

# AQUA ACE

You can become a decent open-water swimmer by training only in the pool, but you'll never reach your fullest potential. How fast you can be? Find a big body of water, jump in and then listen to everything Gerry Rodrigues has to say.

By Matt Dixon, MSc



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When looking at triathlon performance, swimming is often relegated in importance to an afterthought, in training energy, time dedicated and its value in the overall race. Much of this stems from the small percentage of total time spent swimming (as compared to biking and running) in an event, but it is also due to the frustration many triathletes feel with what is, for the majority, the weakest of the three disciplines.

Quickly, swimming becomes a lost hope, and justified as something simply to get through before getting on with real racing. Despite the distaste that many triathletes have for the water, if athletes are given solid direction on how to improve their open-water swimming, and thus develop an understanding of how it correlates to overall performance, swimming suddenly becomes fun. Gerry Rodrigues, founder of Tower 26 Swimming, is doing just that: mak-

ing swimming fun. In the process, he's making triathletes faster than they ever thought possible in the water.

It's all happening in Los Angeles. Rodrigues is one of the most celebrated open-water swimmers and coaches of all time. As a former masters open-water world champion, he has gone on to coach and consult with world champions (including 2010 5K open water world champ Eva Fabian), Olympians and



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multiple professional triathletes to help them become not just great swimmers, but great open-water swimmers. He currently runs his open-water-specific triathlon training center, Tower 26, which has multiple pool and open water sessions weekly. At any given Wednesday morning beach workout, you will see up to 200 athletes under his instruction, including multiple members of Siri Lindley's elite triathlon squad (Mirinda Carfrae, Magali Tisseyre and David Kahn, to name a few), as well as pros from the Purplepatch squad like Linsey Corbin and Jesse Thomas. Within the group will also be middle- and back-of-the-pack swimmers, linked by the desire to move from just getting through the swim to actually looking forward to it.

Rodrigues encourages athletes to begin viewing themselves as open-water swimmers, while teaching the specific skills needed to excel in open water. He created Tower 26

(named for the group's meeting place at Life-guard Tower 26 in Santa Monica) to help athletes improve their swim by providing them with a massive educational base and teaching them how to train effectively on a limited budget. He has quickly become a valuable resource to all levels of swimmers and coaches (myself included) looking to gain an edge on the opening leg.

**TRIATHLON'S SWIM STATE.** To gain a framework of Rodrigues' views, which are the platform for why Tower 26 was created, it is critical to first understand his thoughts on the current state of swimming in triathlon.

**According to Gerry:** There are a few different types of athletes that train for swimming in triathlon. The dominant approach is to hit the pool for 30–45 minutes of straight swimming, simply aiming to swim faster than the previous attempt—an approach that appeals to the



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“type-A” athlete. It offers short duration, high effort and maximal yardage each session.

Outside this group there are plenty of athletes who aim to self-instruct through reading every piece of available literature and media, then implementing the strategy. With swimming being the most technical sport, it is impossible to use this approach and expect large gains.

EVEN IF YOU'RE THE TYPE OF ATHLETE WHO ONLY LIKES TRAINING ON YOUR OWN, HAVING AN EXPERIENCED COACH AND A GROUP TO TRAIN WITH CAN PAY HUGE DIVIDENDS IN THE OPEN WATER.

Perhaps the most dangerous athlete is the one who copycats very established swimmers, and simply mimics their training protocol. This is doomed to lead to failure and injury, as most triathletes have nothing like the background of established swimming superstars like Andy Potts.

The final type of athlete is one who follows an “all easy” protocol of building yardage, often augmented with a heavy focus on drills. If you cannot learn to swim in a couple of sessions, or complete a 2K swim in five to six weeks, you have the wrong approach!

The reason so many approaches exist is the massive amount of confusion on how to appropriately train for open water, combined with huge amounts of misinformation on open-water swimming as a subject. Swimming is not an easy sport, and requires a structured and targeted approach to really improve. There is no easy fix.

## SWIMMING IS VITAL FOR OVERALL PERFORMANCE.

As a triathlon coach, I often get asked why there is such a heavy emphasis on swimming in most of the programs I create. Swimming is often relegated in importance by many athletes and coaches, because it takes up so little time in a race, relative to biking and running. It comes down to viewing triathlon as three separate sports instead of a single swim-bike-run sport. If you ask coaches like me and Rodrigues, it's one of the biggest mistakes a triathlete can make.

**According to Gerry:** There is a huge cost to swimming, even when swimming is only 10 percent of the race in a long-distance event and roughly 17 percent of a short-course race. Swimming taxes the system, especially when one is uncomfortable, becomes anxious or starts to panic. The key is specificity. **If an athlete is adequately and specifically prepared for open-water swimming, including competition conditions (people, currents, sighting, cold) the overall physical and emotional cost is greatly reduced.** This, naturally, leads to improved cycling and running performance. A lack of specific preparation will have an enormous emotional and psychological toll, which can hinder one's ride and run performance. Watch the swimming leg of just about any triathlon and it's clear that the vast majority of athletes approach the swim with the simple plan of getting through it. This is not a prudent approach!

## MYTHS AND MISTAKES OF TRAINING FOR OPEN WATER SWIMMING.

Swimming is the most technical of the three disciplines, and probably the least understood by coaches and athletes alike. A labyrinth of myths and misinformation related to training and technical requirements accumulate to hold performance back. The first step is forgetting three myths being circulated at just about every pool in America.

**According to Gerry:** Perhaps the most important aspect to address is distance per stroke (DPS). So often swimmers are told to focus on glide, reach, rotation and taking as few strokes as possible on each lap of swimming. This ends up being the biggest limiter for most triathletes, as distance per stroke has very small relevance to open-water swimming. The common measurement used to track progress, reducing strokes per lap, only shows that a swimmer can take fewer strokes each lap. It has little relevance to swimming faster. At the elite end of the sport there can be up to a 30 percent variance in stroke length among athletes. Ironically, by focusing purely on DPS, the athlete inhibits the key aspect to improved open water swimming: stroke rate. Improving stroke rate is fundamental to open-water success, but most triathletes are taking 20–45 strokes per minute less than optimal. In beginner to intermediate swimmers, low stroke rates coupled with long gliding strokes equals a slow swimmer.

Another myth is the idea of being able to drill your way to success. Some specific drills, when applied properly and then transferred into real swimming, can be of great benefit, but great drillers simply become great drillers. The triathlon world seems to greatly overuse drills as a proportion of total swim time. Drills are a means to teach a specific skill, but then that skill has to be executed with high frequency. What's needed is an acute awareness of the foundation needed to be a strong swimmer, then executing that with high frequency. There are some drills that are totally irrelevant to beginner and intermediate swimmers—like sculling—but more on that later.

The final myth is that to become a great open-water swimmer, you can simply train like a swimmer. Open-water swimming is a vastly different sport from pool swimming, with a dynamic environment and changing conditions that create additional obstacles. Without experience, wisdom, specific skills and training, success is hard to come by. Specific sets to prepare for open-water racing provides a massive boost

to performance, and the ability to relax and enjoy race conditions, without fear of panic, exhaustion or poor performance.


**A COACH, A GROUP AND A PLAN.**

Even if you're the type of athlete who only likes training on your own, having an experienced coach and a group to train with can pay huge dividends in the open water. This will help give direction to every workout and ensure that there are no wasted sessions.

**According to Gerry:** I believe it is really important to find real instruction and a group of swimmers to train with. Solo swimming is fine for experienced swimmers, but offers a relatively small return for others. Find an established and qualified coach, masters or triathlon training group, or a group of buddies with similar goals. This will help keep motivation high, and it also provides valuable technical feedback on a weekly basis. Within that group structure, you must have foundational swims every week that will prepare you specifically for open-water competition. Re-

moving the lane lines and having a large group spread throughout the width of the pool is a great way to work on technical aspects like sighting and drafting. These workouts will also prepare you for open-water intensity, and allow you to become familiar with the discomfort of swim starts, pack swimming and accelerations in pace.

While an accumulation of time and frequency is needed to evolve your swimming ability, you should never simply aim to accumulate time in the pool. Volume, without direction, is meaningless, and your aim should be to develop a full range of "gears" in the pool so that you have a spectrum of intensities on race day.

Of course, you need to balance this with the other disciplines in triathlon, as well as supporting it all with adequate recovery to maintain health. I am never volume-focused in training, but prefer to aim for consistency, specificity and building a complete athlete over time. 

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