



# Otter Aquatics Newsletter

## No 41. October 2018

Dear swimmers

Welcome to the October 2018 edition of the Otter Aquatics newsletter. This month we spend a bit of time on addressing anxiety in the water – both in the pool and in the open water. In May this year we ran a story of one of our new learn-to-swimmers who had a particular fear of water generally (aquaphobia if you like) and how she overcame it. This month we start off with another very personal think piece on the topic, then we provide some advice on how to relax in the water, to accept the open water elements for what they are, to develop rhythm in the pool and the open water and, above all else, to develop a feel and a love for the water.

Look inside to find:

-  'Overcoming the monster'
-  Collette's story
-  But what about experienced swimmers?
-  Fear of the unknown – or unseen – in an open water swim
-  How to get into your rhythm and flow
-  2019 European swimming holidays – it's time to give them some serious consideration
-  Stroke trip of the month – a new series on swimming technique myths
-  And our quiz, quote and pic of the month.



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-  Learn-to-swim instruction, stroke correction and swimfit coaching – all levels
-  Open water swimming instruction and training
-  Swimming as therapy
-  Swimming-based tourism – domestic and international

## Overcoming the monster

*Tracey Lloyd submitted this very sensitive and thoughtful piece for the newsletter on her very personal battle with aquaphobia. She addresses a common problem for **all** swimmers (yes, all of us- at least some of the time and in some circumstances), but especially for those new to swimming in general and to open water swimming in particular. Many thanks to Tracey for providing her insights and her honesty.*

There is a monster that lives inside all of our heads. It is a serpent that says the world is a scary place and be careful. It's a throwback to when we were Neanderthals and needed to decide whether to fight or flee when faced with a sabre toothed tiger. I don't know about you but I don't see too many sabre toothed tigers prowling around the pool but, like all of us, I have that serpent, only mine gets out of control at times and sees danger everywhere and tells me that I'm not strong enough, good enough or brave enough to cope with this scary world.

My monster got out of control when I least expected it, while I was away on holiday. After a very stressful long period at work, I found relaxation on a Sydney trip (there's nothing like the beach for waving away your cares). In hindsight my defences were down and the monster spied its opportunity. I'd had a lovely week in Sydney, reacquainting myself with the ocean pools and beaches of the eastern suburbs and further afield. My journal was full of interesting experiences and anecdotes including the baby hippo that I took a swimming lesson from at Taronga Park Zoo. The planned highlight of the trip for me was to participate in my first massed swim - the Dawny's to Cockatoo swim at Balmain on a Sunday morning.

### *Panic at the Swim*

After two days of miserably wet Sydney weather, Sunday morning dawned with a beautiful blue sky. The four warriors had a slight mishap with directions to Balmain, which was rectified with my trusty GPS. We strode into a rainbow sea of swim caps, orange, pink, yellow, green, red, purple and white denoting different distances and ages. After a safety briefing - in all its Sunday best legal finery - the competitors marched like ants back to the nest, around the pool and down to what would become the pontoon of doom. The first lot of caps were called to the water and entered like mermaids and mermen. Lemming like, each successive group of caps dived into the murky cold depths and soon there were only orange caps left on land. The Monster was starting to take hold and it didn't help when we were hurried down the pontoon with exhortations that are more fitting for the Australian rugby team than a bunch of Sunday swimmers. I walked to the end of the pontoon trying to de-escalate my own behaviour; but it was no good. I was hyperventilating, shaking and my heart was beating out of my chest. I decided for my own safety that I was in no fit state to enter the water and deflated, defeated and teary, I walked back down the pontoon to the safety of terra firma.

### *Tips for Overcoming the Monster*

From that low point it became easy for me to find reasons not to get in the water and I spent the majority of last summer and winter allowing those excuses created by the monster to deprive me of the freedom and soul rejuvenation I find in swimming.

What has worked for me in overcoming The Monster? It has been a slow process - the Monster took away my enjoyment in swimming and life, as it does, got busy. After much research (a great excuse for not swimming) I found a few ways that helped me get back in the water (including a

swim in 13.7C water at Beverly Whitfield Pool, Shellharbour on the NSW South Coast). I must stress that these are tips that worked for me and they may or may not work for you. Never discount the great improvements that can be made with working with a psychologist or psychiatrist. I owe my ability to manage my symptoms to the work I have done over the years with mental health professionals.

\* Aromatherapy

As well as using lavender for its calming properties I found that smells that are associated with positive experiences helped to encourage me back in the water; to me the smell of coconuts is closely linked to Reef Oil suntan lotion and sunny days enjoying myself on the beach.

\* Visualisation

Visualisation is a technique where you use your imagination to paint a picture in your mind of you completing an activity confidently. Far away from the beach I created the mental picture of swimming confidently at Queens Beach, starting out from in front of the toilet block and stroking confidently towards the rocks at the northern end of the beach. In my mind there is a beautiful blue sky with calm water and the sun gently warming my back, I can taste the saltwater on my lips and see my marker points: the first storm water pipe, then the picnic tables, the second storm water pipe and the sandbags indicating the closeness of the rocks. When I look down I see small schools of bait fish, golden sand and deep green and maroon seaweed. I can come back to this calm oasis when I feel overwhelmed.

\* Meditation

Related to visualisation, meditation can help by teaching you to slow and control your breathing (a helpful skill for anyone wanting to become an endurance swimmer) and by giving you a place of calm to find within yourself through the use of mantras.

\* Journaling

I use journaling in all areas of my life to assist me with removing some of the mental clutter and to record the highlights of life. There are many ways to journal from the traditional written journal, creativity journals, guided journals and goal setting journals. Journaling can also be a mechanism that allows you to view your problems from the point of a neutral person and can help you to solve them. When I was overcoming the monster, reviewing my journal and the highlights of good swim days helped to re-frame my approach to the water.

\* Exposure Therapy

I recently returned to Balmain and stood on the pontoon where the monster took me away from swimming. Being back in that environment (even though it was a cold winter day and I would not be swimming) put me straight back into the headspace I was in on that day the monster won. I found my heart rate started to increase and my breathing shallowed. I used meditation and visualisation techniques to control my breathing, reduce the panic and imagine myself stroking freely towards Cockatoo Island.

I know my monster will always be there but at the moment I'm controlling the monster, not the other way around.

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## Collette's story

Collette Walsh wrote in May about her fear of water but also of her greater ambition to be a swimmer. She wrote 'my progress was by no means smooth, and I'm sure there were times when Mark believed he had met his match! (*ed: I actually think I am pretty good with helping people deal with a fear of the water but, in Collette's case, she was very close to being right.*) Panic was my frequent companion in the water, and I often thought my desire to swim was just a pipe dream. As a retired psychologist I felt such a failure that I could not cure my own phobia. I tried self-help reading, relaxation exercises, meditation, hypnotherapy, and watched numerous You-tube clips about overcoming fear in the water. All this effort had limited effect. I remained fearful, frustrated and angry with myself, and was on the verge of giving up my quest to become a swimmer.'

Collette saw her GP who prescribed some anti-anxiety medication. While this remedy might not be the preferred recourse for all of us – and it is unlikely to be a long-term solution – it certainly worked for Collette which we all witnessed on her next swim which began with a jump in at the deep end. She reported that she 'could move through the water on my front and my back, from the shallow to the deep end, not only without fear but loving the experience!'

To be immersed in water – whether actually swimming or not – is a great relaxant. Just to float, on your front or back, and experience the weightlessness of your body in the water is a great way to let your cares disappear. Remember to let all your body's tensions and all your cares pass from your body to the water. Breathe deeply and slowly and just relax.

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## But what about experienced swimmers?

If we are honest with ourselves, we realise that there are times and circumstances when we all feel anxiety in a swim, especially an ocean swim. Anxiety in the water is very much a personal thing. In my case, the triggers are any one or more of these three: cold water, rough water, a competitive swim with lots of people around bustling and in body contact with me (mostly unintended but not always) – which has a lot to do with why I choose not to compete much these days. Open water swims are meant to be enjoyable, right?

Others may feel apprehensive faced with other circumstances such as swimming in very deep water, a good example being Lake Orta, our flagship European swimming holiday. *Lago d'Orta*, as those in the know and others who like to show off call it, is certainly very deep indeed and it has been known to scare people off swimming across it. But we only swim on the top of the water, so it doesn't matter how deep it is, so it is therefore an irrational fear. As with all irrational water-based anxieties (as for rational fears, keep reading), it is important to keep in mind that the anxiety is psychological. That is not to say that it is not real but, once you realise that the cause has no physical basis, it is much easier to come to terms with.

How do you overcome both of these anxiety-generating situations? Lengthen your stroke and work on breathing more deeply and more slowly. Anxiety, whatever its cause, delivers short strokes and hurried, shallow breathing – inefficient at the best of times and likely to result in greater anxiety. Just relax.

But what if I am the competitive sort? Competitive swimmers can also suffer anxiety, especially if they have gone out too hard and hit their watery wall before the end. They need to adjust their

speed and the level of their effort; in other words, they need to know what they can achieve and what they can't. For a long competitive swim, just like a long run or bike ride, the competitor needs to know what pace he or she can maintain for the duration of the event. They need to get into that pace as early as possible in the event (i.e. don't go out too hard) and just stay at that pace until the last hundred metres or so, when they can put in a final sprint. Remember what Dory said to Nemo – just keep swimming, that's all you have to do'. Even for competitive types, they need to learn to relax their mind. Easy.

In most cases, it is the journey that is the enjoyment rather than the finish – but to win or do well sometimes is good too (as someone has said 'I'm not competitive but I don't like to be beaten'). Then again, there is certainly a great deal of satisfaction to be gained when you finish a long swim, regardless of the time taken or the position you finish in. You will neither enjoy it nor get that satisfaction if you put yourself in a panic-inducing situation. So read on for tips on how to prevent it or deal with it if it does occur.

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## Fear of the unknown – or the unseen – in an open water swim

We don't need to worry about crocs, sharks, stingers, currents or rips in pools (actually there are some pools ..... but let's not go down that track for the moment). But, in the open water, fear of these things are quite rational fears. It could be dangerous and foolish if we don't take these things into consideration in an open water swim. The answer – to use some management-mumbo jumbo speak – is to do a risk assessment. Here are a few risks in OWS and what to do about them.

-  **Crocs.** Simple answer – just don't swim in places where there are likely to be crocs.
-  **Sharks.** After crocs, these critters are right at the top of the list so let's get it out of the way early. Check out some earlier newsletters for more info – in particular editions in late 2015 and early 2016 (available on the website – or ask me for copies). Suffice to say, at this stage, that the stats are on our side with only one fatal shark attack per year on average in Australia since records began in the 1890s. In the next newsletter, with the warmer weather approaching, I will devote space to the shark issue, especially some dos and don'ts
-  **Stingers:** Either avoid the water if they are about or wear a stinger suit. Learn how to treat stings (see January 2016 newsletter – more about that in the next newsletter too).
-  **Rips and other currents.** Learn how to pick a rip and when and where not to swim. Take advice from those who know – especially surf lifesavers.
-  **Rough and cold water.** One of the key features and delights of open water swimming is that we take environmental conditions as we find them and that includes rough water and cold water. We need to know our own limitations in regard to rough conditions: if it is too rough for you, don't swim. As for cold water, you may need to get a wetsuit which come in a variety of lengths (short or long), thicknesses of neoprene and fashion. If it is extra cold, you might also like to get a neoprene cap, gloves and perhaps even shoes. We are all different but here are my criteria for donning a wetsuit: if the water temperature is below 20° and I am planning a swim of one hour or more. Before next winter, I will write some more on the beauty and downsides of swimming in cold water.

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## How to get into your rhythm and flow

In this article, we are mainly focussed on long-ish swims in the open water, but the lessons can easily be adapted for long pool swims or for competitive OWSs. Some terms which I tend to use on this topic include mindfulness, focus, concentration, thinking of your stroke, and even meditative sub-maximal exertion (mouthful? I can explain), 'zen' swimming (laugh if you will but it's all about the former) and, above all, relaxation.

OK, so here are some tips:

-  Get in the right frame of mind before you get in the water. Imagine what it's going to feel like in the water before you get in. Some people like to practise their yoga on the beach before all the other swimmers turn up. It helps to be relaxed and calm before you start swimming and not be checking on your watch (or other electronic gadget, Tracey) too closely before the start or while you are swimming. Try to set aside sufficient time for your swim so that you're not rushing before, during or after
-  Actively seek your rhythm (some might call it 'flow'). You will only know what your rhythm is from repeated practice over similar conditions and similar distances. Once you know what it feels like in your body and your mind you can guide both towards it again and again
-  Don't rush it. Your rhythm or flow doesn't happen as soon as you hit the water. Allow your mind and body the time and space to get there. If it is a competitive swim, avoid the temptation to go out too fast – you will tire and not do as well as you could. Keep any sprinting to when the finish is in sight. In the initial phases, work on deepening your inhalation and exhalation and lengthening your stroke
-  Concentrate and find a focus. Concentrate on one particular aspect of your swimming technique at a time (e.g. entry, catch, pull, body roll, kick, body alignment) and keep focused on that part for a time before you move on to the next. The trick is to gradually move from active or conscious control to lightly monitoring of any particular aspect of your technique while preventing your mind from wandering
-  Don't hold your breath. As soon as you've taken a full breath and put your face back in the water, let the air escape fully and gently – fill your lungs on the inhalation and let it completely out on the exhalation. Relax as the air is bubbling out. Use your nose as well as your mouth to exhale. Exhalation, especially through the nose, is a tried and proven yoga technique to relax. Remember that you exhale fully and evenly every time your face is in the water
-  Sense your surroundings. Listen to the sound of your exhaled bubbles and the water, note how the water feels against your skin as it passes down your body and feel how it supports you. Know where you are at geographically in your swim. Stay in the moment. Don't think about what you're going to cook for dinner or the other 99 things on your to do list. Just swim. This is *your* time. This is mindfulness

- 👤 Don't swim *too* slowly. You need to be challenged to find your rhythm, but not too much. Find a pace that's comfortable for the distance you're swimming, and then increase it fractionally if you wish. Think purposeful swimming rather than either plodding or sprinting
- 👤 Swim with other people. Doing stuff in company aids in relaxation, especially when anxiety might be around the corner – and you enjoy it more
- 👤 If/when all of this happens for you, you might like to try 'Zen swimming'. This is a technique which you could employ when you have found your rhythm, when you are mindful of what your body is doing and its surroundings ... and when you are relaxed. It needs to happen with 'sub-maximal effort' – i.e. when you are swimming at less than flat out. To do it, focus on your sighting point every 20 strokes or so (more or less depending on the wind and wave conditions). So long as every time you look up to check on your sighting point, it is still where it is supposed to be, close your eyes while continuing that focus and concentration. Extend the time that your eyes are closed from, say, every 20 strokes, to every 50 and perhaps even every 100. You will be still be on course if your stroke is symmetrical, the water conditions are calm and you have maintained your concentration. Now this is real meditative swimming. My fellow swimmers will only notice if I am doing it when I have lost my concentration and veered off course. One of our regular OWSers has gone down in history for doing a complete 180 while trying Zen. Don't worry, Don, we won't reveal your identity
- 👤 Everyone experiences rhythm and flow differently, and we all will have our own ways of finding it, so experiment and share your findings over your après-swim coffee. You won't find it every time you swim but the more aware you can be of how you feel the more often you will find it
- 👤 But what if I am just a plodder of a swimmer; how can all this help me? If you conscientiously employ these methods, you will find that you will be so relaxed and in the groove that your previous 25 metre, 50 metre, 100 metre or more maximum is instantly doubled, tripled or more.

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## 2019 European swimming holidays

There has been some interest over the past week or two about next year's European swimming holidays. So it's high time to get serious about expressions of interest. The trips under consideration so far are:

- 👤 **Italy's Lake Orta** – likely dates are late August/early September (after this, the lake is too cold)
- 👤 **Lake Constance/Bodensee. A Three Country European Cycling and Swimming Odyssey** (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) – likely dates early/mid September

 **Greek Islands Swimming Adventure: Rhodes and Symi:** likely dates mid/late September (before this the Med is too hot!)

For information on each trip, please go to the website <http://www.otteraquatics.com.au/swim-tours.html>. There are links there to all three trips with information relevant for 2018. Details for 2019 trips will be similar but prices will likely do as prices do – increase a little.

Importantly, the trips will only go ahead if each trip has at least six participants.

So between now and early December (that's not far away), please let me know if you are interested in coming along. In early December, I will issue invoices for deposits which must be received by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018 in order for me to make bookings. Balances will be due by the end of May 2019.

The cost of getting to and from Europe is up to you, as is the cost of getting from one trip to another, assuming you want to do more than one. Each trip has its own price structure: all include accommodation, breakfasts and local transport and some, but not all, have lunches included.

I will be able to be more definite about which trips will go ahead and their dates when I have collated responses from you.

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## Swimming technique myth #1: cupping your hand to achieve a good catch

*(No, I don't have a lisp. This is about myths as in 'widely held but false beliefs or ideas')*

Despite the fact that there is plenty of empirical evidence that proves otherwise, many swimmers continue to believe that cupping your hands helps to achieve a good catch.

For many years now, most of the best swimmers in the world have been relaxing their hands and fingers for the recovery, entry and catch phases of the freestyle stroke with fingers slightly apart. A number of studies undertaken over the past ten years have proven that you hold more water with relaxed hands and fingers very slightly apart than with hands cupped with fingers together.

When we part our fingers, water does not simply flow through the gap. Tests have found that a small gap creates surface tension and a vortex between the fingers which hold water in a kind of 'webbed hands' effect. A relaxed hand with fingers slightly apart also creates a bigger wake behind it than a cupped hand. In some tests this was up to 53 percent.

What's the optimum finger spacing then? That depends on a lot of things but it is reportedly between 20 and 40 percent of the finger width. This isn't much but it is important to have it. For most of us simply relaxing our hands will result in a small gap appearing between the fingers which will be about right. Although it's impossible to measure what is perfect, this will result in a definite improvement over cupped hands and closed fingers.

We all know (right?) that the catch is a very important part of the freestyle stroke to prepare for maximum propulsive force and to avoid unnecessary drag and possible shoulder injury. And we also know that the best way to achieve a good catch is to arrive at an 'early vertical forearm'. We

should aim at a more-or-less straight arm from elbow to finger tips – or, at least a gentle curve (visualise reaching over a barrel), but no cupped hands. Our maximum muscular effort can only deliver propulsive force after the hand and forearm have become vertical. Up until then, we should relax muscle tension in the arms and hands and conserve muscular energy for the push and pull. Check out underwater shots from the Olympics or other big swimming events.

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## Quiz of the month

The answer to last month's quiz ('What is the name of the iconic 1.5k open water swim which operates every day of the year starting from Manly Lifesaving Club at South Steyne Beach in Sydney to Shelly Beach and return?' – we do this swim on our 'Iconic and Historic Swimming Places of Sydney' swimtour') is the **Bold and Beautiful**. And the winner is Sydney-based swimming-tour supremo, **Peter Munro**, who has done at least one of our European trips every year from 2015 to 2017. He has also done the B&B many times (well, he is a Sydney-sider after all). He is currently swimming in and around Symi Island in Greece, checking it out for the rest of us next year.

This month's quiz question: is a rip a current or a tide?

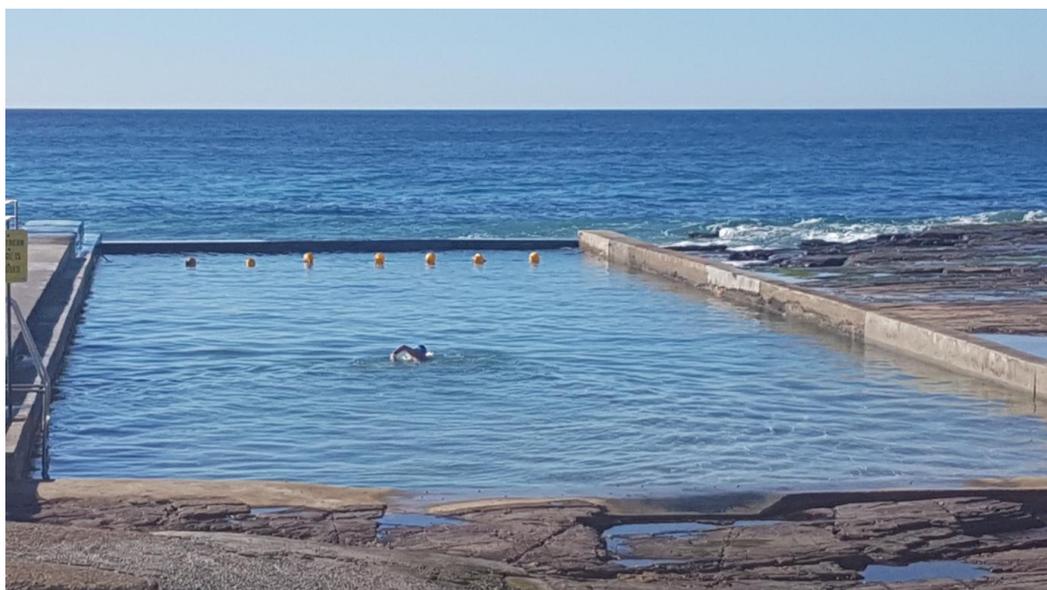
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## Quote of the month

*'The open water swimmer develops the courage to leave the security and comfort of the beach to embrace the life-threatening but life-affirming uncertainty of the sea'*

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## Pic of the month



Last month Tracey Lloyd visited her childhood home of Austinmer on the NSW south coast which just happens to be the home of the Austinmer Otters, a winter swimming club. Here is one of the otters (or perhaps it is it Tracey?) swimming in 13.7° water in the Austinmer rock baths.

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## Unsubscribe

As scintillating as this newsletter no doubt is to everyone, I have no wish to clog up people's inboxes if they have lost interest. If this is the case, please reply to this email with the word UNSUBSCRIBE in the subject line or body and I will unsubscribe you.

