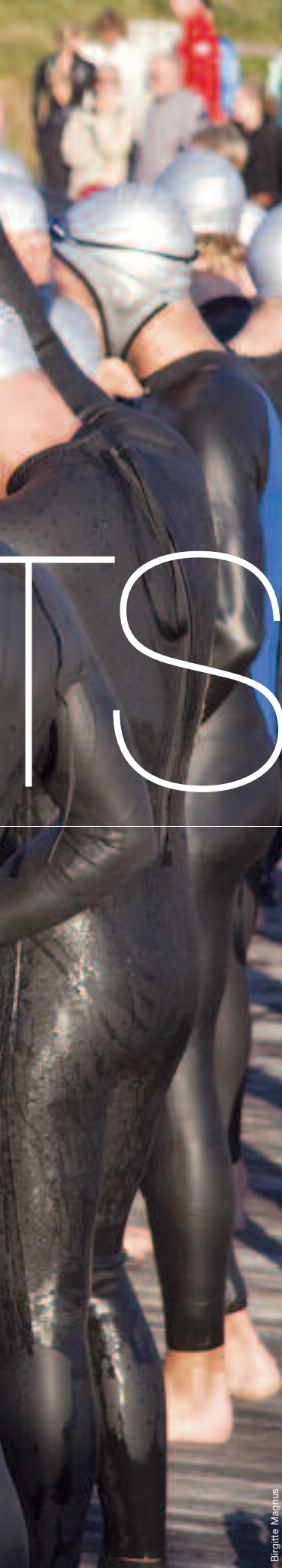




WETSUIT

— The Neoprene Debate Resurfaces in USMS Waters —



by Michael J. Stott

This coming September, delegates to the USMS Convention in Atlanta are scheduled to debate a resolution to allow swimmers in wetsuits to have full competitive status in open water national championships. Purists in the swimming world have already begun to voice objections, but some—even those who say they will never be caught dead in neoprene—are conceding that wetsuits may help enhance Masters swimming as a sport.

Many proponents of the proposed rule change say giving greater status to wetsuit competitors in certain events is likely to attract more members to USMS from the ranks of triathletes, who offer a significant potential for growth. The principal national triathlon organization, USA Triathlon, claims more than twice as many members as USMS.

“I always hated wetsuits, and never wore them. Until

recently, I never could find one that fit me,” says Cindy Hughes, a Masters swimmer, triathlete and marathoner

who competes with the Highlands Ranch Masters in Colorado. “If there’s a separate division (for wetsuit competitors), however, then it’s fair. It will require more scoring and more paperwork, but will it attract more swimmers to these events? Absolutely.”

The resolution, which was introduced by the Virginia LMSC, will pave the way for a rule change that makes wetsuit wearers eligible for USMS

national championship medals, rather than just event place awards, as allowed under the current rule. Under the proposed new scenario, open water swimmers who wear wetsuits could set USMS national records in their new category.

Chris Stevenson, a Masters world record holder in backstroke, is the Virginia Masters member credited with (or blamed for) authoring the controversial measure. A delegate to the 2007 USMS Convention, Stevenson heard the wetsuit issue being discussed, and decided he could offer a solution that might benefit his organization.

“Triathlons have attracted runners and cyclists to the sport of swimming, and I want the sport of swimming to spread,” Stevenson says.

Marcia Cleveland, chairman of the USMS National Open Water Long Distance Committee, notes that most of the 16 members of her committee look askance at wetsuit use, but view its acceptance as important for “the greater good of Masters swimming” and a potential to attract more participants. Given the committee members’ personal views, Cleveland considers the proposal a “magnanimous act,” but also believes the committee has a responsibility to address the interests of all 43,000

USMS members.

“I don’t own a wetsuit and probably never will,” Cleveland says, “but I understand the benefits. I’ve been in a wetsuit three times but never in a competition. I felt like I was in a rubber band and couldn’t move. It’s a personal choice. People definitely get buoyancy and warmth benefits. There are triathletes who can’t swim without them,” she adds.

Indeed, triathletes are among the biggest proponents of wetsuits in general, and they have been flocking to open water events in recent years—including Masters events. Veterans of the triple sport concede that many triathletes who came from running and cycling are poor swimmers, and that wetsuits have provided them with warmth and confidence in the water.

“Personally, I don’t think [the proposed USMS rule change] will be that big of an attraction,” says Brian Bortell, a top triathlete and board chairman of the Richmond (Va.) Triathlon Club. “It’s really a different crowd. At triathlons, except for the pros, there are lots of competitors who are there just to finish. They probably are not great swimmers, and they wouldn’t be there without their wetsuits. At Masters open water events, like the

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Steve Lovegrove

Chris Greene swim in Charlottesville, Va., nobody is out there just to finish.”

Despite his reservations about the recruitment benefits of the wetsuit resolution, Bortell thinks increased demand for wetsuit use is probably inevitable in Masters swimming, attributing the phenomenon at least partly to the introduction to swimming of “speed suits” like Speedo’s Lzr, Tyr’s Tracer Light and XTerra’s 0.02 Velocity, which are appearing more frequently at top-level swimming events all over the world.

“The world of speed suits and the world of wetsuits are merging,” Bortell says. “The distinction between the two types is getting harder and harder to tell apart. How can a

race director know whether a swimmer is wearing a wetsuit or a speed suit?”

Some veteran swimmers are adamantly opposed to both types of swimwear, and others say it doesn’t really matter as long as competitive events take into consideration the fairly well-proven benefits of wetsuits.

“In the early ’90s, when the craze was just starting, only slower triathletes would wear [wetsuits],” says Kris Houchens, coach of the YMCA Indy SwimFit Masters and a former triathlete. “They knew it was a benefit. Now, if they allow them in a triathlon, you almost have to wear them. But as for the rule to set up a separate category for wetsuits, I’m not sure it will work. After a

while, all the really good swimmers will start wearing wetsuits, and try to set records in both categories.”

In Chicago’s Big Shoulders, a 5K and 2.5K Lake Michigan swim held each September since 1990, wetsuits have been allowed as a separate category since 1999. Here’s the rule published on the Big Shoulders Web site: “Swimmers wearing wetsuits or other non-porous attire are welcome to register in the Wetsuit Division, but will be started in a different wave and will not be tabulated with the age group swimmers who do not wear wetsuits.”

Big Shoulders Registrar Scott Reeves says the wetsuit categories have attracted mostly triathletes who use the event as an open water training swim, and participation by wetsuit-wearing swimmers has averaged about 10 percent of the total number of swimmers each year. The event had about 600 total swimmers in 2007.

Seasoned swimmers are usually cordial, if not loving, toward triathletes.

“Swimmers will most likely pooh-pooh wetsuits,” says Joel Wilson, coach of the Santa Cruz (Calif.) Masters and race director for 15 years of the Santa Cruz Pier-to-Pier 10K. “Triathletes just smile, zip up, and run into the water.

Wetsuits allow people to get in water that they would not otherwise be in. They’re being assisted artificially, better able to float and better able to

maintain a horizontal body position. More accomplished swimmers will not be assisted as much. I’ve always thought that wearing a wetsuit allows you to float through the swim rather than actually swim it.”

Currently, article 303.6.3 of the USMS rules states: “Wetsuits may be allowed at the discretion of the meet director. Wetsuits generally provide a competitive advantage. If awards are given to wetsuit competitors, they shall be awarded separately from those for non-wetsuit competitors. Any published results or records must clearly indicate which swimmers wore wetsuits.”

Because of the extra work and expense of adding separate categories, the decision on whether to allow wetsuits may depend on the level of resources available to race directors and sponsors.

“If you want to hold a separate wetsuit division, figure out if it’s worth the extra organizational time and extra awards expense,” Wilson says. “If so, go for it! We allowed wet suits in our 10K Pier-to-Pier Swim, but did not count wetsuit swimmers in the overall results, and they received no awards.”

What are the benefits of wearing a wetsuit? Most acknowledge a speed advantage, although many argue the extent of this advantage.

In one online post on the USMS Forum, “Ruffwater” comments, “Wetsuits make you faster...Swimmers with good body position get even better body position with a wetsuit...Over the past six years, I have done dozens of open water swims—about 50/50 with or without a wetsuit. I have found that I go approx. one min faster per mile with the wetsuit. That’s about 4 secs per 100. I train at approx 1:05/100yd pace. That’s comparable to the guy who said he is 8 sec/100 faster and holds 2:00/100.”

Wilson’s experience is

Resources for More Information about Open Water Swimming

- A guide for prospective wetsuit buyers: www.nineteenwetsuits.com/user_wetsuitfit.html.
- More advice before buying a wetsuit: www.tri247.com/article_1880_Wetsuit+survey+2007.html?category.
- USMS discussion thread: forums.usms.org/showthread.php?s=01ebbf7a1f8968b7ca9512a19ce9a4c4&t=7913
- Discussion of wetsuits and marathon swimming with helpful links: www.soloswims.com/wetsuits.htm.
- “Dover Solo,” by Marcia Cleveland, MMJS Press, is Cleveland’s memoir of physical and psychological triumph. www.DoverSolo.com.
- “Wind, Waves, and Sunburn: A Brief History of Marathon Swimming,” by Conrad A. Wennerberg. Although dated, this book is fascinating.

somewhat different. While some research indicates a 10 percent decrease in time over 1500 meters, Wilson knows only “of anecdotal evidence regarding the speed advantage of wetsuits. I’ve raced friends in wetsuits and noticed that if they were normally faster than me, they beat me by about the same time/distance. If I was normally faster than them, I beat them by about the same time/distance.”

Other advantages? For open water neophyte Tom Callan, a borrowed wetsuit offered a sense of comfort and protection from sunburn on his back and shoulders.

“I don’t think I could have completed my two Chesapeake Bay swims without a wetsuit,” Callan says. “The water temperature was not the issue; it was about 73 both times. It provided me with insulation. On a long distance swim, your kick is slower, less constant. The wetsuit kept my lower extremities from cramping.”

Cindy Hughes’ husband, John Hughes, a sports medicine physician and Masters competitor in pool and open water events, says wetsuits offer a number of benefits besides speed. He says beginning swimmers, and swimmers who have suffered joint injuries, can swim more confidently in a wetsuit.

“It gives us another way of not being tagged out for a year because of a knee injury,” Hughes says. “People who are in rehabilitation for a knee, who can’t tolerate the impact of pushing off a wall in a pool event, can swim in an open water event wearing a wetsuit” for confidence and protection.

Some seasoned, well-conditioned long distance swimmers just don’t like wetsuits, even while acknowledging their thermal benefits—including Dave Holland, former Randolph-Macon College coach, USMS champion and meet director of this year’s 2008 USMS National

Championship 2-Mile Cable Swim.

“Personally, I am against the use of wetsuits for any competitive swimming races,” Holland says. “They were originally designed for scuba divers, surfers and windsurfers to prevent hypothermia and to aid in flotation. Most wetsuits are made of neoprene, which is very buoyant...the rationale for allowing them in most races is for safety, but I think that’s a cop-out. If safety is your number one priority, then stay away from open water. Pretty soon they’re going to allow fins for safety reasons, and then everyone will start wearing those.”

Holland swam at Indiana University for four years under Doc Councilman, who at one time was the oldest man to swim the English Channel. Councilman’s “old school” approach resonates with many in the open water community.

“The thrill of an open water swim is facing nature head-on,” Holland says. “A wetsuit seems like a security blanket to me and I want that feeling of being immersed and tossed around in water. I want to feel the water, waves and wind on my skin, and I want to tackle the difficulty of acclimating to cold water with persistence and hard work. I realize that wetsuits are widely accepted in many races, especially within the triathlon circuit, but my personal moral compass says ‘no.’”

Genetic makeup obviously helps. Lynne Cox, conqueror of the Bering Strait and Antarctic waters, is neutrally buoyant and has an unbelievable tolerance for the cold. She believes that channel swims should be swum under the English Channel Swimming Association rules, whereby one wears only a swimsuit, bathing cap and goggles.

“Part of the challenge of crossing a waterway is being able to make it across under

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your own powers,” Cox says. “It’s about the human ability, not the technology. I believe you will have very spirited debate on this issue at Convention. I’ll be interested in how it turns out. I think the membership would accept separate categories and awards (wet and non-wetsuit), but I have a hard time seeing USMS members accepting just one category that includes wetsuits. I’ll stay tuned.”

As director of the Chris Greene Lake Swim in July, Holland says he will not be allowing wetsuits for three reasons: “1) The water is usually warm (80-82 degrees), so a wetsuit creates a risk that swimmers will get too warm; 2) wetsuits have traditionally been banned from this race and I want to uphold that standard so that there is a level playing field among participants over the years; and 3) wearing a wetsuit over the course of two miles could give a participant an advantage

measured in minutes. I don’t want to deal with asterisks or separate categories when tabulating results.”

The pending open water long distance proposal recognizes the influence of triathlons on Masters swimming. Terry Laughlin, who runs Total Immersion clinics worldwide, senses “that the main advantage of neoprene is that it compensates for the absence of some basic skill.”

“For some I think it is a survival thing,” says Cleveland, “but for a lot of people it is psychological, and they don’t want to take the time to train and get acclimated. It takes patience and years. It’s not easy.” Cleveland recognizes that for many USMS members, people who don’t wear wetsuits will always be the favored children—the real swimmers. And she adds, “Real swimmers swim naked.” <<<

>>> SWIMMER Managing Editor Bill Edwards contributed to this article.

USA Triathlon Regulations on the Use of Wetsuits

4.4 Wet suits (sic). Each age group participant shall be permitted to wear a wet suit without penalty in any event sanctioned by USA Triathlon up to and including a water temperature of 78 degrees Fahrenheit. When the water temperature is greater than 78 degrees, but less than 84 degrees Fahrenheit, age group participants may wear a wet suit at their own discretion, provided however that participants who wear a wet suit within this temperature range shall not be eligible for prizes or awards. Age group participants shall not wear wet suits in water temperatures equal to or greater than 84 degrees Fahrenheit. The wetsuit policy for elite athletes shall be determined by the USAT Athletes Advisory Council. <<<

>>> For details, go to www.usatriathlon.org/upload/pdfs/usat_rules_download.pdf.