

## Racing Strategies



NOTE: There are numerous racing strategies and tactics to use in a race. Many of these strategies and tactics are dependent on one's goals and level of experience. The strategies and tactics explained below are for the experienced swimmer who wishes to be highly competitive with their peers.

Race strategy is often dictated by one's competitors, the venue and the water conditions. However, the classic race strategy is at once simple and difficult to execute.

The best open water swimmers have a combination of great endurance and sprint speed along with a high navigational IQ and are savvy racers.

In races between 1K and 10K, the world's best swimmers are always in the lead pack, jabbing and fading like a skilled boxer. They rarely lead the race and always drafts inches from their competitors. Because they are drafting so close to their competitors, they infrequently lift their heads to look forward. They are also masters of fast and efficient feedings at the feeding stations or while taking gel packs from their swim suits.

Once the lead pack starts to thin out and separate itself from the rest of the competitors towards the last half of the race, the world's most experienced swimmers move up to the second, third or fourth position, never much more than a body length from the leader.

In a 10K race, after the 8K mark, if any swimmer makes a break, the best instinctively follow, hanging on right behind their competitor's feet or immediately somewhere off to the side between their hips and feet.

At the end, as the remaining lead swimmer or swimmers approach the last turn buoy, the best open water swimmers move into position to take the lead. Either right before or immediately after the last turn buoy, they step up their pace to either take the lead or swim right next to the leader. Then, because they have conserved more energy than their competitors throughout the race, they have the energy to begin a final kick, often brushing up against their competitors until they can "break" their competitors.

Race strategy in open water swimming involves a variety of issues that may not be readily apparent to the pool swimmer. For example, in large domestic races or in major international races, there may be a flotilla of boats – official's boats, escort boats and media boats – around the swimmers throughout the race. Many of these boats emit exhaust and create waves that can be irritating to the swimmers. They can also block the view of turn buoys and finish lines.

After the start, packs will form immediately. The top swimmers know where their top competitors are. While it is important to draft, there are also limited instances where leading is a necessary race tactic. For example, if the pace is too fast, some swimmers have sprinted to the lead of the pack...and then slowed down to purposefully slow down the entire group's pace.

Another key tactic that is difficult for many newcomers to learn is how to avoid getting boxed in between swimmers to the left, right, front or rear. Once a swimmer is boxed in, his or her ability to break free and keep up with a breakaway swimmer is significantly reduced.

Race strategy also involves self-protection in open water races. Swimmers must be careful of flying elbows and competitors bumping against each other. The best swimmers stay calm and move into a better position within the group rather than retaliate. However, for many swimmers, the first instinct is to fight back. Resist this instinct and focused on your goal.

The pace will significantly increase in the second half of race. Sometimes, two or more packs form. If two packs form, swim with the faster pack even if you do not know which pack has the best line to the finish.

Referee boats will be visible throughout the race. Swimmers may hear the referee whistle and point to swimmers who are in violation of race rules. Each race will vary in its rules and how these rules are interpreted. At the highest levels, rules are strictly enforced and several referees will be on the race course.

For example, in major international competitions, the Head Referee will frequently blow a shrill whistle when competitors jostle each other. The whistle is only a warning. If there is a more serious infraction, the Referee will issue a yellow card. The Referee will write the name of the swimmer who committed the infraction on a white board and will hold up a yellow card. This is a serious warning, but it is no reason to slow down or give up one's position in the pack.

If there is a serious infraction, then the Referee will write the name of the swimmer who committed the infraction on white board and hold up a red card. A red card means the swimmer is immediately disqualified.

What actions lead to red cards? The official FINA rule is as follows: Obstructing, interfering with or making intentional contact with another swimmer shall, if in the opinion of the Referee deemed to be "unsporting", will lead to disqualification whether made by a swimmer or their escort safety craft.

Practically, this means anything like punching, elbowing or pulling on the legs or body of a competitor leads to an immediate disqualification. Also, swimming another swimmer off-course or purposefully spilling their water cups are other examples of serious infractions.

Because there is so much physical contact between swimmers in open water swimming, one good prevention measure is to put a light amount of Vaseline on one's ankles, lower legs and shoulders before the race. This Vaseline will help ward off other swimmers from effectively grabbing other's ankles, legs and arms.

In local races and most open water races, rules are generally not so diligently enforced and it is basically a free-for-all, especially during the starts, turns and finishes. Beware and be careful.