

Wetsuit Selection Considerations

By David Kraemer, Open Water Swim Coach, Silicon Valley Triathlon Club

Note: our sponsors Runner's Factory, The Runner's High, and Team Concepts, sell wetsuits and offer SVTCer's discounts according to their sponsorship agreements. The Runner's High, located in Los Altos and Menlo Park offers Wetsuit rentals with a Rent to buy option!

The advent of the Wetsuit has changed Triathlon as much as any single introduction of new equipment. After the bicycle frame and componetry, purchasing the wetsuit represents the largest expense. The purpose of this document is to educate the new wetsuit buyer about the options and considerations for purchasing a new wetsuit.

Once the sole users of wetsuits were divers and surfers. During the 1980's triathlon events permitted the use of wetsuits that has resulted in being a great swim equalizer due to the creation of increased buoyancy. Additional benefits include the extension of season, expansion of potential workout and race venues; increased safety and reduction of fear, and general comfort make this investment worth the outlay.

USAT (USA Triathlon) sanctioned races allow wetsuits for races in water 78 degree or less. USMS (Masters Swimming) swim events do not permit the use of wetsuits. Racers who decide on wearing wetsuits do so for reasons other than official placing or awards, and may be used by choice. In short, buy a wetsuit if you plan on doing triathlons in lakes before July and after September, in the Bay or Ocean venue any time of year, or if you intend on swimming for fun in the Open Water.

Why a wetsuit?

Warmth—The Neoprene or rubber material traps a layer of water close to the skin that is warmed by core body temperature and delays Hypothermia in water less than 80 degree.

Buoyancy—The wetsuit provides safe and fear-reducing buoyancy, but should not be relied upon as a life preserver. However, increased confidence in the open water can be a benefit of this feature.

Speed—Reduction of drag, the effects of providing buoyancy to the hips and legs, and the ease of breathing and sighting all contribute to a 10% or greater reduction in time over an Olympic distance swim (3-5 minutes!). Greater improvement is accrued to lesser swimmers, making the wetsuit a great equalizer.

Energy Conservation—These prior features contribute to a significant reduction in expended output during the swim.

Wetsuits come in 3 primary varieties and can be 1 piece or two:

Full Cut: Coverage from head to toe 200\$+ (50 degree +)

Sleeveless: also called a Farmer John or Farmer Jane 150-200\$ (68 degree +)

Short Cut: Knee length Farmer John 100-150\$ (75 degree +)

The compromise in style is cost, warmth, freedom of movement, and ease of removal in the transition areas! Two-piece wetsuits have an advantage that they can be mixed and matched with different tops and bottoms (short and long), and they are easy to remove, but are slightly more expensive, and potentially compromise the seal of water ingress. These designs are becoming very popular in tri-circles.

At one time, Wetsuits were all constructed uniformly at 5mm or 3mm (trading off warmth against flexibility). Today more innovative designs combine 3mm in shoulders, limb openings, and arms, with 5mm in legs and chest.

Additional Considerations:

1. "Squid Lids" are head coverings, which provide an additional layer of protection for ears and the top of the head. Open Water Swimming is done "double capped" using latex swim caps or a combination of latex cap and "squid lid" (about 10-15\$).
2. "Booties" and "Gloves" are also available. If you are swimming in water colder than 50 degrees, you ARE crazy (ed. Note), but probably need the extra protection! Swim friendly products are neoprene only and soft, but not so desirable for Diving or Paddling.
3. Fit of the wetsuit should be "second skin" tight. Legs and Arms can be "cut" to length with a sharp scissor, if necessary. Fit around chest and arms for ease of movement is the single most important fit consideration.
4. "First swims" can feel like your breathing is restricted. This diminishes with practice so long as the fit is proper.
5. "Repairs" of compromised fabric is possible, but not reliable. Care should be exercised to prevent a breach of the fabric from "pulling" or "puncture".
6. "Neck Rash" is the chafing that can occur around the neck due to the movement associated with breathing---some tri shirts have fabric above the collar bone, and shirts known as "rash guards" which are synthetic, thin, and have a "turtleneck" feature are available at Costco and surf shops. They are a good investment particularly for swimming in 78-80 degree temps without a wetsuit.
7. Wetsuits should be hosed down and air-dried after every use.
8. Use of "body glide" at the lower legs, neck and wrists can help in suit removal. KY Jelly, Vaseline, and PAM are also helpful, but should be washed off the wetsuit purposefully---or damage to the neoprene will occur.
9. During the swim exit, pulling the zipper down, allowing water to ingress the suit will also help in suit removal. Sitting on the ground and pulling off the bottom may be the best removal method. You will see lots of people doing the "wetsuit hop" by standing on the pant leg while lifting the leg out of the pant leg!
10. Two-piece removal is aided by bending at the waist crossing the arms and reaching to the bottom of the "Wetsuit Top" and pulling upward.
11. "Winter Shrinkage" creating wetsuit tightness is very common if you have enjoyed a training break (OK this is just to see if anyone is reading this far---but seriously the fit should be so snug that gaining 10 pounds is a problem!)

Where to buy—SVTC sponsors Runner’s Factory, The Runner’s High, and Team Concepts. Second hand stores like “Play it again Sam”, Surf or Dive shops, Brand stores like O’Neills in Santa Cruz) Call first, ask about their rental policy, ask if they have Tri-Suits, be certain of thickness, and where possible “try before you buy”

Primary Triathlon related Vendors:

DeSoto

Quintana Roo

Ironman

O’Neil

Orca

Ask around, to find brands, which others have, had satisfaction, and the March 03 “Triathlete” magazine included a product feature for swim related products. Please call if you have questions: Dave Kraemer 408 865 0484, David_Kraemer2001@yahoo.com.