

Getting Back To The Lake

A Guide To Those First Sessions Back

South West Swim Head Coach, Jason Tait



With lakes around the country due to reopen, or already in the early stages of their spring / summer season, many swimmers are looking forward to getting back into the water after spending most of their time in the pool. Through the winter months some of you may have been dipping in the lakes still, some hardened winter swimmers would still have been training and doing considerable distances. You can usually easily spot these individuals lakeside as they enter the lake in a simple costume like it is the height of summer, without so much as an expletive or sharp breath in.

For the majority of swimmers and triathletes it will be the first time in the lake since late last year, or even since the last event of the 2023 season. Any acclimatisation you gained last season will have vanished through the depths of winter and absorbed by all that warm pool water.



One thing we must remember, regardless of what group you fall into, is that the water in April / May can still be cold. We are likely talking anywhere from 7 degrees to 12 degrees depending on your lake, river or sea and its geographic location. Any temperature under 15 degrees is still classed as cold water and much more care needs to be taken pre swim, in your swim and post swim. The main focus for your early season swimming should be to be safe and manage your expectations in the water.

Here are some reminders, or a helping hand for the new open water swimmers, from South West Swim's head coach Jason Tait. These are tips for a safe, fun and productive return to the water in the early season:

1) Kit check - Have you got everything you need? Is it in good working order? Do you know where it is? Get that kit bag out and check that costumes, hats, goggles are still in good order and haven't grown things in them since the last time they were used (yes, it happens). Check your wetsuits for fit, and check for holes especially between the legs and under the armpits and repair if needed. Check boots, gloves, neoprene vests and hats whilst you are at it. Have you got your tow float (and is one needed for the lake you swim at)? blow it up and leave it for a while to ensure it has no leaks or damage, replace it if it deflates. We would also highly recommend a set of ear plugs to protect your ears from ear infections and surfers/swimmers ear. We wear ear plugs all year round but this is especially important in colder water.

Also consider your post swim gear. Towels, dry robes, woolly hats, flasks, dry clothes. Pack this all into your bag so you don't forget it and pack in a way / order that you can find this easily after your swim with no faffing around (i.e. pack your bag with items you will use and put on first at the TOP).

Kit can occasionally be hard to come by early season, due to the demand for it so look after your gear well and it will last a few seasons or more.

Check out our "Open Water Kit" video at <https://youtu.be/u2fwOYwr5ZA>

YOU can also shop at Zone3 with our South West Swim Discount and get 20% off! Simply head to www.zone3.com/swswim and use code 'swswim' when checking out (although the discount may have already been calculated from the url)

Top Tip: *For safety a whistle attached to your tow float, or on your person can provide an audible signal should you get into difficulty. Consider adding one of these to your kit list.*

2) Managed venues - Have you got your memberships and booked into your venue to swim. Many venues may operate a booking system for swim slots to control numbers of swimmers and for general safety. Make sure you've checked out how your venue operates so you are not disappointed if you turn up and find you need to book in for a swim slot.



3) Getting in - This is going to be key for your early season enjoyment. Get in slowly and acclimatise to the water before you do anything, don't just dive straight in. To minimise cold water shock we want a gradual introduction to the temperature of the water, and to bring your breathing under control before we head off on our swim. We call this short term acclimatisation at South West Swim, basically preparing for your swim on that day.

You have a little more time to do this in a wetsuit as you are more protected from the water, skins swimmers (those without wetsuits)

will need to be moving a little faster through the process so they don't get too cold. **Check out our “Entering Cooler Water” video at <https://youtu.be/LpvwSdzUbUY>.**

You may also find one of our sessions useful, either a 1-to-1 based session or one of our Introduction to open water Level 1 sessions. We host these in the early part of the season at Cotswold Water Park Hire (Lake86). More information and booking links for all our open water coaching sessions can be found at www.southwestswim.co.uk/openwaterglance

***Top Tip:** The key skill here is breathing, controlling your breathing and not gasping, panting or breathing too quickly will help you relax. Think of your breathing as if you would be when walking or lightly jogging, no breath holding and a nice flow breathing in, and breathing out. Relaxed breathing is not just something for the cold water, but for your swimming in general be it in the lake, sea or pool keep it relaxed.*

4) Manage your expectations - Regardless of your historic cold water experience, if you've been out of the water for a while your first time in is quite possibly going to be a “oh &@&!!?!@##* “ moment. Do not feel you need to swim for long, do not feel you need to swim for a certain time and definitely do not swim for a set distance, do what is comfortable for YOU and learn about **YOUR** body and **TIME** spent in the water, building the time spent in session by session. **NEVER** think of your early season swims in terms of getting in and swimming a set distance, distance is **NOT IMPORTANT** at this stage and could also be dangerous if you have a mindset of getting in and completing a set distance and actually overstay your welcome in the cold water. There are no medals for your first dip back, no hero points, be safe and have fun. Get out of the water when you are **still feeling good**, don't wait until you are starting to really feel the cold. At lower temperatures your body state and state of mind can change in an instant, we have seen this happen in the winter swim events we use to run and it can be a matter of seconds between feeling good, and an extraction.

Your swim may be different on any given day, and this is true in any temperature. Things that can change your feel and reaction can be obvious, such as external weather conditions, wind chill and rain can dramatically affect your post swim warm up (as a coach wind chill is a real problem on those lovely “british spring/summer’ days!) Things that you may not consider can also affect your swim quality, breakfast is a prime example. Ensure you eat beforehand and make it a carbohydrate based meal, rather than a protein hit. Your body will burn carbohydrates efficiently when swimming and therefore work to heat your body more effectively during and after the swim.

I spend most of my life in the water due to my job, but every year I know that my first swim back will probably consist of acclimatisation and a short heads up breaststroke swim, followed by some heads in swim work for a VERY short time. I do most of this work within shouting distance of the bank, you do not need to venture out onto a course for your early swims.

***Top Tip;** if you get to the lake and are not feeling great....decide whether you should actually go for that dip. There is no harm in turning up and deciding that today is not the day, for whatever reason.*



5) Is this training? - Yes and no. Think of your first time colder dips as acclimatisation swims and you are training your body to be used to the water. Don't go into your first swims thinking that they are going to be really productive long training sessions for your events, they may not be. For technique and getting back to those longer sessions the pool will still be your friend at this time of year, and in fact all year round (we recommend a mix of open water AND pool

based training sessions through the racing season in order to work on your all round swimming skills, pacing and fitness). Wherever you train, be mindful of not doing too much too soon and focus on your swim stroke and building this stroke into your base open water skill set, working on breathing and sighting for example.

Top Tip: As mentioned before, in cooler water go for time in the water and **NOT** a specific distance, in any way shape or form. For your first sessions there is no harm in keeping your swim close to the entry / exit points so that you can get out quickly and as needed.

6) Filter the noise, Swim YOUR swim - It's **your** swim, only **you** can feel it after all. You will see people going non-wetsuit (this is also known as skins), People in just a wetsuit and some in full on neoprene head to toe. Wear what you are comfortable with and for new swimmers I would recommend at least a wetsuit in these lower temperatures. Don't be persuaded to go further, or longer than you are comfortable with by others. What works for one person may not work for you. If you're a wetsuit wearer don't be forced into trying a skins (non wetsuit) dip if this is not for you, there is certainly no embarrassment about not doing this. The key is to take everything at **YOUR** pace, learn about your body, your reaction to the cold and make your own decisions. If you are new to open water swimming, or it's your first time in, then let people know this before you get in (either safety screw or your coach). During our coaching sessions we are always looking and monitoring swimmers in cooler water, and will withdraw them from the session if we feel we need to.

Top Tip: As stated you need to make your own decisions, it is your swim after all and you must learn how your body reacts and know your limits (and this is true through the whole season). Parallel to this you need to accept that trained professionals **will** know better and **will play things on the cautious side**. If they say times up, then you must heed this advice and get out of the water when told.

7) Be mindful - We are all doing this to enjoy the water, be respectful of the swimmers in front of you doing the heads up breaststroke and getting used to the water. There are lots of speedy swimmers out there and sometimes you can be on top of a much slower swimmer in seconds. If you do get crashed into (known as 'Swum Over') it is usually an accident, so please don't take it personally, hopefully the swimmer that swims into you will check you are ok and apologise.

Also keep an eye out for anybody who may be in trouble or struggling and if you come across somebody ask them if they are ok and signal for help to the trained safety crew. Do

not attempt to rescue the swimmer yourself as this could mean the safety staff are dealing with two casualties, try and stay at least a body length away from the swimmer.

Top Tip; Asking if somebody is ok goes a long way, and if you are asked if you are ok by another swimmer don't be offended.



8) post swim - get out, put on a hat, get dry, get dressed, start warming. These are the first things you should be doing when stepping out of the water. Have a warm drink on standby and

ensure you warm yourself up slowly (i.e. avoid having a hot shower straight after your cold swim). Your hat, gloves and dry robe will all help to get your body back to normal temperature, in the right way.

When you exit the cold water your body will still be cooling down, this is known as **after drop** and I could write a ton on it, but our friends at outdoor swimmer magazine already have you covered, take a read of

<https://outdoorswimmer.com/blogs/after-drop-is-real-and-how-to-deal-with-it> . This is a very short and concise article detailing the main points and how to deal with them. There are more in depth articles out there if you wish to really study up on this.

You may start to shiver, that is fine and normal but if you feel unwell, or your shivering is uncontrollable or goes on for a length of time, advise a member of the lake safety staff so you can be monitored appropriately.

As with all exercise, ensure you hydrate well afterwards to keep your hydration levels up (a note; colder water may make you feel the need to urinate a little more, therefore losing more fluids. On the bright side this will warm up your wetsuit whilst you're in the water 😊)

Top Tip: Make sure you recover fully from any effects of the cold before beginning your journey home.



9) enjoy the social - swimming's a lonely sport at times, but getting out and meeting others is one thing swimmers love. You can meet many different types of people and the cooler swims are ideal as you get to chat over hot drinks.

Top Tip; Mines a latte, thanks ;)

10) post swim kit check - rinse your wetsuit and hang inside out to dry (preferably from the waist to avoid damage and stretching). You don't want to

leave your suit wet and have that surprise in your next swim. Washing your suit will also ensure you have rinsed off any travellers who may have hitched a ride from the lake or

lakeside, avoiding potential cross contamination if you swim in multiple locations. This is an important note in order to control our environmental obligations as open water swimmers.

Top Tip: *Never machine wash or tumble dry a wetsuit, yes we have had swimmers tell us this and then wonder what they have broken suits.*

I hope the above gives you a reminder, or if you are a new swimmer, a helping hand in what to do on your first swim.

If you need any more advice please do not hesitate to drop me a message, we like talking and swimming and would be more than happy to advise you. We also have a few courses aimed at the new or inexperienced open water swimmer if these are of interest:

- Open water lake safety essentials
- Introduction to open water swimming (level 1)
- Introduction to open water event skills level 2)
- Introduction to advanced open water race skills (level 3)
- Open water 1-to-1's
- Various open water skills mini workshops

Find out more on all our available sessions at a glance at

www.southwestswim.co.uk/openwaterglance

Whatever your aim, goals and ambitions, the most important thing we want you to do is enjoy it and be safe. Have a great season whether you are training for events, or just for social, leisure and health.

Jason Tait

Head Coach South West Swim

Who Are South West Swim?

South West Swim was founded by head coach Jason Tait in 2014. Jason is a respected open water coach in the UK, with a vast amount of experience in inland open water swimming and front crawl stroke fault identification and correction. Through his time as a coach Jason has coached athletes from total beginners to world champions, those swimming their first length of a pool (or the first few open water strokes) to ultra marathon swimmers and channel swimmers. Jason is highly qualified as a coach with both Swim England and the STA and was part of the working group who wrote and developed the STA Open Water Coaching Qualification, and is a qualified coaching tutor of the same course. We work with various lakes, event companies and have worked with media outlets in print, radio and television for organisations such as the BBC.

South West Swim also has four more amazing coaches, Colin Jones (Swim England Open Water), Stuart Foster, Mark Hopkins and Ashley Cain (Swim England Level 2 Coaching (pool) and a small team of our own pool and open water lifeguards for additional cover as needed in some sessions. Together we have built a fantastic team to deliver you class leading sessions in Swindon & The Cotswolds with the best coaching methods, technology and after session feedback and content to further assist your journeys.