

The Joys of Open Water – Getting Your Feet Wet

By June C. Hussey

With open water season starting up this May right here in Arizona with the S.C.A.R. invitational swim across Saguaro, Canyon, Apache and Roosevelt lakes, some readers may be wondering, could I ever do that? And that's how it all begins.

There's a first time for everything and everyone and open water swimming is no exception. I'll never forget how nervous I was before (and during) my first open water swim. In a weak moment I had agreed to swim on my sister's 1997 Maui Channel Relay Team. I'd just birthed my youngest child, by emergency C-section no less, so I was in terrible shape, recovering from surgery, carrying an extra 30 pounds and weakened by extended bed rest. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by my shark-phobic big sister's first Maui Channel experience the previous September. Her exaggerated accounts of big waves, jellyfish and Tiger sharks couldn't scare me off. If she could do it, I knew I could too. Still, I had my work cut out for me.

A first open water experience can be daunting even to an experienced swimmer like me. I grew up in and on the sea. I also grew up the victim of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. I can't tell you how many times my friends and I reenacted scenes from that movie in the dark, murky waters of Long Island Sound, grabbing each others' legs underwater and pretending to be devoured. So, I had some mental issues to overcome before my first open water adventure, not to mention physical challenges. But like any adventure in life, if you want to do it, you just have to go for it.

To help me prepare, I reentered the world of Masters swimming. It was an autumn day in 1996, the very day, in fact that I stopped nursing my four-month old baby. Returning to swimming was a gift I gave to myself – after a ten-year hiatus. At the time, I was a 35-year-old working mother of three kids, age six and under, so I needed this outlet badly. And just to make sure I stuck it out, I had set a pretty big goal for myself: Swimming from Lanai to Maui as a member of a six-woman relay; a total distance of 9.5 miles as a seagull flies...much longer if she gets sidetracked by commotion on a fishing vessel that's caught up in a current or a boil of baitfish.

Fast forward eleven months and 500,000 yards in the pool. I'm in the middle of the Maui Channel on a fishing boat that, no joke, resembles the one that got destroyed by *Jaws*. Not to worry because our seafaring captain, Sean, has a bang stick on board, just in case. My teammates and I are heading to Lanai from Lahaina for the start of the race. The sun is rising over the volcanic peaks of Maui and the island is shrinking. I'm bouncing along the impossibly blue waves imagining myself inside them and I'm literally shaking. I've done the work, I remind myself. I'm the only one on my team who hasn't done this before so I feed off their experience and advice and feign confidence. Now, if I can just push those mental images of Tiger sharks out of my mind....

Cruising in these waters, Tiger sharks make a good living. They are predators at the top of the food chain and they are easily the size of Volkswagens. They can't differentiate between you and their next preferred meal very easily. While they've never caused a notable incident in the race's 41-year history,

they do make frequent appearances at this race and have, on other occasions, made headlines taking out surfers and bathers alike.

Talk about facing your fears. I cannot put into words the feeling I had diving off that boat the first time, with a minute to go before the third swimmer's leg would be over and I would have to carry forward the torch for the next 30 minutes swimming calmly yet confidently at a good clip in the middle of the deep blue sea. Thrill? Terror? Exhilaration? A chemist might call it a hearty cocktail of Dopamine, Serotonin, Oxytocin, Endorphin, Adrenaline and Cortisol. I was on a natural high all right. You couldn't do it if you weren't properly juiced.

I regulated my breathing as best I could before my teammate touched my toe and I took off, alone, toward Maui. There is an uncomfortable period of time when your escort boat is in neutral picking up your teammate and you are out there, full of adrenaline, trying to set a pace, wondering if the boat could reach you in time if something, for example, tried to eat you whole. But this feeling, too, shall pass. Most of the time, the boat is there every time you turn your head to breathe. Your teammates shout words of encouragement or direct you with signs to go right, left or straight ahead. You wait for the minutes to count down, as symbolized by cardboard signs, "15," "10" and the most welcome of all, "5" minutes left.

When you're not inhaling and watching for positive signs of progress, you're gazing in amazement through your goggles at the rays of sunlight penetrating the blue depths well past your field of vision. Here and there, a glittery twinkle bounces off some small particle suspended in the brine, reminding you that sea life is all around you and you are, just for this small slice of time, a part of it. How very fortunate you are.

And that, my friends, is the feeling that will stay with you always and keep you coming back for more.

For a list of the world's Top 100 Open Water Swims and all kinds of other great information about open water swimming, visit www.openwaterswimming.com.

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