

The Improvers Triathlon Guide

TRAINING

Swimming in "the washing machine"

By elite British triathlete Harry Wiltshire

This is the area that most beginners find scarier: the thrashing of the water, the flailing of all those arms, the kicking of all those legs. It's known as "the washing machine." "There can be lots of physical contact. Swimmers start bashing into one another," says Harry Wiltshire, who has been through more spin cycles than the rest of us have had hot dinners. "Inexperienced swimmers sometimes panic because it's such a bizarre environment for them."

You may be very confident and well trained for the distance you have to cover during the swim, but this will be useless if you're not prepared for the organized chaos of an open-water swim. For this reason many inexperienced triathletes choose to start their swim at the back of the field, or far to one side. "Don't get in a fight with other swimmers. Get your own bit of water, hold your line and hope other swimmers keep off it."

Of course, other swimmers can be unpredictable. "If swimmers start banging into you, then you have two choices," he adds. "If you're a confident swimmer, then continue to hold your line and hold your pace—less confident swimmers will move out of your way. But if you're not that confident yourself then you should move away from the washing machine and keep out of trouble. This means you'll have to swim off the racing line. You may end up swimming a bit further, but you'll exit the water a lot less stressed."

During one of his first elite races, Wiltshire got very stressed indeed. "I was quite near the front, swimming right round a buoy, when this German guy pulled my goggles off and punched me in the face."

Of course, this kind of roughhousing isn't going to occur in an amateur race, but if you're not confident, it's well worth being prepared for a little bit of contact. "People might occasionally knock your arms or legs," says Wiltshire. "Rounding the buoy can be a bit tricky, for example, so keep your head down, swim very wide around it, and stay out of trouble."

His stresses how important it is to always be moving forward. "As soon as you slow down, someone might swim over the top of you. Then it's very hard to get your momentum going again. If this does happen, hold your breath, and swim well out of the way, off the racing line. Then clear out your goggles and slowly ease back into the rhythm of the race."



ALBEE Given that a lot of triathletes will conduct their training in swimming pools and without access to the coast, the open-water swim can be the hardest element for many first-timers to progress to.

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