

THE ULTIMATE SWIMMING CHALLENGE by Dick Hannula

Who are these competitive swimmers that can become seasick, face dangerous jellyfish, sharks, and even piranha while racing? They swim through storms, dead cats and dogs, contaminated water, and risk deadly parasites and sometimes hypothermia. This is the world of open water and marathon swimming.

I'm a little ashamed that after more than fifty years of coaching that I knew so little of this area. A 1500 meters event challenged my coaching ability more than enough. Races of more than 50 miles were beyond my comprehension. Yet my replacement coach on Tacoma Swim Club had swum on the professional marathon swimming circuit for many years. It was time that I sat down with Jay Benner, our TSC coach, and had him fill me in on marathon swimming.

This article is the result of a luncheon interview on a few of Jay's experiences in marathon swimming. This is a departure from my usual NISCA Journal articles, but I believe it is interesting and appropriate.

Jay Benner started swimming at age 9 in the Seattle/Tacoma area, and was an above average age group swimmer. At Chief Sealth High School, he was a two time champion in the 200 yard individual medley, and set a Washington State High School Record in his senior year. At the University of Washington, he

was an all American in the 400 yard individual medley. Jay fared better at long course and finished 7th in both the 400 meter individual medley and 1500 meters free in US Swimming National Championships. At the age of 27, he progressed to open water swimming and was a member of the US Swimming Open Water National Team in 1994, 95, and 96. The distance was 25 kilometers. He swam in the Pan Pacific Games in 1995, and the World Cup in 1996.

Longer distances became the greater challenge, and he entered the professional marathon circuit in 1995, and continued through to this interview in 2002. Open water swimming was over 25 kilometers or 15.5 miles. Professional marathon swimming was at distances from 15.5 miles to over 50 miles.

How could I spend more than 50 years in swimming, and know nothing about open water swimming? Probably because it has been a giant yawn in the U.S. Very few people care and any recognition of the sport, or its participants, has been almost accidental. Contrast this to marathon swims in a few of the other countries that embrace marathon swimming. Argentina enjoys crowds of more than 200,000 spectators at their annual marathon swims. The top marathon swimmers are national heroes, and have the status of a rock stars.

What are the rewards in marathon swimming? Mostly intangible as there is only a modest amount of money to be won. Some third world swimmers do make a living, for most like Jay, it is a hobby. A winner might collect up to \$7000, and the last place finisher would still get paid about \$400. Travel is one reward. Jay competed in Macedonia, Argentina, Greece, Egypt, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, and the U.S.

Jay sees it as a great way to learn about your self. To finish a race is a great satisfaction. The body is being pushed to new and very challenging limits. It is a delirious out of the body experience. There is no or very little outside stimuli. Your face is in the water for very long periods of time, and time passes very slowly.

The river swims are not as easy as they might seem. You don't always go with the current, and your boat guide can make the difference in winning or losing. On one of his river swims, Jay was leading the race when his boat guide threw him off course. His boat guide got caught up with the crowd on the shore, and while waving to them, he ran his boat into Jay. Each boat had a small outboard motor, and without knowing it, he pushed Jay off course and out of contention. Successful river swimming depends on taking full advantage of the best that the current has to offer. This depends on a knowledgeable and alert boat guide.

Jay's river swims included the Nile where he swam through many dead,

bloated dogs and cats. The Nile was also a parasite risk, and the swimmers received drugs to reduce the risk at the completion of their races. Jay saw the scar on a Syrian swimmer that ran from his neck to his stomach in an attempt to remove a parasite he received on a Nile swim.

The Nile swims also featured some shortcuts taken, more often by Egyptian swimmers, that skewed the outcome. Jay said that some of those swimmers would hold a rope dangling from the boat for a faster and restful tow on occasion. He also stated that some swimmers actually left the water and ran 500 yards or so down the river bank before returning to the water. The Nile swims were over 27 km, and last about 7 hours.

The long river swims in Argentina were the top river swims. Three major ones are held each year over a five week period. One on the Rio Coronda was particularly memorable. There was a chicken processing plant on the river, and chicken heads were everywhere on the river. It also had a sulphur smell that nauseated the swimmers. The other two Argentine races were 62 km (just over 38 miles), and lasted 8 or more hours; and 88 km (55 miles) and lasted over 9 hours.

Swims in the open sea present a new list of challenges. Salt is one of them. After a 9 hour swim in salt water, Jay's tongue was so swollen he couldn't speak. The recovery of the arms rubbing on the neck can be especially irritating in long salt water

swims. There is always a chop or swells. A 12 inch chop can disrupt the stroke of the most accomplished swimmer, and five foot swells can result in motion sickness. Swells from the side are the most difficult. Head on swells are preferred. Then there is the greasing of the body to reduce chaffing, and help to maintain the body core temperature. Jay has finished open sea races where his body temperature was 89 degrees. Water temperatures have varied on his swims from 59 to 85 degrees. Boats also are known to sink in storms in the rivers as well as the open sea.

Wiring, glass, and debris are other hazards of this sport. This is especially true in the river marathons. Jay has had his suit ripped open at the crotch from wire. Many others have body scars from such encounters.

There are no stops to rest. You are disqualified if you hold onto the boat for any reason. The feedings must come from the boat to the swimmer by pole. Jay uses a pole about 10 feet in length with a cup holder on the end of it. He depends on liquid nourishment throughout his race. It is usually the carbohydrate replacement, endurox. Some swimmers take solids such as powerbars, cookies, fruit, chocolate, and baby food.

Jay swims his first 30 minutes without nourishment, and then takes a cup of endurox every 15 minutes throughout the race. He estimates each feeding time to be 5 seconds.

You now know as much about marathon and open water swimming as I do. There are a couple of noteworthy footnotes. Jay holds the record for a double crossing of the Aegean Sea. This is from Koroni to Kalamata, Greece. This isn't a competitive event. It was a 40 mile swim in open seas.

Since Jay is a recent father, and approaching 40, I asked what's next for him in marathon swimming. He replied that he wants to make a special attempt to double his double crossing in the Aegean Sea. A four way crossing and set a record for the event. This is 80 miles, and 31 to 34 hours of open sea swimming!

What will he get for succeeding? "A key to the city, his picture on a wall there, his housing and meals, and besting the challenge."

Perhaps I didn't miss that much being ignorant on marathon swimming after all. Then again, maybe I'm the one that has missed the boat on the "Ultimate Swimming Challenge".