course took them 200m down to a large buoy, before returning to the jetty. The edge of the lake and the lane

rope marked out the boundaries but these were miles away from the racing line.

The swimmer in the middle broke into breaststroke and resigned himself to a last-place finish as the gents on the outside started to front crawl (FC). With the ability to sight and breathe simultaneously, the breaststroke swimmer made reasonable progress. The FC swimmers started to zigzag their way down the course, taking turns bouncing off the lane rope. The breaststroker was somewhat confused as to what was happening behind, but as he just swam the necessary course distance, he was first into T1. I estimated that the FC swimmers probably covered closer to 600m rather than the standard 400m.

Not for one minute am I promoting or endorsing working on your breaststroke, but it does illustrate the benefits of effective sighting. It must also be said that sighting correctly is only truly effective combined with a balanced and symmetrical stroke.

So prepare for a perfectly linear swim, via vision and technique... →

What sends you off course?

If you consider the swim pool environment, everything about it encourages you to swim straight: the black line on the bottom of the pool, the lane ropes, the side of the pool, the walls... there are even lines on the ceiling for when you're swimming backstroke.

Now take yourself back outside to the lake or sea – you're unlikely to see anything that's going to help keep you straight. All you have to rely on are a sequence of buoys several hundred metres apart, floating on the horizon, often with the sun coming up behind them.

Also reflect on your technique, which you hopefully honed during the off-season. Commit any of the four FC cardinal sins and you'll be adding swim distance and time...

- The lack of a strong catch position set up by one of the arms, usually from the arm that supports the head as you breathe away from it. The arm cycle should pull you forwards. If only one arm has an effective catch, this generates unbalanced propulsion.
- An early exit at the back of the stroke, leading to less propulsion on one side.
- A lack of dexterity on the 'weaker arm' prevents you from duplicating the correct pathways that the 'strong arm' performs.
- A wide sweep of one of the recovering arms across the centre line.

Spot a landmark

Whichever style of sighting you adopt or favour, it's vital that you arrive early at the venue and map out where you're going and what you can use to assist. Watching the mistakes of the earlier waves can also help your swim enormously. Look for the landmarks that you might be able to make use of in line with the buoys and direction of swim. For example, a large tree, moored boats, a boat hut and so on.

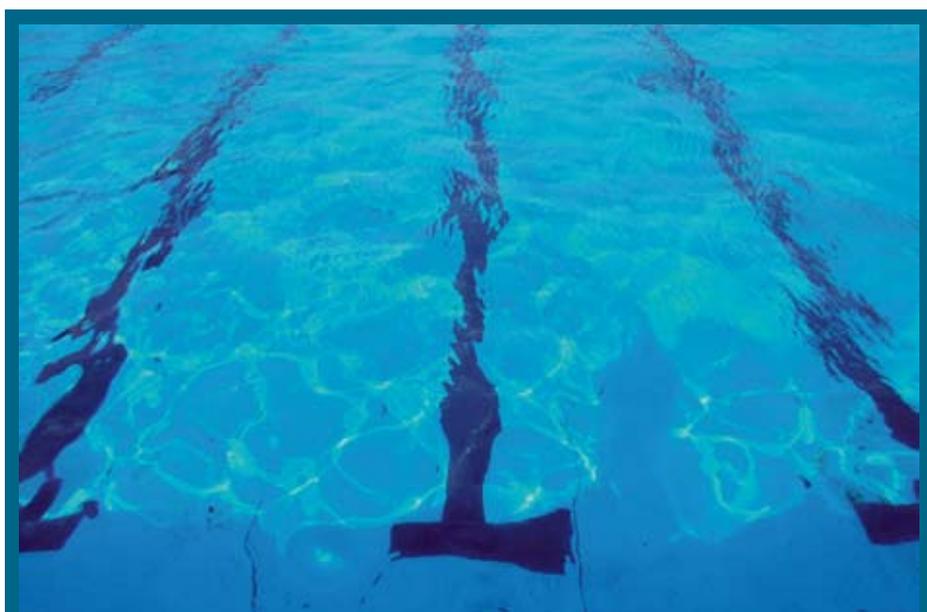
Things change again in rougher waters. You should expect to keep your head up for two to three strokes as you 'wait' for the peak of a wave. This will give you a clear vantage point to take an accurate sight. Minimise this time in the up position by using large immovable objects for assisting your sighting: cliffs, piers, oil rigs...

Assist this issue further by ensuring vision is 100% by taking light and dark goggles, and choosing the correct pair as conditions dictate at the last minute. Old goggles that are scratched seem to mist over more quickly. A greater contrast in the warmth of the face and the coolness of the sea will also not help with the speed that goggles mist up. Splash and cool your face before applying your goggles during the warm-up.

Right, now onto sighting methods for triathletes of all abilities...



Scouting the swim course beforehand can help keep you on the straight and narrow



Pool test

Before you get to open water, you can evaluate your 'swim line' by stroking on top of the black line. Close your eyes and swim over the line (please check that the lane is empty first!). Try for seven to eight strokes having started out on the black line, open your eyes... Are you still on top of the black line? If so and you can repeat this multiple times, then you can be fairly assured your stroke is working well.

Sighting for beginners

This is basically sight and breath combined, and while that sounds good, raising your head forces the legs low and leaves you susceptible to oncoming waves. The other downside to this technique is how much it breaks the rhythm of your stroke: swim, lift, sight, slow down, return the head to a neutral position and then accelerate back to regular race pace. For the novice unconcerned by performance, however, it's a useful skill.



1 As the front crawl catch initiates, naturally there's a small degree of the hand pushing down.



2 Take advantage of this action, lifting you into the sight, which affords the chance of a breath.



3 Once you're aware of any direction changes needed, get your head back down ASAP.



The stroke doctor

If you performed the pool test (see *Pool test* box on page 54) and were constantly meandering down the lane, we need to look at the following areas of the stroke that could be taking you off course...



Problem Breathing to just one side impacts on a balanced stroke.

Solution If bilateral is truly out of the question, perfect your breathing every second stroke, constantly either to the left or right.



Problem Minimal rotation through the upper body leads to wide sweep at front of stroke.

Solution The higher the elbow recovers above the surface of the water, the straighter trajectory the hand can take from the hip area, up past the shoulder and then enter in front of the shoulder.



Problem Stroke becomes disjointed when combining sight and stroke.

Solution Perform the crocodile drill in the pool. Swim five strokes of front crawl with your eyes looking forward just above the surface of the water, then five strokes normal crawl. Repeat.

Sighting for improvers

By sighting forwards and keeping your head as low as possible (to stop your legs dropping), the breath is taken by rolling to the side within the usual arm recovery cycle. If this movement is not controlled, there can be a lot of combined upper body momentum that will upset the normal forward progression of the stroke through lateral deviation of the body. Get this right and you'll create much less drag in the water.



1 Keep your head as low as possible while sighting to stop the legs dropping and slowing you.



2 Next, take your head to the side to grab a breath, avoiding the chance of sucking down water.



3 Return your head back to its normal breathing position to complete the cycle.



Sighting for peak performers

The method I like best – and logic suggests it should impact on the horizontal profile of the body least – is to lift the head to its lowest position and keep the movement separate from the breath (eyes just above the surface and then return the head to its neutral position). The breath is taken to the side in its normal breathing pattern. This method ensures the greatest time between breaths so is great for Ironman swims. Not so great in rough swims, though.



1 Head lifts to its lowest point to take a quick sight. Good awareness of sighting points is essential.



2 With a minimal lift, your body position will be kept neutral and there will be minimal slowing of your cruising speed.



3 Return head to neutral position and, next stroke, breathing is performed as normal either to the left or right as conditions dictate. Key: this is in-between and separate to any sighting movements.



Over 30 years' experience of competitive swimming, coaching, teaching & direct involvement with Triathlon

Swim analysis – instant playback

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