



# CONQUER YOUR FEAR

OF THE

# TRIATHLON SWIM

M. ELLEN DASH | ALL MEEKS

“Debunks the  
traditional ‘tough-it-out’ approach.”  
Professional Triathlon Coach **Matt Koorey**

# **CONQUER YOUR FEAR OF THE TRIATHLON SWIM**

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End the Dread!

M. ELLEN DASH  
&  
ALI MEEKS

## **Praise for *Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim***

“These concepts changed my life. As a fit athlete but a late-in-life swim competitor, I hit a wall with triathlons. This made me rethink my relationship with water—it changed everything! It felt like triathlon swim therapy: something I dreaded but then discovered was the best thing I ever did!” –**Triathlete E. Scott Osborne**

“The system of overcoming fear that Melon and Ali are teaching is second to none. Their message is spot on.” –**Maryann Carrero, Triathlete and a graduate of Melon’s program**

“This book is a fantastic resource for those suffering anxiety or panic attacks in the triathlon swim. Debunking the traditional ‘tough it out’ approach, *Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim* offers a strategic pathway to break free of a debilitating condition. Without doubt, it will improve the performance and quality of life of many.” –**Triathlon Pro Coach Matt Koorey**

“VERY interesting. Coming from a sink or swim, ‘tough it out’ background, this was not at all what I was expecting. However, what a wonderful way to approach fear. I’ve always had a fear of jumping from extreme heights (typically into water). I always thought if I could start from a few feet, then gradually work up higher and higher, it would be easy and enjoyable. This book exemplifies that step-by-step approach. I LIKE IT!”  
–**USA Triathlon Certified Coach Rick Greif**

“This book is chock full of excellent information: even if you’re an experienced open-water swimmer or long-time triathlete, there’s always something new to learn. As a fellow swim and triathlon coach, I found the book to be extremely helpful: I plan to use several of their tips with my own athletes. It’s an excellent manual, and easy to read.”  
–**Swim/Tri and Leadership Coach Anne Duffy**

“Research shows that fear and lack of knowledge about open-water swimming can be two of the biggest barriers to entry in triathlon—but they don’t have to be. *Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim* is a much anticipated resource for aspiring triathletes who are still in the process of finding comfort in open water. This book helps athletes see a path forward so they can chase their triathlon goals, no matter how big.”

–**USA Triathlon CEO Rocky Harris**

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*To my mother, who wasn't afraid.  
She allowed me to try things most parents would shudder to watch.  
She helped me learn to trust my body, a true gift.  
Thanks, Mom.  
—Melon Dash*

*To my mom and dad,  
who took me to swim lessons and endured thousands of swim meets.  
Thank you for your gift of a lifetime in love with the water.  
—Ali Meeks*



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A grand thank-you to all graduates of Miracle Swimming who have *so* inspired me and my staff for over 35 years! You have taught me how teaching and learning work, validated my conclusions, and spurred me to step out into the world and proclaim new truths that you experienced.

A second grand thank-you to all my licensees who came forward to learn to teach afraid adults, knowing we had the missing link.

Last but not least, thank you to Ali Meeks for writing down the bones of this book to get us started, and who provided the ever-ready fuel to ignite the next stage of the process. This was truly a team effort. Her tremendous grace to trust that in time it would come together, while I spent seven years slowly getting my part finished, made this possible. She practiced our mantra: go at your own pace and keep it fun.

—Melon Dash

First, I would like to thank the swimmers and triathletes of the world, including my own coached athletes at ReadySetSweat, who inspired me to write these words of hope. Thank you for letting me do this work I love.

Next, I'd like to thank the following people who contributed their prized time and energy to making this work a reality. My co-author Melon Dash is a talented writer, thinker, and friend who spent innumerable hours helping to shape this project. Rick Greif, Tony Alexander, Brenda Henderson, and Maryann Carrero gave

to us their intensely personal experiences, and in doing so, helped our readers identify with the challenge of the triathlon swim. Your stories are important, and thank you for sharing them. Several incredibly busy people read and reviewed the book, providing priceless input and comments: Rick Greif, Laine Hendley, Tony Alexander, Scott Osborne, Rocky Harris, Matt Koorey, and Anne Duffy.

The talented cover designer Dragan Lonchar gave us a striking and sleek look for the book. Vince Font at Glass Spider Publishing was a professional and persevering project editor as he helped us craft and refine this product for you. We can't recommend him enough.

The generous and creative crew of Team Rocket Tri Club in Huntsville, Alabama gave brilliant feedback during our barrage of polls on book title and cover design. Team Rocket is an inspiration to athletes everywhere with their myriad of races and admirable group cohesion. Every city should be so lucky.

My non-triathlete husband Kelly Meeks endured oodles of insufferable conversations about the content and direction of this book. He deserves a tall tumbler of bourbon every time it is mentioned. And finally, my parents Elden and Diane Wick have been behind me all the way in everything I've ever done, no matter how crazy. Thank you all.

–Ali Meeks

# PREFACE

Welcome, triathlon friends! Join us on this exploratory journey of triathlon swimming. The concepts in this book are a culmination of over 40 years of combined experience working and swimming with adults with fear of the water, whether in a pool, lake, or in beach conditions. With conviction, we bring you the most fundamental and far-reaching solution to overcoming fear in triathlon swimming.

Many of the issues triathletes experience are the same issues beginning swimmers have: anxiety, fear, and panic. The fear of panicking, not having fun, or not living through an experience is the beginning of panic. This is true whether you are learning to put your face in the water for the first time or swimming 2.4 miles in an iron-distance triathlon. You can't learn to swim if you're afraid you might not live. And you can't swim well in a triathlon if you're afraid you might panic.

For many years, swimming classes specially developed for afraid adults have been used to help them conquer their fear of water and learn to swim ([www.miracleswimming.com](http://www.miracleswimming.com)). If the methods work for our Miracle Swimming students, then they will work for triathletes. We invite you into a circle of people who understand how the water works and how presence of mind is maintained. As a drop of water creates concentric ripples outward, we hope this book causes this circle of people to grow exponentially. May it take many with it as the expansion leads to every person in the world learning how to find their own safety in the water.

The authentic relationships we have with our athletes and students are encouraged between you and your coach. Almost everything we know about teaching and coaching swimming has been learned from our students and athletes. Find answers here that make sense to you. You already have much of the knowledge inside you. We hope the fun you have will cause the sport to not only grow, but become safer.

Let us know how you do.

Swimcerely,  
Melon Dash and Ali Meeks, 2020

## DO TRIATHLON SWIMS FREAK YOU OUT?

There is a very good reason why the swim is usually the first sport in a triathlon. Putting the swim first helps athletes draw on the fresh energy at the outset of the event to perform the swim and then move on to the other sports. But for many triathletes, the swim portion of a triathlon is a frenzied, blurry effort that ends not nearly soon enough. Before a triathlon, you may have been one of those who said, “I just have to get through the swim,” or “I’ll be fine once I get through the swim,” or “I really love triathlon—except for the swim.”

If you’re an afraid swimmer, does it help to know that a whopping 46% of American adults are afraid in deep water in pools, and 64% are afraid in deep open water?<sup>1</sup> If you wouldn’t characterize yourself as an afraid triathlete but would say you’ve experienced just a little fear or anxiety in triathlon swimming, it’s important to recognize that fear is at the core. *And it’s okay! It’s also great information to know!*

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup Poll, 1998.

**How is it that I can bike a hundred miles, I can run a marathon, but I can't swim the length of the pool without being exhausted?**

You can make progress if you know where you are and you start from there. But you can't make progress if you try to start from where you *aren't*. You may have felt a bit embarrassed or ashamed that you have not been able to overcome your fear of the swim. If so, you are in the good company of many, and this book is written for you.

**You can *heal* your triathlon fear once and for all.**

Meet Tony, Rick, and Brenda.

**Tony's Story**

"Telling my story is hard, because the way I was brought up, a guy is not supposed to feel panic. But obviously, we do.

I was brought up swimming in the Tennessee River, and I have been very comfortable in the water all my life. To this day I cannot understand why this panic experience happened. It is not only frustrating but it feels humiliating as well, since I have jumped out of airplanes and flown airplanes and done a lot of adventuring in my life, yet I have never panicked in those situations.



The race where the swim panic occurred was Wet Dog sprint triathlon in the Tennessee River (400-meter swim, 12-mile bike, three-mile run). I had done a few sprint triathlons before, and although I've always been slow and clumsy in the water, I had never felt panic. Leading up to this race, I had taken swim lessons and was able to swim over a mile wearing a snorkel. However, without my snorkel, I could never seem to breathe enough air, and so I was glad to find this race that allowed snorkels.

I remember thinking that the race would be such an easy breeze for me since I had trained so well and felt completely prepared. To this day, I do not understand why, but as soon as I got in the water and started the swim, I felt like I could not breathe. Almost immediately, my heart started racing and I started hyperventilating. I removed the snorkel and rolled over onto my back to swim on my back, but the feelings of panic would not go away. I remember being completely aware that this was a panic moment but felt powerless to stop it. It was so obvious that I was seriously struggling that a lifeguard stayed with me for the entire swim.

It was such a relief to finally finish the swim and get out of the water. I have never before or since experienced this type of panic. I don't know what I could have done differently to deal with this panic, or how I could have kept it from happening."

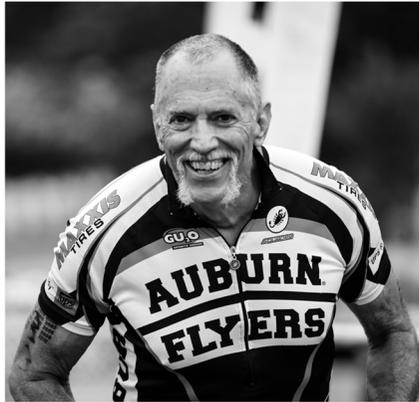
### **Rick's Story**

"I've been competing in triathlons for 25 years and have completed over 250 triathlons. With that background, you wouldn't think I would have any open water issues, but I do. Don't get me wrong, I love swimming in open water. Anytime we go to the beach, that's where you'll find me. Despite all of that, I've had three complete freak-out moments in my long career.

## Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim

My first panic occurred one cold, rainy morning during a half-iron distance race in Tennessee's Atomic Man Half-Iron distance race. The start had been delayed, and we all stood around shivering in waist-deep water waiting for the gun to go off. The race finally started and we took off in a frenzy. I was cold, stiff, and furious because I was repeatedly getting hit by the other swimmers. I remember feeling agitated and chilly when I suddenly felt my heart rate shoot sky-high. I tried to continue swimming, but by then I was in a full-blown panic.

For the first time in my life, I had to call a kayaker over to help me. A kayak quickly got to me, and I told the kayaker that I just needed to calm down and hang onto the kayak for a minute. I hung on, bewildered, and watched the next two waves of swimmers go by until I had settled down. Then, miraculously, I went on my way and had a great swim, a great race, and even pulled out a podium finish. I am not sure how I could have calmed myself down and relaxed other than stopping at that kayak, though, and I don't know what I would have done if he had not been there.



The next setting was at USA Triathlon Age Group Nationals in 2015 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I was in excellent shape and was looking forward to an exciting race. The water in Lake Michigan was very cold in the low 60's that day. It was a deep water start with athletes jumping in from the dock, and I sped off at the start in anticipation of a fast swim. Unfortunately for me, I

hyperventilated again, feeling that familiar panic demon in my chest. I made my way to shallow water where I could stand and stood there until I settled myself down. I then continued on for a respectable yet far-from-podium finish. Once again, I'm not sure what I would have done if the bottom had not been there for me to stand on while I calmed down.

My most recent incident happened in 2017 at the Lake Placid, New York, half-iron distance race. This was my first long course race after having had a stem cell transplant and high dose chemotherapy for many months prior. My goal on this day was simply to finish the race, but the air temperature was very cold at 38 degrees, and the water felt freezing. When the race began, I was uncomfortably cold yet forging forward when all of a sudden my old panic showed up. Again this time, I flagged down and grabbed a kayak in order to get my breathing under control and continue the race.

I can see now that the common thread in all of these experiences is cold water. Even though now I try to think of the swim as a calm, smooth and easy warm-up, I still get anxious in cold water, and I feel that I don't have control when these panic symptoms start. It seems as though as long as the water is relatively warm, I can stay calm and all is good, but not in the cold. On the one hand, I feel like it is only a mental game, but on the other hand, I wonder what else there could be that could keep me from panicking in these situations.”

### **Brenda's Story**

“I'm an accomplished veteran in triathlon, but I still have fear in open-water swims. I can't understand why I've been able to do so much yet still worry about my safety. I've been a triathlete for over a decade in a number of distances in pools and open water, from

## Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim

sprint all the way to iron-distance events. I've stood on the podium more than once in all kinds of races, and I've competed at the national and world championship level. Yet I still fear I'm not safe in deep open water.

Way back in my first triathlon, I ended up not finishing the swim because of fear. I think the reason I was afraid was that I was lacking experience and felt really inefficient in my stroke. In my next race, we were supposed to jump off of a dock to start the race. This terrified me because the water looked dark and very deep, and so I decided not to do the race.

Despite these experiences, I continued to train throughout that year, excited about the sport and encouraged by others around me. Thinking I had plenty of time to resolve my swim fear and feeling very fit, I decided to sign up for Ironman Florida the following year (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2-mile run). It was a great year of training, but in the race swim I panicked due



to the ocean's swells and the inability to see well over them. I hadn't had much ocean swim experience, and the swells scared me. They still do.

Later that year, I completed a half-iron race in those same swell conditions, and although I was similarly terrified, I managed to overcome my fear by using a strong swim stroke and pushing

through it. Two years later, I finished Ironman Florida again, feeling strong and finishing mid-pack, and felt great. I high fived everyone and had a great time in my best swim ever.

However, that feeling has been short-lived. After a couple of years off, I'm starting back to triathlons now, and I'm starting to feel that same fear creeping up. I worry that I won't be able to be safe in the water since I haven't practiced my open water swimming skills in a while and I'm not as strong as I was then. I wonder if my swim stroke would still be strong enough to save me, or if there is something else that makes me safe in deep water."

After reading these, you might be thinking, "Wow, that feels like something I could have written!" You may be frustrated with your swims and feel that they will never get better, like Tony. Maybe you push through your cold-water race anxiety, like Rick. You might have tried working on your freestyle technique to become stronger, like Brenda. And maybe, like all of them, you might wonder if the swim will always be scary, crazy, and difficult.

BUT GUESS WHAT? Swimming should not be scary, and there IS a way to make it comfortable. Cold water does not HAVE to trigger anxiety. **A better freestyle stroke is not the answer.** There is a better way to approach swimming, and here's the point at long last:

**Being able to swim freestyle is not the same as knowing how to swim.**

You may be saying, "Wait, what? Are you saying that if I know how to do freestyle and tread water, I may not know HOW TO SWIM?"

## Conquer Your Fear of the Triathlon Swim

*Yes!*

Well, then, what is “being able to swim?” Being able to swim is being confident, calm, in control, and safe in water that is over your head. Being able to do strokes is knowing how to swim *efficiently*.

There are two legs on which safety stands: presence of mind and understanding of how the water works. Right now, if you have fear in the water, you’re missing one or both of those legs! But recall what Captain Marvel used to say in those 80s afterschool commercials you may have seen: “Knowing is half the battle!” Now, let’s win the battle.

What does NOT being able to swim look like? It looks like fearful stroking and treading that saps your energy, destroys your endurance, and causes uncertainty, worry, and puts you in danger. It also takes the fun out of the swim. When you get tired and are at the end of your energy, stroking and treading are not the answer. The real key to knowing how to swim (whether you’re participating in a triathlon or otherwise) is being in control. When there is control, there is no fear in the first place. This fear can be healed with an understanding of how your body works in the water and how to keep your presence of mind so that you can maintain control. You need to stand on both of these “legs” to *feel* safe and *be* safe in a triathlon.

You are on your way to making the swim the best part of the triathlon by healing your fear once and for all.

## FIGURES & REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**M. Ellen (“Melon”) Dash** is founder of Miracle Swimming School for Adults, which opened in Berkeley, CA, in 1983. She discovered and developed a new teaching paradigm that virtually guarantees that adults who are afraid in water will overcome their fear and learn to swim. It is accomplished with the “science of having fun.” She wrote the book *Conquer Your Fear of Water*, produced the DVD *The Miracle Swimmer*, hosted *The Learn to Swim Show* on internet radio and has contributed game-changing concepts to the aquatics industry that have begun to have a global bearing on water safety. Dash has trained instructors around the world to use her teaching system. Her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, NBC’s *Today* show, NPR, *Psychology Today*, *Athletic Business*, *Aquatics International*, *Recreation*, The Travel News Network, CNN’s *Headline News*, *Real Simple*, and many others. Dash is world-ranked in three events as a U.S. Masters swimmer, and resides full time in Sarasota, Florida.

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**Alicia (“Ali”) Meeks** is a lifelong swimmer, a former NCAA Division 1 collegiate athlete, and a three-time Ironman triathlon finisher. Following a successful career as a marine biologist, she founded ReadySetSweat, LLC, a company providing swim instruction and triathlon coaching. Meeks’ swimming and open-water experience has rendered her a highly sought-after coach, from beginning swimmers to those refining their speed skills. She has been roundly praised for her ability to bring fun and excitement to the learning process for both children and adults. Meeks is a Licensed Miracle Swimming Instructor, a Red Cross/CPR Trained Lifeguard, a Certified Personal Trainer with the American College of Sports Medicine, a USA Triathlon Level 1 Coach, and a Training Peaks Certified Level 2 Coach. Meeks is active in her local triathlon community, volunteering and participating annually in open water and triathlon swims ranging to 10 miles. She lives in north Alabama with her husband, two out-of-control bird/couch dogs, and four good horses.

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“A much-anticipated resource that offers a concrete path to help triathletes swim with confidence.”

USA Triathlon CEO **Rocky Harris**

# END THE DREAD!

*What if instead of dreading the triathlon swim, it could be your favorite part of the race?*

This smart step-by-step guide to conquering triathlon swim fear brings you the product of over 40 years of experience healing adults with the fear of water. Authors M. Ellen Dash and Ali Meeks unpack for triathletes the most fundamental and far-reaching solution to open-water fear available. For the first time, the groundbreaking mindfulness concepts used to teach beginning adults are matched to the challenges of open water racing to produce a remedy that lasts. Learn exactly what you need in order to achieve a rewarding swim every time.



M. Ellen (“Melon”) Dash’s Miracle Swimming School for Adults, founded in 1983, revolutionized

swimming instruction for adults afraid in water. She is a renowned expert and author, featured in countless national and international news outlets for her work. As a U.S. Masters swimmer, she is world ranked in 3 events.



Ali Meeks is a former NCAA Division I college swimmer and multi-distance triathlete who has coached triathlon and swimming with her company, ReadySetSweat, for almost a decade. Her swim expertise and ability to instill enthusiasm and confidence in her athletes makes her a client favorite for miles around.

- Discover how to be calm in open water instead of panicky
- Breathe easy on race day
- Know you will be safe and can take care of yourself

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