







## **SAFETY OFFICER#:**

In these days of “Risk” minimisation and management the role of the Safety Officer is critical, so the appointment of this person should not be overlooked nor trivialised. It is vitally important to the success of the day and for the well being of all Swimmers, Handlers, Technical Officials and the Organising Committee. This is a key role for a key person. The General Requirements apply to the Safety Officer’s appointment.

### ***Who do you appoint and why?***

If you’re lucky enough to have someone who volunteers and who:

-  has specialised skills in recognising risks and dangers;
-  can minimise these to an absolute minimum;
-  coordinate the combined expertise of others into a single cohesive unit;
-  can plan and successfully implement the plan and carry it out to a successful conclusion;
-  will accept the challenge, run the gauntlet of criticism and abuse; and
-  come up smiling at the end of the day with that look of satisfaction when it all went ok,

then you’re blessed and don’t let them escape! Most of us only get to this level with practice and some good old-fashioned luck.

From the above description you can see that the role is demanding and it might be difficult to find the right person. Someone with experience in the voluntary Emergency Services, Police, Fire or Ambulance Services, Coast Guard or who occupies a safety officer role at their place of employment may be your target. If you have anyone in your Club or District Association that has these attributes approach him/her and see if he/she will accept this position. If the person has a tie in with one of the Services you may be able to use that contact for assistance. Sometimes Emergency Services will utilise an open water swimming event as a training exercise. Two immediate benefits, you get to network with a specialist group of people and they get valuable training while helping you with the event. For example, Penrith Swimming Club has had the invaluable assistance of the Penrith (formerly Nepean) Rescue Squad since 1981 with the Squad looking after water safety. The Squad has used Penrith’s annual event as practical training for its members. A plus all round.

In conjunction with the Course Officer, the Safety Officer should carefully inspect the proposed course. The venue will alert you to some of the areas of concern. What do you look for? There are so many variables that it would be impossible to cover everything. Let’s examine a lake and a beach. At each of these locations you could reasonably expect to encounter just about everything. Prior to staging any OWS event a Risk Assessment Plan should be completed.

### **At the Lake:**

- ∞ From where does the water come? Underground spring, bore or river fed? If a river is it fast or slow flowing? Does the river originate in alpine areas? This will determine the water temperature. Is there a dam further upstream? You may need to contact the Water Authority

to ensure that no discharge is scheduled a few days before the swim. Enough for the ingress how about the egress?

- ∞ Is there a discharge point from the lake? If there is, what is the discharge rate? There's no point in having a swim if half your swimmers are sucked out of the course into a fast flowing stream or river.
- ∞ Is the venue subject to sudden flash flooding? If there is no egress point for the water what happens to the excess water? Does it overflow or is there an underground channel? This might be indicated by a whirlpool at some point in the lake.
- ∞ What is the depth of the lake? If it's just a few metres then the temperature may be all right. Whereas if it's 50 metres deep there will be frigid water at the lower levels. What will be the effect of 50 to 100 swimmers and their support craft on the water layers? Will the frigid water come to the surface?
- ∞ What comprises the lake's bottom? Is it sandy, soil, rocky? Are there any sinkholes? Are there weeds and reeds? These may constitute a trap for the unwary.
- ∞ How do the swimmers access the venue? It may be the best venue available but it's no good if you have to scramble down a 3 metre embankment to enter the water and then back up the same height when leaving.
- ∞ Is there an access ramp for craft? This can be a problem if it's the only public ramp for kilometres around and you close it off for the duration of the swim. Is there a way of overcoming this issue?
- ∞ What is the quality of the water? Has the Organising Committee obtained a clearance from the Health Department? If so this should be in the form of a certificate. It's no good putting all the swimmers at risk because of water impurity. In some races overseas the swimmers receive an injection before they commence the race to counteract possible infection, or parasitic invasion by ingestion. What a horrible situation, but this is the overseas Organising Committee's form of risk management.
- ∞ Are there any submerged obstacles such as trees, rock outcrops, motor vehicles, traps, or underwater pipes or cables? There may be a submerged fence line. Nice trick to swim across submerged barbwire! This has a detrimental effect on the body, but the fish may like the bits of food that sink to the bottom. See there is a positive from every obstacle!
- ∞ What is the evacuation plan for the removal of all swimmers from the course? If a sudden electrical storm occurs you don't want any swimmers in the water running the risk of being electrocuted. How do you evacuate injured swimmers to the nearest medical facilities? Have the local ambulance and hospital been notified that the event is being staged?
- ∞ Is the whole course visible at all times? Do you need an elevated observation post or is there a natural attribute that will fulfil this need? If the swimmers round a natural obstacle such as an island in the middle of the course and they cannot be seen, have you stationed an observation post on the off side so that reports as to progress can be made?
- ∞ Are there other users of the venue that need to be considered? Commercial users will have rights that will not be subjugated. Have these users been notified? It might be embarrassing

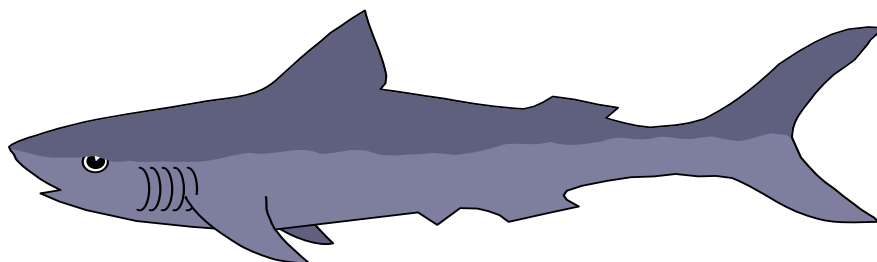
if the local sailing club is holding its annual championship regatta on the same day over the same course or the rowing club has a permit for the exclusive use of the course on that day.

- ∞ Is the course adequately defined? Do the markers, buoys or fixed turning points stand out or do they blend into the background? What can be done to ensure a contrast?

As you can see the concerns are limitless and you need to be fully aware of all possibilities.

### **And at the Beach?**

- ∞ Usually access will not pose a problem. Do you need to have a restricted zone so that surf boards, sailboards, jet skis, power craft and the like are prohibited? If so, has there been adequate notification?
- ∞ What have been the climatic conditions in the week leading up to the day of the event? A storm several kilometres away could mean huge swells, large waves and strong winds. What is the weather forecast?
- ∞ Have you obtained tide charts? Is the tide run up, turn or run out? Is there a main current situated in/through the course?
- ∞ Looking at the beach itself, are there channels, rips, sinkholes, reefs, bomboras, shallows, sand bars? Is it a patrolled beach? If so approach the local surf club for assistance. The surf club members will know all of the above and may be willing to provide swimmer support and IRBs. The local Council may also help with IRBs and professional Life Guards.
- ∞ Has the Coast Guard been contacted? The Coast Guard will have every known obstacle or danger mapped and will know the commercial vessel routes and channels.
- ∞ Is the beach subject to unusual numbers of stingers? The time of the year and the prevailing wind may dictate relocation, postponement or even cancellation of the event. As the Safety Officer, it will be your recommendation that the Referee will respect.
- ∞ Is the beach a known spot for “visitors of the deep”? You’ll notice that the dreaded “S” word has not been used, so a picture will do:



- ∞ If one of these joins the race, do you have sufficient swimmer support craft to evacuate all swimmers from the danger zone? What is the emergency evacuation plan? If powered craft are used it is unlikely that this visitor will stick around. But it is a concern that you have to take into consideration. Everyone should also remember that there is more chance of being killed in a car accident than there is of being taken by a shark. In any expanse of ocean you

will always see marine life. So it's important that there is a plan in place and that the swimmers are told what will happen if a "visit" occurs.

- ∞ Normally with ocean swims there are plenty of powered craft. So there is the potential for a propeller injury. Your evacuation plan should cater for this type of trauma. Is it possible to insist that all powered craft have propeller guards?
- ∞ Is there an exclusion zone, such as the start and finish areas, from which all powered craft are prohibited? Do you need to check that the drivers of all escort safety crafts are licensed? Most probably and highly desirable. A licensed driver should be aware of requirements with swimmers in the water.

As you can see it is difficult to predict all the eventualities. It's normally a case of identifying all the possible problem areas, having a plan to eliminate or minimise and conferring with as many people who have knowledge of the venue as you can.

### ***What to do?***

The Safety Officer shall:

- \* be responsible to the Referee for all aspects of safety related to the conduct of the competition.
- \* check that the entire course, with special regard to the start and finish areas, is safe, suitable, and free of any obstruction.
- \* be responsible for ensuring that sufficient powered safety craft are available during the competition so as to provide full safety backup to the escort safety crafts.
- \* 7 days prior to the events provide to all swimmers a tide/current chart clearly indicating the time of tide changes on the course and showing the effect of tides or current on a swimmer's progress along the course.
- \* in conjunction with the Medical Officer advise the Referee if, in your opinion, conditions are unsuitable for staging the competition and make recommendations for the modification of the course or the manner in which the competition is conducted.

### ***In addition to the Rules, please note that the Safety Officer:***

- \* Coordinates with the Course Officer on all aspects of the course. Checks the tidal conditions/rates of water flow and be satisfied that the course is safe for the conduct of the event.
- \* Checks with the Course Officer that suitable warnings of the event have been passed to all other craft using, or likely to use, any portion of the course.
- \* Briefs Swimmers, Handlers, Race Judges and escort safety craft crews on all or any potential safety hazards and the action to be taken should any happen.
- \* Checks, prior to the start, evacuation procedures and sites of Medical Teams.
- \* 15 minutes prior to the start in conjunction with the Medical Officer, confirms to the Referee that, in their opinion, all safety requirements have been met.

- ✳ Inspects the swimmers' escort safety craft to ensure that it is suitable for the purpose intended. Depending upon conditions appertaining to a particular course the type of escort safety craft used will vary. Ensure that prop guards have been fitted to the propeller. ***THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT SATEY ISSUE NO PROP GUARD – NOT ALLOWED ON THE WATER.***

Inflatables should only be used as a last resort due to their inability to keep a constant track in windy conditions and their unsuitability to be rowed at the required pace. While this is a fair comment you will find that the majority of Referees prefer to use IRBs due to their ability to come along side of swimmers with a minimal wash, and the closeness that can be achieved. IRBs are generally more manoeuvrable than larger craft. It is also easier to retrieve swimmers from the water when using an IRB. The trade off is the comfort factor.

Kayaks/canoes/surfboards/skis can be of use as close-in escort in open stretches of rough water but must always be backed up by a suitable larger craft.

**RULES:** The following rules relate to the Safety Officer's responsibilities and duties:

#### **FINA**

OWS3.31

OWS3.32

OWS3.33

OWS3.34

OWS3.35

#### **SNSW**

OWS4.31

OWS4.32

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