

Open Water Techniques For Pool Swimmers

by:

Terry Laughlin



J. Ferrara Photography

Terry Laughlin, the founder of Total Immersion has been the leading teacher of "improvement-minded swimming" for adults for 20 years. His books and videos have been worldwide best-sellers. Though he was an undistinguished swimmer in his youth, since 2006, he has

become the most accomplished open water swimmer of his age in the U.S., completing his second 28.5-mile Manhattan Island Marathon Swim winning four National Masters championships, breaking national 55-59 national records on three occasions (twice in Mirror Lake), and medaling in the World Masters Open Water Championships. He has also been the nation's #1-ranked 55-59 long distance swimmer.

Now that it's had its Olympic debut, Open Water is the Next Big Thing in swimming, and many high school and club swimmers have become curious. I swam in high school over 40 years ago, then for four years in college. I'd swum lots of distance races and they'd gotten a bit stale and predictable. I didn't mind "retiring" after college swimming ended in 1972. But the next summer I swam my first open water race, 500 yards in the ocean during a lifeguard tournament at Jones Beach on Long Island in NY. It was a revelation. At the starter's signal, a pack of us dashed into the water, dove under – or were knocked back by – the shore break and began swimming furiously. No lanes. No walls. Most of all no sense of personal competition. Not only was the predictability of the pool replaced by a breathless blur of sea, sky and flashes of indistinguishable fellow swimmers, but we were all preoccupied with basic concerns like waves and finding the next buoy. For the first time, my sense of racing *against* someone was replaced by a feeling of swimming *with* my fellow competitors. When I ran up the beach 8 or 10 minutes later, I was so exhilarated by the experience, at

first I cared little where I'd placed.

As a distance swimmer in high school and college, I trained as hard as anyone but never even threatened a team record on my undistinguished school teams. Yet as a middle-aged open water swimmer, I've won national championships, broken national records and been the #1-ranked swimmer in my age group – mainly by learning a new technique – one that's ideally suited to open water, but has also served me well in the pool.

"The 'Perils' Of Pool Training"

Three years ago, I read an article by Jonty Skinner, Performance Science Director for USA Swimming on the USAS web site that compared the technique of those who swam best in Short Course (25-yard pools) with those who dominated in Long Course (50-meter) events like the Olympics. Skinner compared video of SC and LC specialists and found that the best LC freestylers tend to swim with longer, "hip-driven" strokes, requiring less turnover -- bit less speed in short bursts, but markedly less tiring. SC specialists used a faster, more "arm-driven" stroke – faster over short bursts, but much more work.

Skinner's study noted that in a 25-yard pool (using the underwater dolphin as Phelps does) an



Terry Laughlin and Shinji Takeuchi, Head Coach of TI-Japan

athlete might swim as little as a third of the distance, giving hard-working arms long rest breaks. In a 50-meter pool, the same swimmer would need to swim at least 70% -- but usually more -- of the distance -- a clear incentive to swim more economically.

I understood immediately that what was true for 50-meter pools would become massively compelling in open water. Here's the rub: Hard-working, naturally competitive high school swimmers, training and racing in 25-yard pools, will almost inevitably imprint the "SC stroke." To excel in open water (or Long Course) you'd need the discipline to defer immediate gratification (short-term speed) for long-term gain. If you're game, here are four Open Water techniques to practice in the pool -- and remember while racing.

Hug the Surface

Most swimmers instinctively lift or swing the head in rougher water. This increases drag and gives the waves a bigger "target." Waves occur above the surface, but it's relatively calm below, so concentrate on knifing through chop, not climbing over. To practice, release your head until it feels weightless, then visualize a laser projecting from the top of your head. Point that laser where you want to go. This also helps hips and legs ride higher and lighter, saving further energy by reducing drag and your need to kick.

Swim Taller

The simplest way to lengthen your stroke is to focus on using your arm to extend your bodyline. You'll still stroke back; you'll just shift your attention -- and your intention -- to the one going forward. Practice by focusing on: (1) After entry, visualize slipping your hand through the water, as if through a sleeve -- a long sleeve. (2) Spend more of each stroke in the "front end" slightly exaggerating the "overlap" between strokes. In rougher water, this will also allow time to establish a firmer grip.

Swim with 'Wide Tracks'

I've noticed that nearly all "developing" swimmers cross to the center as they reach forward. Elite freestylers extend and stroke on a line directly forward of the shoulder. This helps channel energy in the direction of travel. It also improves stability in waves and chop; your arms function like outriggers. To practice, visualize a fat tree trunk in front



**Terry Laughlin hugging the surface
- even while breathing**

of your head. Keep your arms outside it the entire time they're forward of your nose.

Enter the "Mail Slot"

A high-swinging, forward-reaching recovery, common among swimmers in open water places most of the load of propulsion on fatigue-prone arm muscles. When your hand enters closer to your head (on Wide Tracks) with a steeper arm angle, your hand reaches the "catch" with your palm facing back, where hand pressure moves you forward. A steep "angle of attack" also connects better to power from hip rotation, saving your arm muscles from fatigue. To practice: (1) Visualize a Mail Slot forward of your shoulder; slip your hand and forearm into the Slot before sliding through the "sleeve;" (2) Swim silently -- a cleaner entry is always quieter; and (3) Watch for, and eliminate, bubbles from your stroke.

Rewire your Brain

These techniques may be simple, but none come naturally or instinctively. You'll need to practice new stroke thoughts consistently and tireless, until they become habits. I.E. Never leaving a wall without choosing one to focus on. Just as important as new muscle memory will be "mental muscle" -- the ability to stay focused on any of them in the midst of a churning pack during a race. P.S.: "Memorize" them in the order given.

*Terry Laughlin is Head Coach of Total Immersion Swimming. His DVDs **Easy Freestyle** and **Outside the Box** teach all the techniques of "Perpetual Motion Freestyle." Information and more articles like this at www.totalimmersion.net.*