

## Wave machines: waterproof MP3 players on test

Music to swimmers' ears or a washout? Simon Osborne tests the new aquatic gadgets

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Man has gone to great lengths to make exercise less mind-numbingly boring. Visitors to gyms have it pretty good – TV screens show music channels, while rowers and runners can compete in virtual races via built-in computers. And outdoors, joggers have the ubiquitous iPod.

But what about swimmers? Thrashing up and down the pool is Britain's most popular way to exercise, but it can also be the most boring. How nice it would be to have a bit of music to make things go a bit more, well, swimmingly.

MP3 players are nothing new, but waterproof ones are flooding the market. Speedo, the Nottingham-based swim firm, brought out its Aquabeat this summer. "It's only in the past few years that the technology has become small enough to make players waterproof as well as portable enough to swim with," says Sean Hastings, Speedo's head of products. "We used a combination of rubber materials to make the joints watertight, and sourced precision waterproof headphone jacks from Japan."

Speedo, the company behind Michael Phelps's revolutionary LZR swimsuit, are the first big firm to dip a toe into the waterproof MP3 market, but it's a pool already awash with minnows. Josh Welensky, head of Edinburgh-based Advanced MP3 Players, has gone from selling a few specialist players in 2005 to more than 150 a month today. "Sales have more than doubled in the past year as customers start to realise they exist," he says.

One man who perhaps can't take advantage of the boom is David Davies, who won silver in the 10km open water swim at the Beijing Olympics. "If I do a long session on my own, I'd definitely get one to stop 'black line syndrome' setting in," says Davies, who clocks up 50 miles in a week's training. "But I don't think my coach would be happy about me listening to music while I was doing serious training."

A disapproving coach is not an issue for me but, while I'm a keen swimmer, I have never considered doing it to the sound of music. Swimming might be dull at times, but surely the space beneath the ripples of a pool is one of the last sanctuaries of peace, where the hustle of life can be washed away for half an hour?

Still, intrigued by these devices, I decide to "lane-test" four of the biggest sellers at Brockwell Lido, my local outdoor pool in south London. The unheated water is a nose-numbing 15 degrees (28 degrees is the average for your local baths), which will provide as stern a test for me as it will for the gadgets. Each player is loaded up with a watery playlist and gets four lengths, or 200 metres, to sink or swim.

### FINIS SwiMP3

First up, it's the player that intrigues me most. Unlike the competition, the SwiMP3 has no headphones. Instead, its twin units clip on to your goggles and rest against the temples, just in front of your ears. Rather than piping music into



**CARLOS JASSO**

*Mi-Sport: 'One for swimmers who want to keep their hair dry'*

the ear canal, it relies on something called bone conduction; the units cause your cheekbones and skull to vibrate, agitating the fluid of the inner ear. Then, as if by magic, you hear the music.

I'm sceptical as I pull on my goggles before jumping in. At first, it sounds like I have cheap mini speakers strapped to my head (so not very good), but the SwiMP3 comes into its own when water bridges the gap between the player and my cheek. The effect is extraordinary – it is as if the entire swimming pool is a speaker. I'm literally immersed in music and, perversely, I cannot identify my ears as the conduits of sound.

The startling effect is reduced when I start a steady crawl. First, the tinniness returns when each unit rises out of the water as I turn my head to breathe. And, with my ears not filled by headphones, the sound of the water washing over my head and the bubbles cascading from my nose drown out the music coming from inside my head.

Verdict: mesmerising, but fast swimming drowns out sound; measly memory bbb

£99; 256MB

[www.advancedmp3players.co.uk](http://www.advancedmp3players.co.uk)

### **Speedo AQUABEAT**

Speedo's offering is certainly the best-looking. With its chunky rubber buttons, it looks like it belongs in the water and it is easy to control even when your fingers are shaking and turning blue with cold. Compact and light, the unit clips neatly to my goggles strap and I quickly forget it's there. The headphones are fiddly to attach to the ears but, once in, the sound quality is good. With Aim's "Cold Water Music" playing, I set off at a fast crawl in an effort to stave off hypothermia.

Things start well; the music goes directly into my ear and is clear. But after a length, a few drops of water work their way past the headphones, interrupting the passage of sound. As the water starts sloshing around, the volume goes up and down but the music remains audible.

It takes a while to get used to being serenaded while swimming – usually I hear only the sound of bubbles and the almost imperceptible din that fills a pool of water. I rather like the musical alternative and feel like doing another length or two to reach the end of the track.

Verdict: great design and sound; takes time to get a good fit bbbb

£75; 1GB

[www.speedo.com](http://www.speedo.com)

### **Nu Dolphin**

The Dolphin looks the most reassuringly waterproof of the players I'm testing. A cylinder of brushed metal is topped with the headphone jack, which screws rather than plugs in and tightens against a rubber seal. But it's not so smart at the other end, where five tiny buttons are horribly fiddly. Unlike the Speedo, it's impossible to turn up the volume or change track when the Dolphin is strapped to my head, out of my field of vision.

The silicone ear buds on the headphones are alarmingly long, but once in place they're comfortable and the Dolphin turns out to have the best sound. Even during a fast crawl, water doesn't get past the buds. With the volume up, I can hear Chris Martin belting out "Shiver" after four lengths. Problem is, I can still hear him when I get to the office an hour later; maybe it's my frozen fingers, but I can't seem to turn the unit off and have to unplug the headphones to stop the muffled sound of Coldplay emanating from my bag.

Verdict: controls fiddly, but good sound bbb

£63; 1GB

[www.wiggle.co.uk](http://www.wiggle.co.uk)

## **mi-sport**

These headphones apparently shorn of their wires don't look waterproof at all. Made by a firm in Nottingham, the Mi-Sport does away with brain-prodding ear plugs and tanglesome cables. Instead, the right headphone doubles as the MP3 player itself, with a tiny door that seals off the USB socket. When I dip my head in the water the unit doesn't drown after all, and they stay on my head as I swim, despite having sat rather precariously on my ears before I dived in.

The problem is the sound – there isn't a means of directing the music straight into my inner ear, and with the rush of water going past my face I can barely hear it. This isn't one for swimmers who like to get their hair wet, then, but would be perfect for those who prefer to keep their head above water, or for anyone lounging in a Jacuzzi or sauna. And, as it doesn't rely on the goggles to stay on your head, the Mi-Sport is good for sweating runners.

Verdict: not great for proper swimming; one for the spa bb

£70; 1GB

[www.mi-sport.net](http://www.mi-sport.net)

## **Water music Simon's playlist**

Madonna: Swim

Smoke City: Underwater Love

Friendly Fires: Jump in the Pool

Aim: Cold Water Music

R.E.M. :Nightswimming

Coldplay: Shiver

Wet Wet Wet: Cold Cold Heart

Aqua: Doctor Jones

PJ Harvey: Down by the Water

Peter Gabriel:I Go Swimming

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