

A Brazilian water safety policy for open water swimming races

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After adjusting exposure, estimates of the number of deaths by drowning as a function of time are 200 times higher than those of road fatalities. Even though, all sports result in an increased exposure risk of trauma and death, aquatic sports are among the riskier. The elevated risk results from the fact that in aquatic environments, a momentary loss of consciousness, or even just dizziness, may prove fatal, changing the fun environment to a very adverse location. Unless consciousness is re-established, drowning occurs within 1 minute and deaths in less than 5 minutes. However, most accidents can be prevented by the timely implementation of water safety strategic plans customized for each aquatic sport. Those situations are usually never thought as a possibility because athletes are expected to be high performance swimmers, and therefore an athlete usually gets more media coverage than any other drowning situation.

Open water swimming races are especially dangerous because they gather many athletes in one single race. Although everyone's duty, the organizers have the main responsibility for risk prevention and should involve and prepare judges, referee, coaches and athletes providing water safety education for these circumstances.

When an athlete is in need of help while in water action must happen immediately and help shouldn't be based only on lifeguards but also managers, judges, referees, and especially athletes. This can only be made efficiently if education on how to detect and intervene is taught beforehand. Although prevention is important, organizers must also be aware that such events can never be made risk-free, and so action plans are always necessary. Still, a proper balance between costs and benefits is important, as the high cost of professional water safety services would likely make the event financially impractical, leading to less support for people to train, join and learn open water swimming, which ultimately lead to less people prepared to avoid drowning.

This policy resulted from a debate among 15 experienced lifeguards, athletes and aquatic event managers, and based on their real practical experience on open water swim race events. Request came from the Brazilian Aquatic Sports Confederation (CBDA) – official representative affiliated to International Olympic Committee to organize Olympics 2016. The objective was to standardize safety protocols at these events in Brazil, to better prepare the Olympics and also marathons, triathlons, aquathlons and similar events in the ocean, lakes, rivers, bays and channels.

Water safety measures were classified and recommended at 3 levels:

1) PRO-ACTIVE

- a. Place of event: Mitigate risk considering variables as water temperature, currents, rocks, animals, tide, and others.
- b. Choice of track, start and finish points
- c. Present water safety tips at the application
- d. Limit athletes' participation considering their experience, age, gender, and care able to provide
- e. Event briefing including all safety measures
- f. Athletes' health certificate

2) REACTIVE

- a. Good athletes' control: number, identification (color, GPS)
- b. Well establish hand signalization for help and other
- c. Well plan professional lifeguard support to rescue
- d. High technology to count, detect and react faster than human control

3) MIX - prevent and react

- a. Adequate professional lifeguard service – a formula considering all controllable variables.
- b. Adequate rescue equipment managed by well-trained crews to prevent and react
- c. Well-trained staff
- d. Pre-hospital emergency team and a plan for guidance to the hospital

A final formula was built to help organizer to standardize the amount of support needed for the event including 4 variables (ranked from 1-4): location's drowning + athletes' number + track distance + athletes' experience.

This presentation aims to present and discuss with WCDP2015 participants the Brazilian open water swim race Policy.