

USMS LONG DISTANCE SAFETY

(June 2005)

INTRODUCTION

The aquatic environment, especially open water, holds a potentially wide range of threats to swimmer safety. These can range from mild to wild including, but not limited to: anxiety attacks (novices), physical contact between swimmers, fatigue, marine life, hypothermia, cramping, heart attacks, strokes and drowning.

USMS does a good job of providing resource materials that contribute to safe open water swims. Extracts from four of these, including links for each to the USMS web site, are given below. However, the safety of any event remains the sole responsibility of the event organizer. Conditions vary greatly from site to site, so what follows should be considered as general guidelines only.

USMS RULE BOOK

www.usms.org/rules/part3.pdf

303.1. SAFETY STANDARDS

As conditions and courses vary, it is the responsibility of each swimmer to know and follow the safety standards necessary for protection from foreseeable dangers. The meet director can assist this endeavor by:

303.1.1—Obtaining necessary permits/approvals from the U.S. Coast Guard, park authorities, lifeguard associations, etc.

303.1.2—Providing accurate maps with course descriptions and other pertinent information, including but not limited to anticipated water temperature and general water conditions, with entry forms and meet information packets.

303.1.3—Planning for possible medical evacuations.

303.1.4—Assigning rescue/aid personnel and craft.

303.1.5—Planning for escort paddlers or craft. Personal escorts should be considered for open water swims.

303.1.6—Making provisions for controlling escort craft and access of nonrace craft into the race area.

303.1.7—Briefing all contestants, coaches, managers, trainers, and meet officials.

303.1.8—Planning for possible cancellation, postponement, and/or modification of the meet.

303.1.9—Considering use of fluorescent orange and other brightly colored caps to assist in identification and visibility of swimmers in open water events.

303.1.10—Informing swimmers of the anticipated water temperature, specific weather and water conditions, and known hazards.

Note: LMSC's are encouraged to develop their own safety guidelines and precautions for the conduct of long distance events, provided they are not in conflict with USMS rules, policies, or procedures.

CHAMPIONSHIP GUIDELINES

www.usms.org/longdist/champsguide.pdf

SAFETY COORDINATOR: It is recommended that a "Safety Coordinator", be designated who shall report to the Meet Director. All safety issues should be assigned to the coordinator, and the coordinator should have sufficient authority to ensure safety directives are observed or enforced.

ENTRY INFORMATION: A warning statement should be included on each entry form which cautions the swimmers about special hazards of the meet (e.g., water temperature, distance or surface conditions) and advises medical examination and training under race conditions prior to participation. Swimmers should be provided with and required to wear brightly colored swim caps.

INDIVIDUAL ESCORTS: The use of personal escorts should be the option of the meet director and/or safety coordinator.

MEDICAL SERVICES: A primary responding agency, either from the lifeguard agency or an outside provider such as an ambulance company or the Red Cross, should be assigned as emergency medical services for the meet.

COMMUNICATION: A public address system with sufficient amplified strength capable of reaching the majority of the beach or staging area should be considered a requirement. It's recommended that a large course map should be posted on the beach indicating the course, course buoys and emergency facilities.

MEDICAL EVACUATION: A plan for medical evacuation should outline procedures for transporting swimmers needing medical aid from the water to land-based medical services.

1. The plan should take into consideration the course configuration. If the start and finish are at the same location or less than 1/2 mile apart, one plan can be used. If the start and finish are not in the same location, two plans would be recommended. Multiple plans may be required for extended open water swims.
2. The safety coordinator should provide emergency evacuation boats sufficient in number to insure transport to land-based medical assistance in less than ten (10) minutes.
3. Safety monitor stations (i.e., canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, etc.) should be positioned on the course at a minimum ratio of one station per 25 entrants or one station for every 1/8 mile of course length, whichever is greater. The complete field should be covered at all times. Emergency evacuation boats cannot be counted as safety stations.
4. For events of significant length or significant conditions (e.g. surf, extremely cold water), it's recommended that personal escorts be required.
5. Arrangements should be made for communication between safety stations and emergency evacuation boats.

SAFETY CANCELLATION: A plan for cancellation should include details for evacuating the swimmers from the water. Weather and tidal changes are two examples of dangers that might occur at an open water venue. Dangers may occur before the start of an event so plans should be made for cancellation or postponement. Other plans should be made for cancellation due to safety considerations once the competition has started.

PRE-RACE BRIEFING: A public briefing of all swimmers held prior to the start of the event should include:

1. Course directions/markers/rules.
2. Starting procedure and signals.
3. Finish procedures and cut-off time.
4. Procedure for getting aid while swimming.
5. Participants' obligations if they drop out.
6. Opportunity for withdrawal if a swimmer has apprehensions as to their ability to participate.
7. Positioning of the swimmers at the start so that the faster swimmers are at the front.
8. Information with regard to current water conditions and recent water incidents when appropriate.

OPEN WATER MANUAL

www.usms.org/longdist/owman.pdf

104 SAFETY

Safety is paramount in any open water swimming event. The first step in planning an open water swim is the consideration of all safety factors. Although you are ultimately responsible for safety at your event, you should enlist the assistance of local lifeguards, Emergency Medical Services, the Coast Guard, or other appropriate authorities. A Safety Officer should be assigned to the event and should write a report to be filed with the local organizing committee.

.1 Emergency Provisions

- A** Event personnel should be informed of the emergency provisions. The event director should hold a meeting for all event personnel just prior to the event.
- B** Open water swims should have a medical evacuation plan. The plan outlines procedures and methods of transport for swimmers needing emergency medical aid from water pickup to land-based services.
- C** Safety monitor stations (i.e. row boats, canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, etc.) should be positioned on the course in a minimum ratio of one station per twenty-five (25) entrants or a minimum of one station for every 1/8 mile of course length, whichever number of stations is greater.
- D** Emergency evacuation powerboats should not approach the swimmers at any time. Swimmers in trouble should be brought to the evacuation boat by a safety monitor using non-motorized transportation.
- E** A detailed plan must be available for event cancellation during the event due to safety considerations arising after the competition has started (e.g. lightning).
- F** A procedure must be developed to account for each participant.
- G** The host club should establish and announce a cut-off time for all or part of the event. Swimmers failing to meet the criteria should be disqualified and escorted to shore.
- H** A briefing for swimmers should be held prior to the start of the event and all competitors should be present. A good public address system is essential to ensure that instructions can be heard and understood. Refer to section 304 Suggested Pre-Race Instructions for the specific instructions.

.2 Escorts and Monitors—Paddleboards, kayaks, and canoes are recommended for individual escorts and/or safety monitors.

- A** The use of individual escorts should be the option of the host club.
- B** Escorts' attendance should be mandatory at a pre-race meeting. As the escort will need to be in the water and ready to go prior to the start of the race, a separate escort meeting may be held prior to the swimmer's meeting.
- C** All rules applying to swimmers apply to escort personnel as well. They should be capable of completing the distance and maintaining the speed necessary to keep up with their swimmers.
- D** If desired, the escort can be assigned the same number as the swimmer and marked accordingly.
- E** The escorts must know the course and any special rules. All escort craft should be of sufficient size to hold at least two people afloat—the paddlers(s) plus one swimmer.
- F** Individual paddlers should be discouraged unless the length and design of the course can adequately support them. Too many paddlers aggressively working to support their swimmers can be dangerous. Instead, safety personnel should be placed at strategic locations along the course.

- G** Individual escorts are highly desirable for longer swims and it is recommended that each contestant be allowed to supply an escort capable of maintaining their pace. In addition to being the eyes and ears for the swimmer and providing a measure of safety, the escort is responsible for detecting signs of hypothermia or other conditions of the swimmer and getting the person to safety.
- H** When personal escorts are required, in addition to providing all the services mentioned above, they are responsible for feeding the swimmer and providing the mental stimulation necessary for the swimmer's well being throughout the race.
- I** Escorts should remain at the side of the swimmers to prevent possible drafting. Swimmers should not hold on to or hang from the support craft. (See Rule 303.2.1)
- J** All boats used in conjunction with the event must meet U.S. Coastguard and local standards for equipment and loading capacity. Escort boats should display a fluorescent orange "skier down" flag at all times.
- K** When used, powerboats should be used to protect the course and for evacuation, not as pilot or escort boats for individuals in non-relay events.
- L** Provisions for non-event boat traffic control should be secured. It is strongly suggested that control be arranged through a law enforcement agency and/or Coast Guard.
- M** A "clean-up" boat should be used and remain behind the last swimmer throughout the race.

CHAMPIONSHIP FORMS

www.usms.org/longdist/manuals.shtml (Host Info/Forms)

For open water events only, the championship contract includes the following:

SAFETY: There shall be appropriate medical equipment and licensed personnel, qualified to use the medical equipment, at the meet site during warm-up and competition. Cancellation procedures shall be established. There shall be a sufficient number of safety personnel to support the size and conditions of the meet. Water traffic needs to be controlled so as not to endanger the participants. The host shall provide the Long Distance Chair with written details of the medical and evacuation procedures (see timeline)."

Because championship venues vary greatly, safety requirements (such as the number of safety personnel) are not specified. Nevertheless, safety is your number one responsibility, and we ask that you describe your program as follows:

1. Rescue personnel (e.g. lifeguards) and equipment on the beach and in the water.
2. Medical personnel and equipment on the beach.
3. Medical evacuation plan and the nearest hospital or other emergency care facility. Will you be providing printed directions to the nearest hospital with the approximate travel time? Will the pre-race briefing summarize the medical/evacuation procedures?
4. The course, start and finish. Will a course diagram be available at the start? How large?
5. Cancellation plan in the event of unsafe conditions
6. Coast Guard and/or other law enforcement agencies involved with the race.