



# Para-Open Water

## Tips for going from pool to open water

Accessibility can be limited at open water venues, and there's no single, simple solution that can make open water swimming easy for para-athletes.

But there are a few things para-athletes can do to ease entry to open water swimming, says [Laura Dennison](#), a New England Masters Swim Club member.

Dennison, who competed in five events at the 2016 U.S. Paralympic trials, has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. She also enjoys open water swimming at Walden Pond and other open water venues in the Boston area, and she's learned how to make these places more accessible despite her mobility challenges.

If you're looking to branch out into open water, the following tips and suggestions could make that process a little easier, no matter what disability you're working with.

- **Build up a strong pool foundation.** All swimmers can benefit from this advice: Use the offseason to build strength and endurance in the controlled confines of a pool. That way, when spring comes, you can head into open water confident that you have the endurance you'll need to face currents, wind, waves, and more.
- **Ask a friend to join you.** Swimming is always better with friends, and for para-athletes, having a friend along who can serve as a supporter, guide, or just a swim buddy can vastly improve your experience. Dennison, 41, likes to swim with a friend who also has cerebral palsy. "We're about the same pace, so we usually swim together and she does a lot of open water swimming too," she says.



- **Connect with established groups.** Dennison has completed a few disability-friendly triathlons over the years and has connected with groups that support such efforts, including Challenged Athletes Foundation based in San Diego and Dare2tri in Chicago. Similar adaptive sports and fitness groups in your area can help you work on your open water skills.
- **Choose a calm, accessible venue.** One of the biggest barriers, Dennison says, is access to the actual water, so look for a location that offers a relatively easy way in and out. For example, at Walden Pond, Dennison's friend will back her SUV down the boat ramp so that Dennison can get as close to the water as possible.
- **Prioritize safety.** In addition to never swimming alone, consider asking a kayaker or paddleboarder to join you to assist in case you get into trouble. Brightly colored tow floats also make you more visible to other water users and may offer some limited support if you need to take a break. Adaptive gear such as a wetsuit, snorkel, fins, and paddles may also help.
- **Speak up.** Although para-athletes shouldn't always have to work to make an event, group, or venue accessible to them, the coaches and event organizers who are running groups and swim events often might not realize they're excluding someone. If there's an event you want to take part in or a group you want to join, reach out to the organizer and ask if they're willing to help you access it. Of course, not all of them will be responsive or helpful, but some will be glad you've pointed out their oversight and work with you to make their offerings more welcoming to all.



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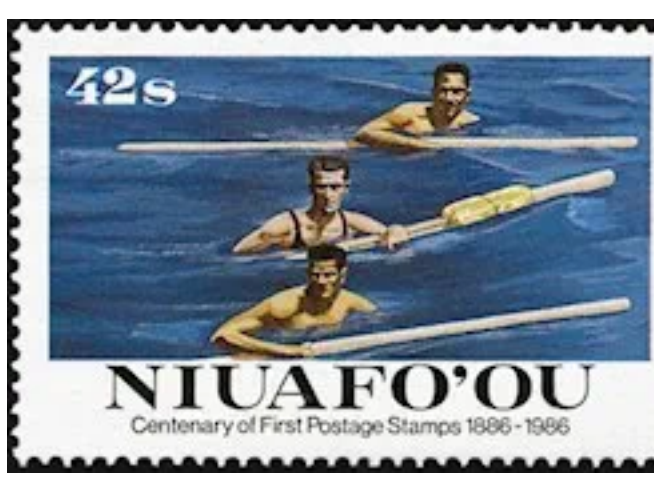
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About The Author

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Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications including [AARP.org](#), *Atlas Obscura*, *espnW*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. A lifelong swimmer who specializes in cold water marathon swimming, she has contributed to *SWIMMER* magazine since 2009 and [USMS.org](#) since 2012. Contact her via her website: [elainekhowley.com](#)

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