

## Getting Around Turn Buoys



Once the swimmers have started, they will immediately form into packs and look for the first turn buoys. There are generally three types of buoys, but every race will be different. There is no standard for turns or turn buoys in open water swimming.

The first type of open water buoy is called an intermediate buoy. These buoys can be any color and are usually smaller than the larger turn buoys. Many times, it is not necessary to stay on any particular side of these buoys. In other words, swimmers can swim to the left or right sides of these buoys as they wish.

The second type of buoy is a turn buoy. These are the most important buoys in a course. These buoys are usually large and orange or red in color. Most times, these turn buoys can be seen from a distance unless waves or boats are in the way. Swimmers must round these turn buoys in one particular direction. The Head Referee will inform the swimmers if they must keep their left shoulder or right shoulder next to the turn buoys during the pre-race meeting. Sometimes, the swimmers must go around the last turn buoy in a different direction than the other buoys along the course. The buoys are usually anchored, but because of waves and currents, they can move during the race.

This fact brings up an important rule of thumb for any open water swimmer. It is important to **EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**. In other words, every open water swimmer should be flexible and understand that the race is not in a controlled environment like pool swimming and things often go wrong or unexpected happenings occur. Currents can dramatically shift during a race or large waves can dislodge turn buoys.

The intermediate buoys often serve as guides between the turn buoys, but that does not necessarily mean the intermediate buoys and turn buoys are perfectly lined up.

The third type of buoy is the finish buoy. The finish buoy can range from balloons near the finish line or a lane line funneling the swimmers to a finish pad, but the buoys come in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors. Occasionally, there are no special finish buoys. Whatever the case is, it is important to know how to navigate the last 50-100 meters of the race because close races are the norm in open water swimming.

Positioning before and around the turn buoys is one of the most important skills to learn for competitive open water swimmers. Many races have been lost because swimmers had poor turns and lost valuable time around the turn buoys.

In competitive races, there will generally be many swimmers going around the turn buoys at one time. The packs at FINA and world championships races can be as large as 25 swimmers fighting around a turn buoy at one time.

Because going around the turn buoys is so critical, the best swimmers start positioning themselves for a fast turn well before reaching the turn buoy. Some swimmers will protect their position if they think they are in the “right” position and other swimmers will speed up or make moves against their competition if they are not in a good position. Obviously, heading into and swimming around the turn buoys among dozens of swimmers is difficult and often results in numerous changes in positions and leads, especially around the last few turn buoys in the race.

It is important for swimmers to swim tightly around the turn buoys, but it is also extremely important for swimmers to protect themselves and their goggles in the pack around the buoys. Arms get tangled and legs get pulled in the midst of a lot of kicking, thrashing and splashing. Swimmers can get kicked, elbowed, bumped, pulled, banged, kneed, cut off, scratched and jostled at the turns, especially if swimmers are asked to make U-turns or 90° turns.

Although the intermediate buoys and turn buoys help swimmers navigate the course, a lead escort boat or kayak is often available and can help keep the lead pack on the straightest line.