

liberty sports

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DISCOVER YOUR INNER POLAR BEAR AND EXPAND YOUR OPEN WATER SEASON

By Bruckner Chase

As a Master swim team, San Francisco's Dolphin Club has some of the best-attended swim workouts and club events in the country. Members from age twenty to eighty log impressive yardage throughout the year, and not a single yard is in water over 62 degrees because the Dolphin Club "pool" is San Francisco Bay.

South Jersey water temperature extremes can make a polar bear pause, but there is life below eighty degrees. With a few extra items in your swim bag and skills in your repertoire, you can trade open water oriented pool workouts for time in the open water. Jumping into water below even 70 degrees can be dangerous, so take the time to arrive at the water prepared. Finding someone who has been there before can make the experience safer and more fun. After a few cold-water miles, you may want to spend less time confined by walls and lanes while discovering a new passion for triathlon's first leg.

The Approach

- Share the love – Swimming alone is never a good idea, and the harsher the conditions the more important swimming with a partner becomes. Stay in familiar water and stay close.
- Pick a day with sun - Even if the air is 50 degrees, a little bit of sun and a place out of the wind will make the pre- and post-swim minutes much more comfortable.



- Start gently – Swimming legend Lynn Cox's first swim was not in the Antarctic and yours should not be either. You can find water temperatures and marine weather conditions online at www.ndbc.noaa.gov. For your first time, look for water temperatures in the upper 50s to 60s, which, in South Jersey, can get you into the ocean as early as late April.

The Plunge

- They call it "shock" for a reason – The hardest part is always the first minute. When your body hits the cold your heart and breathing are going to jump into overdrive. The key is to stay calm, keep your head above water and breathe. Embrace the sensations and relax. The sooner you can start swimming, the sooner you will start feeling better. You are going to feel cold, but your body will stabilize.

As you log more sessions in the cold you will get better at moving from shock to jock.

- Too much of a good thing – Get out before you start to feel cold. Whether your time in is ten minutes or ten hours, start slowly. If you are shivering or losing the ability to control your fingers, get out. Everyone can learn to tolerate the cold better than they think, but the adaptation process is different for everyone.

- Protect yourself – Start off with a full wetsuit. As your cold tolerance improves you can go with less. If you look around the Dolphin Club you will find much of the following gear in both the new and seasoned swimmer's bag:

- Neoprene cap – You lose much of your heat through your head, so “double cap” or use a 3mm neoprene hood under a brighter colored swim cap.

- Earplugs – Keeping a little cold water out of your ears can make a huge difference. Mack's Earplugs are a favorite from any local drug store.

- Lifeguard Rescue Can – You may look like you stepped off the set of Baywatch, but having a soft or rigid rescue device to grab can give you the comfort to endure the first shock.

- Thermometer – Yes, this helps with bragging rights, but more importantly it gives an objective measurement of what you are entering. Plan your time in the water based on your current level of cold tolerance and adaptation.

- Watch – Know how long you have been out before hypothermia tells you it has been too long.

The Exit

- Reverse “Warm-up” – Get out of the water, get out of the weather, and get dry. Hot coffee, hot showers or a sauna will help your body absorb some much-needed heat. Expect to move a little slower on land, so have everything laid out and waiting for you.

- It's not over yet – Your body temperature will continue to drop even after you get out of the water as colder skin draws heat from your core. Stay dry and get into a warm environment until your body gets back into balance.

- Refuel – Getting calories in your body immediately after a workout is always important. A short colder water swim can feel like a much longer workout, so make sure you have food ready to devour.

Whether you go wetsuit or non-wetsuit, whether you cross the English Channel or the local lake, don't think you have to always come in from the cold. And think about it, when was the last time any of us saw a polar bear or a triathlete that could stop with just one quick plunge.



Photo by Bradna Chase

One cold-water swimmer's take on temps:

- 80°+ Don't get dehydrated.
- 65°+ Ahhhhhhhhh.
- 60°-65° Comfortable for a day in the water, literally.
- 55°-60° A little burning that passes with a couple hundred yards.
- 50°-55° A little more burning that never quite goes away.
- 45°-50° Time in the water is limited, and a warm-up exit plan is critical.
- 40°-45° It's going to hurt. Get in, get out and get warm.
- Below 40° You know that bucket of ice the beer was in over the summer?

