



United States Lifesaving Association

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DATE: April 5, 2005

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TO: National Certification Committee

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FROM: B. Chris Brewster, Chair and Rick Gould

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ISSUE: Updated Draft Statement on Open Water Swimming Event Safety

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On our website, www.usla.org, we assert that, "USLA works to reduce the incidence of death and injury in the aquatic environment through public education, national lifeguard standards, training programs, promotion of high levels of lifeguard readiness, and other means." Our purposes and objectives in the USLA Bylaws include the intent to, "Establish and maintain high standards of professional surf and open water lifesaving for the maximizing of public safety;" and to, "Actively support the programs intended to improve lifesaving and to promote public safety in the coastal or aquatic environment and related humanitarian causes."

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The popularity of open water swim competitions has drawn an increasing number of people into challenging events in an environment in which some are unfamiliar. In the case of triathlon, for example, athletes with strong shore-based skills (running and cycling), may participate in the swim portion of the event out of necessity, despite very limited swimming skills. In some cases, this has resulted in a high number of rescues and even drowning deaths. Los Angeles County, for example, reports that it annually provides ocean safety for at least four large events that each exceed 1,000 swimmers, often during treacherous conditions. They report having made 185 rescues during the 2001 LA Triathlon, another 157 rescues during the 2004 Malibu Triathlon, and a combined 128 rescues during the 1998 and 2004 Hermosa Triathlons. Camp Pendleton lifeguards report the occurrence of a death in a triathlon in their jurisdiction, despite the presence of lifeguards and careful oversight. Media reports occasionally reference cases in which open water swim events in other areas have resulted in deaths.

Many open water swim events occur in areas where there is no professional lifeguard agency of jurisdiction. In these cases, event safety may be left up to the event organizer, with little or no guidance from a recognized lifesaving organization.

During our November 2004 meeting, the National Certification Committee reviewed and modified a draft statement on Open Water Swimming Event Safety, which we had prepared for initial consideration. On November 6, 2004, this updated draft was published on the USLA website in the Lifeguard Library section and notification of the document's availability was widely circulated. The cover memorandum explained the reason for the document and invited comment from all interested parties. The deadline for comment was March 30, 2005.

Detailed comments were received from the following parties:

East Bay Regional
Parks District Los
Angeles County
Orange County Lifeguard Chiefs
Association Pacific Masters
USA Triathlon

In most cases, further dialogue was engaged with those submitting comments to better understand their points of view. In the case of USA Triathlon, a conference call was engaged. Extensive and valuable input was received from each of the noted parties and has helped tremendously in shaping this draft document.

Since comments were submitted independent of each other, unique and sometimes conflicting recommendations were received. It has been our goal to meld these recommendations to the best of our ability in language that builds on the value of all comments received, recognizing that no single source has all the answers.

A particular challenge is represented by the fact that open water swim events take place in a wide variety of locales, from small lakes in the Midwest to areas with consistently strong surf. In many locations, there is no USLA certified lifeguard agency overseeing the area, or for that matter any lifeguard agency at all. Our goal was to ensure that the standards address minimum needs in a manner that could be reasonably accomplished regardless of locale or environment.

Significant attention will be paid to the *suggested* ratios of lifeguards to competitors in section #3. For this reason, some particular explanation and justification is provided as follows.

Presently, USA Triathlon, which is probably the most widely recognized sanctioning body for open water swim events in the US, requires the following of event organizers wishing to have their events sanctioned: "A minimum of one (1) lifeguard per 50 athletes is required. A ratio of 35:1 is mandatory for ocean swims." Since USLA presently has no suggested ratios, the USAT ratios are likely widely used nationally, unless a local agency overseeing an event is desirous and able to require a more strict ratio or the event promoter does so without such a requirement.

The USLA National Certification Committee, at its meeting in Galveston in November 2004 considered these ratios to be inappropriate. The committee suggested, at that time, a ratio of 25:1 for most cases water and, "Where water temperature is under 58 degrees, surf is in excess of four feet, or currents are in excess of three knots, a ratio of not less than one trained lifeguard for every 12 competitors should be maintained." In other words, lifeguard protection would need to roughly double when certain conditions are present. In arriving at these ratios, the committee was acting in its capacity as experts developing a draft, consensus recommendation. Most of those involved in this consensus process have significant experience overseeing open water swim events.

Only one agency replied to the initial draft with a ratio they had devised

based on past practice and field testing - Los Angeles County. Specifically, in a thorough policy on the subject, Los Angeles County has specified a baseline ratio of 10:1 (which may be adjusted up or down based on articulated reasons). This ratio is very close to the 12:1 suggested by the committee in its consensus, draft recommendation for specified surf conditions.

In discussions with USA Triathlon, it became clear that it would be impractical for an event promoter to effectively bet on low surf size or weak currents on a given day. Staffing for low *surf* in an environment where *surf* size can vary significantly would leave the event promoter in a "no-go" situation if the *surf* were to rise. Thus, practically speaking, the promoter would need to staff for the worst case situation. This would be 12:1 in the initial USLA draft. Considering Los Angeles County's successful field testing of the 10:1 ratio, it seemed to us appropriate to recommend 10:1 instead of 12:1.

All those who have commented on ratios, including the Los Angeles County policy itself, have pointed out that various factors can affect safety at a race and the resultant need for personnel. As an example, the Los Angeles County policy states, "Additional lifeguards and resources may be assigned to an event based on the age, experience, and athletic ability of the contestants. Conversely, the number of lifeguards may be reduced to safeguard an event based on a pre-qualifying swim." Similarly, other factors are listed which might cause variations.

Representatives of the Chicago Park District mentioned, at the Galveston meeting, that some events involve back and forth swims right beside the shoreline, with lifeguards overseeing from above. USA Triathlon mentioned similar circumstances involving short back and forth courses at some events. In cases such as these, it seems clear that adequate levels of safety could be provided by a lesser number of lifeguards than an open ocean swim stretched out over two or more miles. These are only a couple of examples of mitigating factors.

It seems important to us to develop a target ratio as a starting point for these events, particularly for those with no past experience overseeing an event or for overseers with limited open water lifesaving experience. It also seems critical to list example factors which would logically cause sanctioning bodies and permitting agencies to vary from these targets. This should help both entities base their decisions on best practice. We have not suggested these ratios as minimum standards or minimum guidelines, but rather as *recommended considerations*, in an effort to make it abundantly clear that USLA is not endeavoring to mandate ratios. We have included numerous considerations that would logically cause variations from these recommended considerations (see 3.2.1). It is now up to the National Certification Committee, with input, to further refine this document as it considers appropriate.

If you have interest in comments received, they are available in an electronic version. Simply request one from brewster@lifesaver1.com . A strikeout and underline version of the revision from draft #1 can be found at the end of this one.