



Are Women Better Than Men In The Open Water?

Well, depending on how you look at it...
the answer is...

Yes.

Based on preliminary comparative research findings by Open Water Source, it was found that women compete very well against men – and many times better than them – in the open water swimming world. In fact, it appears that open water swimming is unique among the world's various athletic competitions. In particular, in the marathon swimming world, not only are women holding their own against their male counterparts, but they are also waiting onshore for the men to finish.

Men vs. Women In The Endurance Sports World

In the endurance sports world, the total number of athletes who compete in triathlons and open water swims remains skewed towards men. Both in triathlons in America and open water swims around the world, the percentage of participants in both sports are about the same (63% men vs. 37% women).

In the marathon running world, the ratio of male participants to female participants is about 60% men to 40% women.

In the running world, the average male time of 4 hours and 29 minutes remains faster than the average female time of 4 hours and 59 minutes.

At the highest echelons of the sport, the women's best time in the marathon only placed her 473rd on the 2009 performance list for men and 3205th in history.



Triathlons

In the sport of triathlon, while the top women and the average women are gradually closing the differential gap, there are still significant differences in performance.

For example, in the full Ironman triathlon, the average times of men vs. women by age category are as follows:

Division	Male	Female	Time Differential
Pros:	09:20:31	10:03:42	43 minutes
18-24:	10:51:51	12:41:24	49 minutes
25-29:	10:30:48	11:47:24	1 hour 16 minutes
30-34:	10:35:05	11:32:04	57 minutes
35-39:	10:52:53	11:43:20	50 minutes
40-44:	11:22:35	12:29:56	1 hour 7 minutes
45-49:	11:38:52	12:56:21	1 hour 17 minutes
50-54:	11:49:38	13:18:39	1 hour 28 minutes
55-59:	12:28:48	14:08:21	1 hour 35 minutes
60-64:	13:36:42	14:56:13	1 hour 19 minutes

Where Open Water Swimming Differs

But open water swimming appears to be different. Women do appear to perform better relative to their male counterparts, especially as the distances increase.

Open Water Source analyzed the official times of athletes in various open water swims including the 1-mile RCP Tiburon Mile, the 10K Little Red Lighthouse Swim and the Catalina Channel.

As the distances increase, the women get better and better relative to their male colleagues, but at all distances, the comparative differences are small.



Women Are Better In Marathon Swims

In particular, the average time of women in the Catalina Channel is *7 minutes faster* than the average time for men. What is notable is that the overall records in both directions are held by women (Penny Dean from mainland-to-Catalina in 7:15:55 and Karen Burton from Catalina-to-mainland in 7:37:31).

Because men and women do not swim at the same time during Catalina Channel swims, the analysis also looked at marathon swims where men and women swim together such as the 24-mile Tampa Bay Marathon Swim (years 2000 – 2010) and the 28.5-mile Manhattan Island Marathon Swim (years 2009 and 2010). Around the rivers of New York City, the women – on average – reign supreme with an average time of *nearly 15 minutes faster* (8 hours and 21 minutes for the women to 8 hours and 36 minutes for the men).

A ten-year analysis of Tampa Bay results shows an exception to these preliminary findings: the men reached shore first with an average time nearly 23 minutes faster than the women (11:00.9 to 11:23.2).

Event	Average Men's Time	Average Women's Time
Catalina Channel (all swims)	12:26.2	12:19.1
Catalina Channel (Catalina-Mainland)	12:25.1	12:41.8
Catalina Channel (Mainland-Catalina)	13:22.6	11:55.5
Manhattan Island Marathon Swim	8:36.9	8:21.0
	(41.54 average age)	(33.71 average age)
Tampa Bay Marathon Swim	11:00.9	11:23.2
	(41.02 average age)	(34.54 average age)

The presentation of data can always be interpreted in a variety of ways, but it is important to note that the average age of women in the marathon swimming world is younger than the men (33.7 vs. 41.5 years in Manhattan Island and 34.5 vs. 41.0 in Tampa Bay).



Men Still Faster At The Highest Levels

Among world-class athletes, the world’s fastest swimmers are faster than the world’s fastest women. Several comparisons of the average time of professional marathon swimmers at the Olympics and professional marathon races of various distances demonstrate this fact:

Event	Average Men's Time	Average Women's Time
Olympic 10K Marathon Swim	1:53.7	2:00.9
Capri-Napoli 34K Pro Swim	7:08.8	8:05.1
Hernandarias-Parana 88K Pro Swim	8:27.8	9:02.3
FINA 10K World Cup in Cancun	2:09.8	2:32.5
FINA 10K World Cup in Viedma	1:55.4	2:05.3
FINAs 10K World Cup in Santos	2:16.7	2:22.0

Competitiveness at Short-distance and Middle-Distance Events

Even at short-distance events – like the RCP Tiburon Mile in the cold San Francisco Bay – and middle-distance events – like the Little Red Lighthouse Swim in the fast-moving Hudson River in New York – women perform very well against the men. Open Water Source looked at the results of various divisions of the 2010 RCP Tiburon Mile and the 2009 and 2010 Little Red Lighthouse Swims in New York:

Event	Average Men's Time	Average Women's Time
RCP Tiburon Mile (wetsuit division)	39:31.4	39:57.0
RCP Tiburon Mile (elite top 10)	24:02.4	26:19.4
RCP Tiburon Mile (age-group)	39:02.2	37:42.36
Little Red Lighthouse Swim (10K)	1:41.7	1:44.28
	(42.3 average age)	(38.9 average age)
Little Red Lighthouse Swim (5.8 mi.)	2:18.15	2:20.45
	(42.8 average age)	(39.9 average age)



Uniqueness of Open Water Swimming

If one ignores the differences at the world-class level, it is interesting to look at the data and see how open water swimming – and marathon swimming in particular – may be unique among the world's sports. Based on the data, it appears that open water swimming may be the most competitive amateur sport when men and women race together.

The race is on. May the best (wo)man win.