

Surf Swimming: A Competitor's Perspective*

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INTRODUCTION

Triathlon events, particularly in Australia, often require athletes to have good surf swimming skills as the swim leg takes place at the beach. The National Championships in Mooloolabah, QLD is a prime example of this.

Competitive surf swimming, unlike pool swimming, is a great leveler. It is a sport in which the fastest swimmer doesn't always win. There are many reasons for this, which will be covered later.

This article assumes the reader is already familiar with general and specific training drills and programs (i.e. training schedules, stroke technique and general physical conditioning).

Much has been written for surf swimmers about stroke. Suffice to say, what is considered a good stroke in the pool, may not necessarily be an effective surf swim technique. In fact the perfect style of top-level pool swimmers is often upset by the surf. This is only natural, due to the turbulent conditions experienced in the surf. The same theory also applies to kayak and surf ski paddlers.

There are many variables that allow a competent pool swimmer to become a great surf swimmer. In the pool you just swim: usually indoors, and in separate lanes. It's very civilised. In the surf you have to contend with:

- Climatic changes
- Cold water
- Waves
- Wind chop
- Currents (rips)
- Sandbanks and
- Jostling from other competitors
- Diving

Is it any wonder that good pool swimmers can take some time to become accustomed to surf swimming? Some never make it at all. Some have been recognised still-water champions, while others have been relative "unknowns".

From 1984 to 1983 the following open belt and surf champions never represented Australia in the pool, yet all defeated Australian still-water representatives: Stuart Taylor, Richard Ford, Stuart Dutton and Gary Watson.

The one thing they had in common was that they worked on the things that pool swimmers didn't: **RUNNING, WADING and SURF SKILLS.**

Leading pool swimmers train twice a day in the pool. The leading surf swimmers (i.e. those not up to international still water standard) will spend their second session either at the beach, in the gym or out running.

The skills developed in these sessions will come to the fore when:

- a. There is a sizeable surf
- b. There's a long sandbank and/or
- c. The weather turns nasty

In particular, these competitors' time at the beach spent studying rips and practicing wading and catching waves, will give them a decided edge over the pool swimmer.

You may take it for granted, but the surf race is a collection of many skills, and is broken into the following five sections and components - all with their own rules to be followed for success:

1. Pre-race (psychological, course familiarisation, warm-up)
2. Start – (wade, porpoise, wave-diving)
3. Race (buoy turn, return swim, body surfing)
4. Finish
5. Psychological

The physical skills of wading, surfing and surf knowledge are vital to your success. Without developing them you will never reach your full potential.

Likewise, strong psychological skills are an important and often-neglected aspect of race preparation.

1. Pre-race

The pre-race phase is broken into three parts:

- i. Psychological preparation
- ii. Course familiarisation
- iii. Warm-up

i. Psychological

This section is covered in section 10 of skills.

ii. Course familiarisation

Times will vary, but you should arrive at the venue at least an hour before your race. This allows time to check in, survey the course and conditions, and to warm up.

Try to check in first. There's nothing more frustrating than being worried about whether or not you are entered. Get this out of the way and you can start concentrating on your main purpose: the race.

Next, position yourself at a vantage point that allows a good view of the race course. Preferably, you should be elevated. (In championships, try to get on a hill, the grandstand, or in the surf club).

Check the race distance and the surf conditions (especially for rips).

Once satisfied, try to get as close as you can to the race area (though this is not always possible). If you can, check the relationships of the finish line to the buoys (is the finish to the left or right of the last buoy?). You have to know which way to swim on the return.

Try to select some landmark on the shore that you will head for on the swim home. This could be a flagpole, unusual tree, tent, grandstand or building, or a landmark. This puts you on course.

iii. Warm-up

First check the depth of the water. You will have to know how far you are going to wade and/or porpoise.

The length of your warm-up is up to you (everyone is different). However, as part of your warm-up you should try to swim the course. This will allow you to become familiar with surf conditions.

When you reach the buoys, check to see if the anchoring ropes are clear of the end buoys (this can cause problems if the ropes are not angled straight to the bottom, and you may have to swim a bit wide, or get tangled in the ropes, as has happened to me).

On reaching the last turning buoy, check to see if your landmark on shore is the correct position. (You may have to select another beacon).

Last, catch a few waves, because the surf differs at every beach.

2. The Start

It's important to get a good start, so the most basic advice is to listen to the starter's instructions.

Watch him or her in prior races and get used to the technique employed. With practice you can pick a start by observation. (For me this has become relatively easy, because Bill Ingram, the Australian Championship starter, has been firing the gun for me since 1970).

Once on the starting line, check to see whether the judge-in-boat is positioned. The boat is supposed to remain stationary, and is the usually-perfect marker for your first buoy turn. You can clarify with the starter as to where the boat will be (normally in the centre of the buoys).

Depending on the surf and bank conditions, you may have drawn a bad alley (either a rip or sandbank). Where you enter the water is your choice, and will depend on your strengths and weaknesses. But remember you have to reach ankle-depth water before changing direction.

If you're a fast runner you may not be disadvantaged too much if you decide to change direction. You will simply have to weigh the pros and cons of going either way (is it faster to go out on the bank, or in the rip?).

Phases of the start

a. Wading

Of all the skills, I rate wading as the most important. So often races are won or lost at the start, and if you can't wade, it's hard to come from behind. Wading involves two actions:

- i. Running and
- ii. Porpoising.

A strong wader has an advantage from the start. He or she can be in the water and swimming as others founder.

It is harder to catch someone while you are swimming than when you are both running. And as you should already know, most surf races (and that includes craft events) are won by the time the field reaches the buoys. Not everyone can wade well (may be it's something to do with genes), but everyone can improve. If you are a good runner, then you've got a head start. However, WADING IS NOT RUNNING.

The major differences between wading and running are that in wading:

- a. Leg action is high and to the side, and
- b. There is great emphasis on stomach muscles.

Legs must be lifted high, yet to the side, to enable a competitor to jump over waves (up to a certain height). The side action is similar to that of a hurdler, and there is great strain on the thigh and inner-thigh muscles. To assist in development, cycling and/or squats are thigh extension exercises should be a part of training.

The legs come around to the side, with toes pointed backwards on exit from the water (to stop the wave from impeding your progress through the break). Also try to do sets of sit-ups at least three times a week to improve stomach muscles (if you try doing half a dozen in-and-outs around a buoy 70m from shore you'll know why you have to do sit-ups).

b. Porpoising

Once a competitor has negotiated the break to about waist depth, wading becomes too difficult, because the legs cannot be lifted through the water.

Once your maximum depth has been reached, you should switch to porpoising, or forward-plunging, under or over waves.

Whether you plunge under, or over, is up to you, and can only be determined through trial and error, and what you believe to be your skill level.

Porpoising is usually only done for a short distance, as once you reach waist depth the water depth increases rapidly. On average you will do between three to six "porpoises".

Most competitors seem to be able to porpoise at about the same standard (i.e., there's not much distance to be gained here).

However, certain techniques can give you a slight edge, and any edge is better than none.

The porpoise should also be used as a time of consolidation, both physically and mentally.

When you porpoise you should be controlling your breathing and using this brief time to survey where you are in relation to the buoys and the rest of the field. A mistake can be either made or corrected at this stage of the race.

iii. Wave-diving

Included in the porpoising section is a competitor's ability to master diving to the sea bed before a wave hits.

Judging whether to dive over or under a wave will come with time and practice. Eventually, only you can be the judge, as it will depend on your physical make-up and ability to perform the task.

In this section, more than any, there are more variables than any stage of the race. Here, particularly in big seas, you are at the mercy of the ocean.

More so than porpoising, wave-diving is as essential as wading. Timing and technique are critical. Competitors can lose many metres if they fail to dive early enough and are knocked back by the force of the wave.

Conversely, if a competitor goes for the bottom too early, he or she can run out of breath while waiting for the wave to pass overhead.

It's all a matter of timing, and knowing when to dive. As with all surf skills, this is a matter of practice.

The way the dive is effected is important.

- ❑ Before diving you should check to see if there are any waves following the one you are diving under. (This will enable you to know how long you should stay under, and if you have to be prepared to take another quick breath once the first wave has passed).
- ❑ Dive right to the bottom if possible*. The angle of the dive should be at least 45 degrees. If you dive at a greater angle and you haven't timed the dive correctly, you will be forced back by the wave, because your body is in a more upright position. If you dive at anything less than 45 degrees you will take longer to reach the bottom.
- ❑ Once on the bottom, grab the sand and bring your feet under your hands to prepare for the push-off. Grabbing the sand will stop you from being forced back by the wave. You will know if the wave has passed, either by looking (yes, under water) or by feel and/or sound.
- ❑ The push-off should be effected immediately the wave has passed, once again at 45 degrees. The angle of push is even more critical here than in the dive,

because when you surface any approaching wave will hit you hardest the greater the angle you are at. As you push off you should release all the air stored in your lungs, ready to take your first breath immediately after you surface.

NB: Sometimes the depth of the water makes it impossible to get right to the bottom. In such cases you should go as deep as the water is churning under the wave. If you open your eyes, you can distinguish the colour difference between where the wave is churning and where it is still (i.e. no water movement below the white water).

3. The swim

To a certain extent, you're on your own here. The pool training, which forms the base of your program, comes into play.

During the swim you should constantly be checking your position in relation the buoys (even if you are behind the pack: for they may be off-course). Many races have been lost by swimmers going off course. The best time to check your navigation is when going over a wave or swell. Again, this takes practice.

What you should never do, though, is break your stroke. The head should be raised, but you should continue to swim.

A good rule to follow is "swim your own race". At least if you do go off course you have no one to blame but yourself. Nine times out often you'll be glad you followed your own instincts.

a. Buoy turns

These are a personal thing. You can either take the buoy turn close or wide; with the bunch or without.

The size of the group you're in generally determines whether you will take a buoy turn wide or sharp.

Getting caught in a thrashing bunch can do wonders for the lungs' capacity to absorb water. The thing is, you just don't know what's going to happen at the buoys until you're there.

Generally it's often better to take the turn on the outside. While you may be covering extra distance, your stroke will not as upset as it would be in the bunch.

The smaller the field, the less it matters as to your positioning.

As mentioned, the great trap at the buoys is to be tangled on the anchoring ropes. But that shouldn't happen to you, as you've read this article.

The best practice is practice. Turning the buoys is a separate skill, and the development of a sound technique that suits you can save you precious seconds.

b. Return swim

Once around the last buoy, your sight immediately should focus on your shore marker (keeping in mind that you may have to swim through rips on the way home). You should always head for where's there's white water, which indicates a clean, break).

You should be looking behind you every so often (under your arm) checking for approaching waves. There's nothing worse than the "one that got away" wave.

c. Body surfing

The skill of body surfing is almost a subject in its own right (and perhaps needs to be addressed in greater detail). However, here are a few pointers in regard to the subject.

For our purposes, waves are of three types:

- i. Rolling
- ii. Dumping and
- iii. Broken.

They can be caught either as (a) they are about to break, or (b) broken. Catching a broken wave is difficult.

The size and shape of the wave will determine how you catch it. The bigger the wave, the less chance you'll have of holding it. Likewise, the same applies to dumping waves (where the wave height is greater than the depth of water below it, and indicated by the sand being churned up).

Practice, once more, will make you almost perfect.

For rolling waves it's best to try to become part of the wave (i.e. let it take you with it). You should try to let the wave surround you (relax). For dumpers, get as far ahead of the wave as possible.

Before climbing on any wave, take a deep breath.

i. Rolling waves

Up to about five feet, most rolling waves will be rideable. The basic rule to follow is to keep your head down as often as possible.

You should be flat, with your hands out in front (increased surface area/better flotation). Your thumbs should be crossed to simulate a surf plane, or hand board. This serves two purposes:

1. It keeps your body out of the water if you press down (good for catching your breath) and
2. The hands in this position streamline the body, eliminating drag.

(If hands are placed at the sides, drag increases and you will be prone to fall off the wave).

Once the wave is broken and you are down the face, your head should be down and should only turn when you need a breath. With the hand still in front, the head should be turned sideways (when possible). If the head is lifted it causes the body position to bend, creating drag on the chest, slowing the body and causing the wave to pass the surfer.

At a certain stage the wave will decrease to a size where it becomes necessary for a surfer to kick and plane to stay on. The planing action is usually one-handed swimming, with the head turned infrequently to the side. (A normal swim stroke does not work, as the body movement on small waves only slows the surfer to a speed less than the wave).

At all times the body should remain straight, but not tense. You must remain part of the wave and "think light". Good surfers (providing they're not more than 80kg, can ride ripples to shore.

ii. Dumping waves

The method for catching dumpers is the same as for rolling waves, except for the initial phase the dump (ouch).

As with even some large, rolling waves, catching the dumper is really a lottery. Some you win, some you don't.

The secret with dumpers is to get yourself as far in front of the wave as it breaks. This, of course, means you sometimes have to swim harder for the wave, and kick ferociously once aboard (an extra deep breath goes down extra well when your lungs are bursting as you tumble beneath an avalanche of churning sand and froth).

One technique in the initial stage is to place the hands in front, in line with the shoulders. Trevor Hendy seems to do this with remarkable success. It works. As you hit the trough, your hands should be used to push your body above the water line.

iii. Broken waves

While not fearsome to catch, broken waves are the most difficult to collect: especially when you can't stand.

If you see a broken wave approaching, it's sometimes best to stop and catch your breath, because you're going to need it for a sprint to get on board. It's no good to keep swimming, because that broken wave almost certainly will have some back-markers on it, and they'll pass you if you don't try to catch the wave.

In theory you should be swimming as fast as, or faster, than the broken wave you want to catch. In reality, it's impossible. But with a little luck, and with the skills you've practised, you can narrow the odds to 50-50.

As with all waves you can't afford to be tense, because you won't be allowing the wave to "become part of you". But at the same time, you'll have to be sprinting.

Timing is of the essence, because in a few seconds you have to judge the speed and force of the approaching white water and start swimming at the moment that will allow the wave to reach you as you are at your optimum level for catching it.

Sounds complicated, and it is.

As with all waves, it takes practice. Let it be said, that catching broken waves seems to be a fast-disappearing skill.

d. Return porpoise and wade

It's in this section of the race that you discover how fit, or unfit, you are. You will feel it not so much in the legs, but in the lungs and stomach.

The techniques are the same as used in the beginning of the race.

As soon as you start to porpoise and wade, you should check where the finish line is, as you may have swum off course. Now is the time to correct it.

4. Finish

The point to remember these days is that there are two sets of flags at the finish; there are the outer blue and white ones (40m apart), and the inner green (2m apart).

You have to finish between both sets. This can prove difficult, as evident at the 1991 Australian titles when the winner of the women's surf race and the over-24 surf race were disqualified for finishing incorrectly.

5. Psychological

While not wishing to delve into the innermost reaches of your mind, there are certain procedures/ techniques that you can practice in this relatively untouched area (at least for surf competitors).

The emphasis on psychological preparation for race cannot be under-stated. I would venture to say (or write) that it could contribute as much as 30 per cent of the difference between winning and losing.

Central to the psychological approach are the goals you set at the start of the season. That is what you are about.

The technique I recommend I call "self-realisation". Other called it visualization. Simply, this involves you telling yourself that you have what it takes. It is nothing more than a personal confidence-builder. It is you saying that you believe in yourself.

But first things first. You have to have done the training: right? Without having done enough, and the right type of training, no amount of "psyching" will get you the gold, or silver or bronze.

However, if you have done as much as you could, and as best as you could, then you should employ self-realisation.

Firstly, as mentioned, surf is a great leveler. In the surf the Olympic swimmers come back to the field because of the variables. That two-second advantage over 400m in the pool suddenly disappears, and other factors come into play. REMIND YOURSELF OF THAT.

During training you should be going over all the hours you are putting in, and what the sacrifice is for. This will keep alive the goals you have set. REMIND YOURSELF OF THAT.

At any time throughout the season you should visualise how your race will be swum. This is best done at quiet times (may be a break at work, at home after a day's training, in bed at night, or while sharing an intimate moment with the family pet).

You should imagine everything about the race (the venue, the flags, marshalling, the start, the race, your perfect stroke in the water, how strong you are in the wade, yourself winning). REMIND YOURSELF OF ALL YOU HAVE DONE.

As strange as it seems (and it is strange) it can get to the stage where you can dream the race at will.

On race-day you should go through all the above, continually.

As easy as it may sound, you should not be tense. Your tension should be converted into confidence, ready to be used as energy in the race.

Practice being calm at carnivals during the season (don't abuse the team captain for not entering you).

Taking tension into any race ruins your stroke. Tension needs to be converted into race energy.

Like physical work, psychological preparation needs to be practised.

TRAINING TIPS

1. If you're training for a surf race, which is about 400m, then you should train for that distance. It's no good basing your program on 800m or 200m. Overall, your program should be an "over-swim" program (i.e. centred on set of 600m: 3x200m, 6x100m and straight 600m). Most sets should be done with little rest.
2. Training shouldn't be a grind. You wouldn't be training unless you enjoyed it (unless you're a professional ironman)... all the hours lost at the pool when you could be writing that great novel or watching world championship mud wrestling. So enjoy training. If you don't feel good, don't train: take a day off. You'll feel better the next day.

There are two sayings: 1. "No pain, no gain" and 2. "Train, don't strain". What you have to do is strike a balance between the two.

3. One last piece of advice, relating specifically to workouts. Try doing ins-and-outs with a buoy placed at varying distances (min. 30m) beyond the break. Try building up to a dozen or so, with about two minutes rest between each.

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