Lesson 3: Swimming Straight and Sighting

If needed, first review Lesson 1: Equipment, Pop up drill, recovery position. Are you comfortable with a recovery position? If you are, you should not need to put your feet down at any point while swimming.

And review Lesson 2: Swimming is all about breath control. There are two different kinds of breathing (chest and abdominal); Have you mastered complete emptying with the chest wall and diaphragm, using humming and snorting techniques? Are you able to keep your breathing under control over a longer distance, and under varying breathing cadences?

By this point you should be getting in some extra open water swims to practice what you have learned.

For those who have mastered breathing in water enough to swim an entire 800m loop, today's lesson is about how to swim straight when there is no line beneath you.

For those still struggling with breathing, today's lesson will be to problem-solve with more breathing practice.

Today's basics: how to swim straight.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Although the ATLS is 2.1 km, most people make it a longer swim because they do not swim straight. This adds to your swim time in the water as well.

So how do we swim straight if there is no line underneath us to guide us?

1. You could just take one look and just keep your head down, and hope you are swimming in a straight line, or
2. You could get your bearings regularly by popping up to have a look at where you are going, using landmarks on land or buoys on the water.

Know your asymmetry: It is important for you to know if you have a tendency to swim slightly to the left or to the right, a tendency you will have to compensate for to keep swimming straight. Most of us have a slight asymmetry of both our arm movements and our physical strengths side to side and both of these can be affected by the tightness of our wetsuit fit. However, the more you swim, the more that improves.

Lesson

1. **How straight do you swim?**
   Start swimming at the 0m buoy, initially looking at the direction of the 50m buoy. Now swim towards it without looking for it for 40-50 arm strokes. Where did you wind up? To the left or to the right of your intended target? Were you close or not? Did you try to use other things to guide you—like the ripples in the sand? or shadows and sunlight? If you are a big drifter, you may need someone to video your swimming to analyze your asymmetrical movements. Otherwise, you can otherwise easily correct your swimming orientation by craning your head up to confirm landmarks more often than someone who does not deviate much. Unfortunately, the more you have to lift your head up to sight, the more your body position is affected, and therefore the slower you go. For faster swim times, it is very important to learn the mechanics necessary to swim straight, so you don't have to sight as much.

2. **Sighting techniques**
   Sighting is the process where you pop your head up briefly to get your bearings, to home in on the target you are swimming toward, whether that is a buoy, or a landmark or a finish line. You should have a good idea of what landmarks you will be utilizing before you get into the water! If you are unfamiliar with an open water swim course, scout out your swim route ahead of time, making a mental note of where landmarks are and when you will need to use them. Also note whether the sun's glare may also become an issue.

   Easiest sighting technique: Since your head may be coming out of the water slightly as you turn to breathe (choppy waters will force you to lift your head higher to see over waves), it would make sense for you to attach your sighting head movement to your turning-to-breathe movement. Just crane your neck upward and look forward before you turn to breathe. You can learn to do this on both sides if you breathe symmetrically (every three arm strokes).

   More difficult: "Alligator eyes" between strokes—your eyes sit just above the surface between arm strokes, so that sighting is not associated with a breath cycle. This is most effective when waters are calm and no one is in front of you, and it minimizes any tendency for body position disruption.

Regardless of which technique you use, you have only a second to capture a "snapshot" of what is in front of you, a picture you can process for the next few seconds while you decide whether to make any small corrections to your swim course.

3. **Sighting in chop, waves, and swells**
   With mild chop, or when needing to see over a swimmer in front of you, you may need to lift your head slightly higher out of the water to find your target, or consider looking for a more distant landmark that is in line with your swim goal, such as a tree or building on land, or a mountain peak. Sighting gets harder in wavy water, or when there are swells. You have to learn to feel if you are in a trough or on the crest of a wave or swell, and time your sighting to maximize your ability to see what you need to see. Otherwise, you will only see water. You may also have to sight more frequently, since you may not always see what you are expecting to see. As well, choppy conditions are more likely to push you off course.
4. **More distance practice**
   Put your sighting techniques to the test, by sighting for each buoy of the 800m loop. See if you can read each buoy's meter measure as you swim by it, and without breaking your swim rhythm. Also look at sighting landmarks farther into the distance, such as a mountain peak or a building.

Do some practice on your own this week!