

TRAINING AND TECHNIQUE



OUT IN THE OPEN

Executing Tight Buoy Turns

Tight turns can lop off critical seconds in a close open water race

Most open water races—whether they're 1 mile or 10—use brightly colored inflatable buoys to mark the course. Although sighting off these large spheroids or pyramids placed at strategic points along the course isn't always as easy as their enormous size and conspicuous colors might suggest, learning how to use them to your advantage to execute tight buoy turns can help you edge out your competition.

Rule one for buoy races is to swim in as straight a line as possible to the next buoy. The closer you keep to the course's straight lines, the less distance you'll have to travel and the faster you'll finish. As you get within 20 or so yards of the buoy, sight more than usual to fine-tune your path to the turn.

As you're approaching the buoy, if you're in a pack or racing another swimmer, move to the inside, so that you have an unobstructed beeline. This means that if you're turning clockwise around the buoy, you want to have other swimmers on your left shoulder and the buoy on your right. If you're turning counterclockwise, getting inside means putting the buoy at your left shoulder while keeping other competitors on your right. Getting the inside line on a buoy means you can control the turn, forcing your competition to go a little wider and adding time and distance to their swim. However, those swimmers will also be jockeying for an inside line, so watch out for wayward elbows and feet in the scuffle for the tightest turn.

In executing the turn, one of the easiest ways to change direction is to anchor your hip and shoulder on the side closest to the buoy as you take your last stroke into the turn. This will automatically force your body to begin changing direction. Some swimmers also favor a maneuver in which that harder stroke on the side closest to the buoy follows through into a flip to the back and a backstroke stroke with the opposite arm to keep the momentum going. In a corkscrew move, you'll flip seamlessly back onto your stomach with the next pull and be facing the direction you want to go. This approach is fancy, fast, and fun but requires some practice prior to race day to perfect.

Once you've cleared the buoy, reestablish your open water racing rhythm as soon as possible to maximize the efficiency of your turn and put even more distance between yourself and your competition.—ELAINE K. HOWLEY