

USMS OPEN WATER GUIDE TO OPERATIONS

PART 2: OPEN WATER SAFETY

September 2011

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ARTICLE 201:

SAFETY OBJECTIVES FOR SANCTIONED EVENTS

201.1 INTRODUCTION

The aquatic environment, especially open water, holds a potentially wide range of challenges to participant safety. These may include anxiety attacks, physical contact between participants, fatigue, weather, marine life, hypothermia, hyperthermia, cramping, heart attacks, seizures, strokes and drowning.

Because conditions and courses vary, there is no specific set of requirements that applies to every event. The following recommendations are objectives to be pursued for operating safe open water events. Some recommendations in this document may not work for a particular event, or may be adjusted to the needs and circumstances of each venue and swim. These objectives should not be construed as requirements of U.S. Masters Swimming.

Everyone who participates in the management of U.S. Masters Swimming sanctioned events (USMS, LMSCs, event hosts, event directors) should endeavor to meet or exceed the written objectives. The USMS Long Distance committee may require open water national championships to exceed the written objectives. LMSCs may also require events to exceed the written objectives.

The safety coordinator shall plan for a safe event by creating a written safety plan that covers critical areas of open water safety. The complexity and scope of the plan will depend on many factors, including the venue, swimming conditions, length of swim, number and capability of participants, weather patterns and requirements from facility operators or enforcement agencies.

Critical areas of open water safety include:

- Venue
- Participant Safety
- Staffing for Safety
- Participant Supervision
- Communication
- Emergency Action Plans

201.2 VENUE

201.2.1 Course Design

The swim course should be designed to minimize confusion and unnecessary contact among participants. Hazards should be avoided, removed or clearly marked.

Courses should avoid head-on traffic patterns where participants pass close to each other in opposite directions. Course design should also eliminate changes in course direction until the participants have spread out from congestion at the start. Plan the first corner so people don't collide.

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The course should be clearly defined by:

- The start line;
- Turn markers with explicit directions as to which side of the marker the participant must pass;
- Directional markers, if needed, which are distinguishable from turn makers.
- The finish line.

201.2.2 Start

The start should be safe for the participants. Starting officials and signals should be easy to see and hear.

- The bottom should be firm, clean, and free from hazards (rocks, algae, glass, etc.).
- The starting area and course should be controlled to keep non-participants clear.
- The starting line should be as wide as possible to minimize congestion.
- The starting line of the course should provide fair access to the first leg of the course for all participants. This may be accomplished by providing a starting line perpendicular to the first leg of the course.
- The starter should be clearly identified and visible to all participants on the starting line.
- A public address system capable of reaching the majority of the beach or staging area should be used.
- A starting system that is simultaneously audible and visible should be used. Prior to the start, a three minute red flag warning and one minute yellow flag warning can be given. A loud gun, horn or siren should start the event with simultaneous visible signal, such as the waving of large green flag.

201.2.3 Turn/Course Markers

Using fixed or anchored course markers, the course should be designed so that the path to follow is clear to participants:

- Turn and directional course markers may be used to define the limits of the course, direct participants and mark distances. Natural or man-made landmarks may augment on-course markers, but should be easily seen and identified by participants.
- Course markers should be provided at all turns. Other markers can be reasonably spaced between turns as needed. Course markers should be easily visible from water level and brightly colored. Turn markers need to be distinguished from directional markers; they need to have a visible surface area of at least four square feet and extend 4-6 feet above the water level. A minimum of 4 in feet still water and six feet in wavy areas is recommended.

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- Hazards or danger areas on or close to the course should be indicated with a marker different than turn/directional markers.

201.2.4 Finish

The finish should be safe for participants, easy to navigate, conducted to ensure sportsmanship and staffed to aid participants if necessary while they are exiting the water.

- The finish area should be controlled so as to keep non-participants clear.
- The finish line should be clearly marked and visible from the water, where possible.
- The bottom and ground surface leading up to the finish line should be free of rough or slippery areas and objects that could injure participants' bare feet.
- A chute finish should be used. The chute should be long and wide enough to accommodate the number of participants expected to finish closely together.
- Finish monitors should provide aid to participants standing and exiting the water, and ensure sportsmanlike conduct.

201.3 MAPS/DIAGRAMS

Detailed maps and diagrams should be available for participants and event officials. The size and number of maps should be appropriate for the venue and number of participants. A large map of the course, minimum 2 x 3 feet, should be available for participants at the race site. Multiple maps are recommended for events with large numbers of participants.

201.3.1 Course Map

The maps/diagram of the course should show the start, finish, course distances, turn and directional buoy markers, danger and hazard areas, monitor locations, emergency and medical evacuation points, anticipated water temperature and general water conditions.

- A detailed diagram of the start and finish line configurations should be created if the map does not allow for sufficient detail.
- Medical evacuation points are shoreline locations to which participants will be transported for emergency medical aid.

201.3.2 Site Map

Should show the event "Nerve Center," evacuation points, first aid station, restrooms, and other amenities.

201.3.3 Emergency Medical Services

The event host should provide printed directions and map to off-site EMS services.

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201.4 WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

201.4.1 Water Look, Feel and Taste

What does the water look, feel and taste like? Note that clear water with no adverse tastes alone is not an indicator of acceptable water quality.

201.4.2 Local and Seasonal Trends

- Know local and seasonal trends regarding safe water. Ongoing water quality data, if available, are important to consider for safe and healthy water quality. Due to lag times in obtaining monitoring results for certain contaminants of concern, such as e. coli, water quality trends that show when contaminant levels can spike into unhealthy range are particularly important to consider on the day of the open water event.
- Overall, water quality on event day should meet or exceed Federal EPA standards and state and local water quality standards for swimming, which is often defined as “water contact”. Pay particular concern to water quality degradation that can occur following periods of high rain, storm runoff, or tide surge.
- Local and seasonal trends that may affect currents, water temperature, and water quality are also important to know since they help anticipate safe and unsafe conditions. All aquatic risks should be identified and understood, including all forms of potentially harmful wildlife and marine species and harmful aquatic algae.
- Particular attention should be paid to weather conditions on the day of the event. Storms, lightening, high winds, tide surge, and all other environmental conditions should be understood and anticipated.

201.5 PARTICIPANT SAFETY

Because conditions and courses vary, each participant bears the responsibility of knowing and following the safety standards for protection from foreseeable dangers. The participant and event director can both contribute to individual participant safety by observing the following objectives.

201.5.1 Waiver/Disclaimer/Warning

Participants share responsibility for their own safety and shall sign a waiver of liability to that effect. The waiver should provide notification of potential hazards of open water swimming and swimming at the particular venue. Event information should include a warning statement that:

- Notifies the participants their responsibility for reading and understanding this information.
- Notifies the participants about special hazards of the event (e.g., water temperature, distance or surface conditions, etc.).
- Reminds participants to know their limitations, medical needs, etc., before entering an open water swim.

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- Advises medical examination, and training under race conditions prior to participation.

201.5.2 Emergency Contacts

Participants should provide emergency contact information in case of an emergency.

201.5.3 Participant Identification

The event director should provide a marking system for participant identification including:

- Numbers or other identifying information on each participant. Race identification should correspond to check-in confirmation and emergency contact information. Numbers must be placed on the body (written on a limb, hand or back) and may be on one or more of the following: cap, BIB tag, timing chip, etc., preferably in several separate ways in case one system fails.

201.5.4 Participant Visibility

The event director should provide a system to enhance participant visibility on the water. The system chosen should be consistent with the length and configuration of the course and the distance between monitor craft. Methods may include:

- The use of high visibility caps (fluorescent or brightly colored) that contrast with the color of the buoys.
- Higher density of monitor craft.

201.5.5 Participant Safety Briefing

The event director has an obligation to inform participants about potential hazards. A public briefing for all participants should be held before the start of each swim. Instructions should be able to be seen, heard and understood by all. A good public address system is essential. The briefing should include the following:

- Description of general "race time" conditions, such as water temperature, depth, unusual hazards, weather conditions, etc.
- Opportunity for withdrawal prior to start if any participant has apprehensions as to their ability or desire to participate.
- Participants' obligations if they drop out before the swim or quit during the swim.
- Course and safety monitor locations.
- Procedure for getting assistance or aid during the swim.
- Course directions/markers/rules.
- Starting procedure/signals.

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- Encouragement to participants to position themselves appropriately (or as seeded if seeding is used) at the start, with the faster participants in front. Participants should be courteous and pay attention to others' safety.
- Finish procedures/cut off time.
- Evacuation points and procedures.

201.5.6 Postpone/Cancel/Modify

The event host should have a plan for participant management if the event needs to be postponed, cancelled or modified.

201.5.7 Plan for Potential Situations

The event host should have a plan for potential situations including:

- Participants whose capabilities are overmatched by conditions.
- Heart attack/stroke/seizure.
- Distressed participants.
- Water conditions: tides, currents, wind, and waves.
- Weather conditions.
- Tired participants.
- Heat and/or cold.
- Boat traffic.
- Marine life.
- Submerged obstacles.
- Cuts, bumps, bruises and abrasions.

201.6 STAFFING FOR SAFETY

Safety personnel should be present, trained and able to communicate with each other to ensure the safety of participants and officials alike.

- There should be a sufficient number of safety personnel to support the size and conditions of the event.
- All event personnel should be informed of the event emergency provisions. The event director and safety coordinator should hold a meeting including all event personnel before the start to make them aware of these safety provisions.
- The event host should establish a system of communication between event officials, boats and emergency services at the venue.
- Safety officials and workers should have training consistent with their job and the size and conditions of the event.

201.6.1 Event Director

Because the event director is occupied with overall event management, it is highly recommended that a separate safety coordinator be assigned.

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201.6.2 Safety Coordinator

USMS rules require that a “Safety Coordinator” be designated. The safety coordinator should report directly to the event director. All safety issues should be assigned to the safety coordinator who should have sufficient authority to ensure that safety directives are observed or enforced.

The safety coordinator should:

- Prepare a written safety plan before the event to be followed by all officials.
- Obtain the necessary permits and approvals from the appropriate agencies, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, park authorities, lifeguard associations, owners, etc.
- Provide accurate maps, course descriptions, course markings, and other pertinent information with entry forms and event information packets. This should include anticipated water temperature and general water conditions.
- Consider using fluorescent or brightly colored caps that contrast with the color of the buoys to assist in identification and visibility of participants.
- Acquire and keep a copy of emergency contacts for all participants.
- Acquire necessary safety equipment.
- Train and assign rescue/aid personnel and craft.
- Plan and execute communication among safety personnel.
- Plan for escort paddlers or craft.
- Provide for control of escort craft and access of non-race craft into the race area.
- Manage course monitors and ensure that management is in place for other watercraft.
- Brief all participants, coaches, managers, trainers and event officials.
- Inform participants of the anticipated water temperature, specific weather and water conditions, and known hazards.
- Plan for possible cancellation, postponement and/or modification of the event.
- Work with the event director.
- Work with the EMS personnel.

201.6.3 EMS Services

There should be appropriate medical equipment and licensed personnel, qualified to use the medical equipment, at the event site for the duration of the event. If professional services are available, it is recommended that safety coordinators use them. There should also be a medical evacuation plan. Recommendations include:

- A primary responding agency for emergency medical services. This can be either a lifeguard agency or an outside provider such as an ambulance company, Red Cross or fire department. A well-supplied medical tent

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managed by competent personnel to back up the professional services may be useful in some circumstances, such as events with large numbers of participants.

- A sufficient supply of blankets, drinking fluids (cold for hot days and hot for cold days) and other necessities should be at the venue in quantities to support the size and conditions of the event.

201.6.4 On-Water Course Monitors

On-water craft should be assigned and distributed so the entire field of participants is covered visually at all times during the race.

- All craft used in conjunction with the event should meet U.S. Coast Guard and local standards for equipment and loading capacity.
- Provisions for non-event boat traffic control should be provided. It is strongly suggested that control be arranged through a law enforcement agency or Coast Guard auxiliary.
- It may be necessary to assign multiple tasks to a single craft (e.g. monitor and evacuation). The safety of participants should not be compromised by a craft performing multiple tasks.
- All support and rescue craft should approach participants with the utmost caution. Where motorized craft are required to assist with rescue, the additional inherent dangers should be considered (i.e. moving props, potential reduced visibility, carbon monoxide, exhaust fumes).
- No swimmers should be allowed in the water to warm-up without having safety monitors on the water or observing from the beach during the entire warm-up period.

201.6.5 Escort and Pilot Craft

Escorts and pilots are boats that escort participants around the course. The use of individual escorts is at the option of the event director.

- Paddleboards, kayaks, and canoes are recommended for individual escorts and/or safety monitors.
- For small loop courses or short distances, motorboats are not recommended as escorts or monitors due to the inherent dangers (i.e. moving props, potential reduced visibility, carbon monoxide, exhaust fumes).
- For long point-to-point individual or relay races (for example, 6 miles or more with a large course width), motorboats are acceptable as escorts with a small number of participants. Organizers may also consider using a combination of motorboats and kayaks for each participant.
- Unless the length and design of the course can adequately support them, individual escorts should be discouraged. Too many escorts in a limited space aggressively working to support their participants can be dangerous.

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Instead, safety personnel should be placed at strategic locations along the course.

- Individual escorts are highly desirable for longer swims and contestants should be allowed to supply an escort capable of maintaining their pace. In addition to being the eyes and ears for the participant and providing a measure of safety, the escort is responsible for detecting signs of hypothermia or other conditions of the participant.
- The escorts should know the course and any special rules. Therefore, attendance of escorts should be mandatory at a pre-race meeting. Because the escort will need to be in the water and ready before the start of the swim, a separate escort meeting should be held before the participant's meeting.
- All rules that apply to participants should apply to escort personnel. Escorts should be capable of completing the course distance and maintaining speed to keep up with their participants.
- The escort may be assigned the same number as the participant and marked accordingly.
- Escorts should remain to the side of the participants to prevent possible drafting. Participants should not hold to or hang from the support craft.
- Escort boats should display a fluorescent orange "skier down" flag at all times during the swim.
- All escort craft should be of sufficient size to keep at least two people afloat—the paddler(s) plus one participant.
- When personal escorts are required, they should provide all of the services mentioned above. They are also responsible for feeding the participant and providing the mental stimulation necessary for the participant's wellbeing throughout the race.

201.6.6 Monitor Craft

Safety monitor stations are craft of various types positioned on the course to oversee participants while swimming. Safety monitor stations should be equipped with first aid supplies and an emergency signaling device to summon a medical evacuation boat. Signals may include day flares, smoke flares, radio, or flags.

- Course monitor numbers, type and placement should be consistent with the length and configuration of the course and the number and capability of participants.
- There should be visual coverage of the complete field of participants at all times.
- A sweeper or cleanup boat should follow the last participant.

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- Pilots are considered safety stations, but emergency evacuation boats should not be counted as safety stations.

201.6.7 Evacuation Craft

These are craft that move participants off the course when necessary and bring them to land or to motorized emergency evacuation craft.

- Motorized emergency evacuation craft (power boats) should not approach the course at any time unless absolutely necessary. Where practical, persons in trouble should be brought to the evacuation boat by a safety monitor using non-motorized transportation.
- First responders may use their judgment on making exceptions to the above statement.

201.6.8 Safety Patrol Craft

These are craft placed outside the course to keep craft not associated with the swim off the course. These craft may be provided by the event director, or by the U.S. Coast Guard or other safety agency.

201.6.8 Pre-race Safety Briefing

The event director should ensure that safety officials know their jobs and their place in the safety planning. These responsibilities include:

- Equipment and its use
- Event procedures outlined
- Positioning of personnel and water craft
- General assistance duties
- Response and care duties
- Communication
- Evacuation
- Cancellation

201.6.9 Safety Monitor Training

The event director should ensure that monitors are trained before assisting participants.

- It is recommended that safety monitors have on-water training before the event.
- If the venue has lifeguard services for hire, it is highly recommended that events use the available services.

201.6.10 Safety Gear

Safety gear should be consistent with all anticipated hazards and situations that may be encountered during the event. The following safety equipment should be considered for all events:

- Rescue tubes and personal flotation devices (PFDs) that can be thrown from support and monitoring craft.

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- Whistles or air horns to alert the swimmers of impending dangers.
- Basic medical first aid kits.
- EMS equipment such as AED, Oxygen, Back Board and Epi-Pen, which may be used by non-EMS personnel.
- Additionally, all support craft should carry all USCG required safety gear applicable to their craft size and category. For boats, this will include PFDs, whistles or horns, fire extinguishers and possibly flare kits.

201.7 PARTICIPANT SUPERVISION AND MANAGEMENT

The event director should develop a means to account for each participant. Event safety should include planning for the safety of special needs participants (participants with disabilities).

201.7.1 Accounting for Participants

The event director should ensure that no participant is left in the water or in medical need at the venue after each swim. The accounting methods should be consistent with the swimmer identification and visibility systems defined previously. Event staff or officials should:

- Know the number of participants starting.
- Know the number of participants who got out or were pulled out during the swim.
- Know the number of participants finishing.
- Account for each participant or find the missing participant before event officials leave the venue.
- Ensure that all participants have left the venue before event officials leave the venue.

201.7.2 Layers of Surveillance

The event host should "layer" protection at the event. Monitors should watch swimmers, certified lifeguards should watch monitors, and evacuation boats and the safety coordinator should watch monitors and other personnel on the water.

201.7.3 Response and Care Objectives

Safety planning should identify response and care objectives for participant supervision.

- What is your goal for participant safety?
- How will you respond to emergencies and in what timeframe?
- What level of care will be given after the response?

201.7.4 Qualifying Standards

At the discretion of the event director, qualifying standards may be used to ensure that participants are capable of completing the swim distance within a reasonable time. Setting a qualifying standard will depend on the conditions of

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the swim, including, competitive level, distance, water conditions, altitude, air/water temperature, or any other goal of the event.

Entry qualifications may be used to prevent participants entering an event by requiring:

- A qualifying time based on a well-known event with quality participants;
- A qualifying time based on a check-out swim; or
- A qualifying time based on a pool swim.

201.7.4 Time Limits

At the discretion of the event director, time limits may be set that enable event directors to remove participants from the water after a specific point in time by requiring:

- Time limits to complete the course; or
- Time check points during the swim, such as reaching point X by a given time, point Y by another given time, etc; or
- Time limits that begin after the first finisher completes the course, after which all other participants must complete the course within X minutes after the winner finishes.
- At the discretion of the event host, swimmers who exceed the time limits may be picked up by an event craft, and may be disqualified.

201.8 COMMUNICATION

Communication devices can include radios, phones, flares, whistles, air horns, flags, hand signals, and other appropriate means. The communication plan should include:

- A means of identifying safety officials in the communication circle.
- Public address system audible to all participants.
- All communication devices used for the event.

201.9 EMERGENCY ACTION PLANS

201.9.1 Written Action Plans

Written action plans should be prepared long before the event. Tips for emergency action planning:

- Keep it easy and build it to the level of your staffing.
- Consider the size and shape of the course.
- Consider the types of craft you are using.
- Consider potential conditions when planning.
- Take your response and care objectives into consideration.
- Practice "pull outs" and "transfers" if possible.
- Know your evacuation options.
- Have EMS on site or available, for coverage for the duration of the event.
- Document incidents, fill out reports and file with all appropriate parties.

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201.9.2 Medical Evacuation Plan

The safety coordinator should include detailed procedures and methods of transport for participants needing emergency medical aid from water pickup to land-based medical services. Planning criteria includes:

- Consideration of course configuration, detailing evacuation of participants at the start, along the entire course and at the finish.
- Providing emergency evacuation boats sufficient in number to insure transport to land-based medical assistance in a reasonable time.
- Arrangements should be made for communication between safety stations and emergency evacuation boats.
- A printed map and directions to the nearest medical care facility must be available at the event. Several copies should be available to give to individuals needing non-emergency medical attention who wish to transport themselves.

201.9.3 Event Cancellation or Postponement Plans

A written event cancellation or postponement plan should be included in the overall safety plan. The plan should:

- Include evacuation before, during and after the event.
- Consider the course configuration.
- Designate exit points on course maps. Mark shoreline exit points if different from the start and finish lines. Plans should be made to pick up participants at evacuation points and transport them to safe locations.
- A method accounting for participants should be in place to make sure all are out of the water, particularly with multiple exit points.
- If there is a temporary suspension of the event, the plan should consider participant safety while waiting for danger to pass.

201.10 LICENSING/SANCTIONING

Event directors should observe required licensing and sanctioning requirements that may be imposed by governing bodies, facility operators, private owners and enforcement agencies.

- USMS sanctioning processes may impose safety requirements as a condition of sanction.
- It may be necessary to obtain permits and approvals from appropriate agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard, park authorities, lifeguard associations, private owners, etc. These agencies may impose additional safety requirements as a condition of using the venue.
- Securing permissions and permits to use the venue gives the event director legal access to the venue. The grantor of permissions and permits may require additional safety measures as a condition of using the venue.

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SAFETY ATTACHMENT A: OPEN WATER SAFETY VIDEOS

Protecting Athletes: Open Water Safety Conference

March 18-20, San Francisco, CA

U.S. Masters Swimming has published 18 video presentations of the sessions, interviews and case study presentations from the **Protecting Athletes: Open Water Safety Conference**. You may find them at this link: <http://www.usms.org/video.php?vid=1>

We encourage use of this information to make your events as safe as possible, and please share with others.—U.S. Masters Swimming

Open Water Safety Workshop

Jim Wheeler, Presenter

September 17, 2010, USMS Annual Meeting, Dallas, TX,

<http://liveswim.net/coverage/2010usmsconvention/2010/12/16/2010-usms-convention-workshop-open-water-safety/>

"Jim is an expert in aquatic risk management, safety and training for venues ranging from waterfronts, beaches, pools and water parks. His extraordinary blend of hands-on experience gives him a unique perspective on aquatic operational safety. Over three decades, he has helped increase the level of aquatic safety protocols, procedures and mindset with the National Recreation and Park Association, California Park and Recreation Society and U.S. Masters Swimming.

In 2007, he was selected as one of Aquatic International's 'Power 25 in Aquatics' and was awarded two California Park and Recreation Society Presidential Awards, the International Swimming Hall of Fame's Paragon Award for Aquatic Safety and distinguished service awards from the National Recreation and Park Association and U.S. Masters Swimming.

Jim is the President of [Total Aquatic Management](#), an aquatic consulting and training company that offers 'TOTAL Guard', a leading advanced lifeguard training program. Jim has presented at hundreds of local, state and national conferences on the subject of aquatic inspections, safety and training as well as provided accident investigation services."

(Steve Munatones, <http://www.dailynewsofopenwaterswimming.com/2011/01/jim-wheeler-and-protecting-athletes.html>)