Safety Tip of the Month – May 2008
VSI Safety Committee

"When You Train In The Lake, Don't Miss The Boat"

As more and more clubs, coaches and athletes are becoming aware of the benefits that Open Water training can provide, it is important that they also understand the hazards involved. As the Open Water season begins, USA Swimming would like to inform you of certain precautions that should not be overlooked while training. Please read the following suggestions and have a great summer of training out of the pool, so you can swim faster in the pool.

As a coach, you must first identify the factors that you will be dealing with so you will eliminate unforeseen risks. The known factors which are sometimes overlooked are: age, experience, physical ability, and athlete to supervisor ratio. It is important to understand that your athletes might be able to handle the distance going out, but may struggle coming back. If you are ill-prepared, you could find yourself and your athletes in trouble. Please make sure that you also have enough escort craft with you in a large group. If you have to stop for one athlete the other athletes will then be unattended. Should they need assistance, they will be essentially alone. Keep in mind that while going from yards to meters can be difficult because there are fewer walls, open water swimming has no turns and no lane ropes to hang onto. Make sure your athletes are prepared and know what to do when in trouble.

There are certain environmental factors that should be considered. As the Red Cross has always taught us, never to dive into water in which you cannot see the bottom, so too, should you never do an open water session without considering these factors: wind velocity, water and air temperature, dangerous marine life, cleanliness of water, visibility, water depth and currents, weather conditions, and floating object dangers. How many stories have we heard of being in a boat in the middle of a lake and a storm just blew up out of nowhere? This is one of the most dangerous of situations that can happen. If you are training near shore for most of your session, you can avoid most of this risk. However, if you are swimming out and back, then please be aware of your weather conditions and swim back at the first sign of foul weather. When swimming in clear water, winds can often times kick up bottom soils and make things unclear. If you don't know what you're swimming in this can sometimes become a danger. The coach should have signals that will indicate to the swimmer when they need to look up or stop. This way the coach can stop an athlete before they run into a floating object or another boat.

While USA Swimming requires its coaches to know how to deal with aquatic dangers, the open water coach, whether they are heavily into it or not, should be aware of the risks and know how to respond to dangerous situations. Please read up on hypothermia, hydration, and deep water rescue. Knowing these safety measures will help to ensure your athletes' safety. Under no uncertain terms should a group of swimmers be left unescorted. Know your craft and make sure you can handle emergency situations. If you are using a motor craft, be sure to keep your distance, let no athlete swim from behind the craft, and always know where your athletes are during the swim. Open Water swimming is a great alternative to the boredom of training in the pool. It can literally bring back the enthusiasm of a program. Studies have shown that swimmers who have trained in open water show a higher level of aerobic conditioning and enter into aerobic energy systems quicker than a majority of the pool only swimmers. We have also seen tremendous positive crossover when swimmers return to the pool. Many clubs, colleges and universities use this as part of their pre-season and in-season preparation. USA Swimming wants to make sure you do it safe so you can keep on doing it. Don't let these guidelines scare you, let them prepare you. When swimming in open water you prepare accordingly. Have a great season and don't miss the boat!