

# OPEN WATER SWIMMING

THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE

By Alex Kostich

Visual Splash Photography

Dealing with cold temperatures for the first time can cripple a fast pool swimmer to the point of dropping out of a race, while veteran **OPEN WATER COMPETITORS** have acclimated to cooler water over time and **REMAIN UNFAZED**.

In the 2007 film “The Bucket List,” Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman play aging men who create a list of goals they want to accomplish before they kick the proverbial “bucket.” They visit the pyramids of Giza, go on a lion safari, jump out of planes and race sports cars. All things that are so ... 2007.

Had the cult Rob Reiner film been made today, it’s more than likely that our heroes’ bucket lists would have included participating in an open water swimming event.

In the past several years, open water swimming has gained a foothold in traditionally pool-oriented USMS circles, with many Masters programs dedicating increasing focus to events held outside the usual eight-lane natatorium.

Masters swimmers, budding triathletes, weekend warriors and nervous newbies are all dipping their toes into this rapidly growing swimming subculture and finding a new and invigorating set of challenges to help them stay fit and motivated.

Unlike the relative predictability of competing within the controlled environment of a chlorinated, lane-lined, temperature-controlled pool, open water events are appealing because of the unique set of conditions they offer: naturally fresh or salt water, no tiled lines to follow, and constantly fluctuating temperatures and currents.

Such unpredictable obstacles work to reinvigorate the sport for Masters swimmers, many of whom are struggling to stay interested after thousands of yards and several years spent doing laps in the pool.

## A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

Danny Giometti, a sprinter who swam for UC Irvine, joined USMS at 18 and has been an active member since 2003. Upon graduating in 2008 he continued training in an effort to stay in shape after his collegiate career ended. Staying mentally engaged, however, was difficult since his Masters routine reminded him a little too much of his recent time spent as a competitive swimmer—memories he was ready to put behind him. So Giometti entered his first open water swim in Long Beach, Calif., the site of the 2010 Pan Pacific Open Water Championships, and was instantly hooked after completing the initially daunting 5K distance.

“When the gun was fired and the swim began, I told myself that I would just cruise this race, and if I had enough left over I’d build into it. About 300 meters in I realized that I had distanced myself a good amount from the main pack. The feeling of knowing I got a good start definitely increased my adrenaline. It was so exciting!”

Giometti admits the race had its challenges, but it didn’t prevent him from a thrilling experience:

“The combination of cold water and unknown conditions was intimidating, but that was the main factor for my increased adrenaline. ... I was so proud of myself for finishing that swim, even more so than doing well in college. And it was especially nice to see all the great photography captured that day. It’s awesome how there are professional photographers out there taking pictures of you ... kinda makes you



Dan Weiklin, DAW Photo Art

feel like [Michael] Phelps! I also didn't have a problem bragging to everyone that I swam an open water 5K."

Indeed, the sense of accomplishment swimmers feel upon completing their first open water race is akin to the thrill casual joggers might feel in finishing their first marathon. However, whereas running a marathon is essentially open to anyone able to move forward on two feet (hence its ubiquity on bucket lists), an open water swim is exclusive only to those capable of swimming in the first place. As such, the idea of completing a mile in a lake or the ocean really resonates with people as an impressive feat worthy of their time, effort and well-earned bragging rights.

### A STAR IS BORN

In addition to the unique sense of accomplishment they provide, open water swims can also serve to boost an ordinary swimmer to unexpected successes. For every swimmer reared within the confines of a traditional swimming pool, there seem to be others whose untapped potential lies in open water. Take away the lane lines, drop the water temperature from 79 by at least 5 to 10 degrees and add waves ... and suddenly a star is born.

Mark Warkentin was an accomplished but by no means extraordinary distance swimmer at University of Southern California, graduating as a four-time All-American in 2003. Discover-

ing open water racing in his post-collegiate career, Warkentin excelled enough to qualify for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and became one of the world's premier open water swimmers during what should have been the twilight of his career.

### THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

As swimmers are finding renewed energy and success by venturing outside of the pool, coaches too have begun incorporating open water workouts into traditional training programs. One recent high profile example of this is former UCLA Bruins Masters coach Gerry Rodrigues and his Los Angeles-based open water preparation operation, TOWER 26.

Rodrigues found that many of his swimmers clamored for consistent open water training and would skip pool workouts with increasing frequency to do stealth training sessions amongst themselves in the ocean, especially during the competition-heavy summer months. He started an optional once-weekly outdoor workout that grew so popular that he now coaches a new team outdoors full-time, consisting solely of open water Masters swimmers and triathletes. The focus of this program is to improve the technique and unique approach to racing that members need to excel in open water races.

"Within a year, our TOWER 26 beach workout grew to over

100 attendees, at one point reaching 160 members this past summer," explains Rodrigues.

"Why so many so quickly? Open water is growing rapidly since its introduction at the 2008 Olympics, coupled with the explosion of triathlon participants. Most of my Masters swimmers and triathletes need their open water skills sharpened and their confidence built, and specificity of training is the most targeted way for improvement."

Rodrigues has his disciples warm up with an 8-minute run followed by an 8-minute swim, followed by a few interval-based circuits around two buoys placed 600 meters offshore.

"We break it up into circuits ... to more frequently practice the essentials: a start, maneuvering through surf, frequent navigation, race positioning, drafting and preparing for the finish. A break between circuits offers up time for instruction, and then they're off again."

The 100+ person group is broken into several subgroups based on speed and experience, from pros to newbies.

"It's fun, it's exciting and it's exhilarating!" says Rodrigues, "and best of all the improvements are rapid and evident almost immediately."

### A MORE FORGIVING SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Competing in a pool presents athletes with the same conditions

every time they steps up on the blocks: the water temperature is constant, the race distance is constant and the lack of a current is constant. As such, racing in the same event year after year can be frustrating, even depressing when best times from 20 years ago become become harder if not impossible to duplicate (Dara Torres notwithstanding).

Happily, open water swimming provides a very forgiving set of circumstances in which one is actually capable of improving with age far beyond reasonable expectations. Since there is no way to ensure exact course distances in open water, comparing your times from one year to the next is moot. Since conditions can vary by the minute, you can enjoy a favorable current in one race while battling rogue waves in another. This lack of precision is one of the most appealing aspects of open water competition for some swimmers, as their youthful abilities wane within the rigid rules of the pool.

### EXPERIENCE VS. YOUTH AND SPEED

While experience is always a welcome secret weapon in any Masters swimmer's arsenal, it takes on increasing importance within the realm of open water competition. Youth may prevail when it comes to possessing speed or endurance, but it is often the more seasoned swimmers who have a distinct

advantage when competing in lakes or oceans.

Sighting, an essential technique in which swimmers raise their heads forward to stay on course during a race, can slow down pool swimmers unaccustomed to altering their stroke in such a radical way. An experienced open water swimmer has already mastered this skill and not only manages to maintain proper technique but can also usually remain on course.

Dealing with cold temperatures for the first time can cripple a fast pool swimmer to the point of dropping out of a race, while veteran open water competitors have acclimated to cooler water over time and remain unfazed.

Race strategy is always a challenge for a pool swimmer making a foray into open water. Whereas the longest pool event is 1500 meters or 1650 yards, most open water races begin at that distance and can exceed 25K. This requires a fundamental shift in how one approaches a race; knowing how

to pace oneself, knowing when to feed or intake fluids, and knowing one's own endurance capabilities becomes just as important as knowing when to turn on the six-beat kick or how to negative split.

### WETSUITS WELCOME!

One popular misconception about open water swims is the allowance (or lack thereof) of wetsuits. While tech suits have been disallowed in USMS open water events since January 1,

2011, this has no bearing on those participants who prefer to stay warm with a traditional competitive wetsuit. There are usually separate divisions to account for the distinct advantage such suits offer (warmth and buoyancy), but with such options swimmers should not be discouraged from entering an event out of concern for hypothermia any more than they should be discouraged out of concern for shark attacks (there have been no recorded shark at-

tacks on swimmers competing in an organized open water swimming event, ever).

### THE MAIN EVENT

With Masters swimming memberships on the rise (since 2000, enrollment has grown over 40 percent) the recent increase in popularity of open water events is no surprise. One of the more high-profile events to debut last year was the Optimis-Sport Distance Swim Challenge,



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which took place on October 16 along 12.6 miles of Southern California coast from Manhattan Beach to the landmark Santa Monica Pier.

As with all USMS-sanctioned events, registrants were required to show proof of current USMS registration. Sanctioned events give the athlete a guarantee of sufficient support staff and supplemental insurance coverage in the unlikely event of injury. The event itself had several races to choose from (1.2, 2.4, 4.8 and 12.6 mile individual swims, and relay options) as well as a "wetsuits-acceptable" policy.

The inaugural 2010 event was a huge success, drawing athletes from as far away as England and Australia (world 25K champion Brendan Capell and Olympian Ky Hurst) and featuring 31 brave swimmers who attempted the entire 12.6-mile distance themselves (27 finished).

Spectators lined the beaches at each of the seven transition areas since swimmers were required to exit the ocean and run up the sand and back into the surf every 1.2 to 2.4 miles. This was done in part to accommodate the relay participants, but also to make the race more exciting for the spectators on shore while more challenging for the swimmers. Plans for the 2011 event are already under way.

#### WAVE OF THE FUTURE

The recent gain in popularity of open water events shows no signs of slowing down. Although there are already long established, well-known races on the open water circuit (the RCP Tiburon Mile, established 1999; the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, established 1969; the La Jolla Roughwater Swim, established 1916), USMS is working to bring events like these and many others into the Masters fold.

Mark Gill, director of operations for USMS, would like to see as many events as possible branded with the USMS seal of approval.

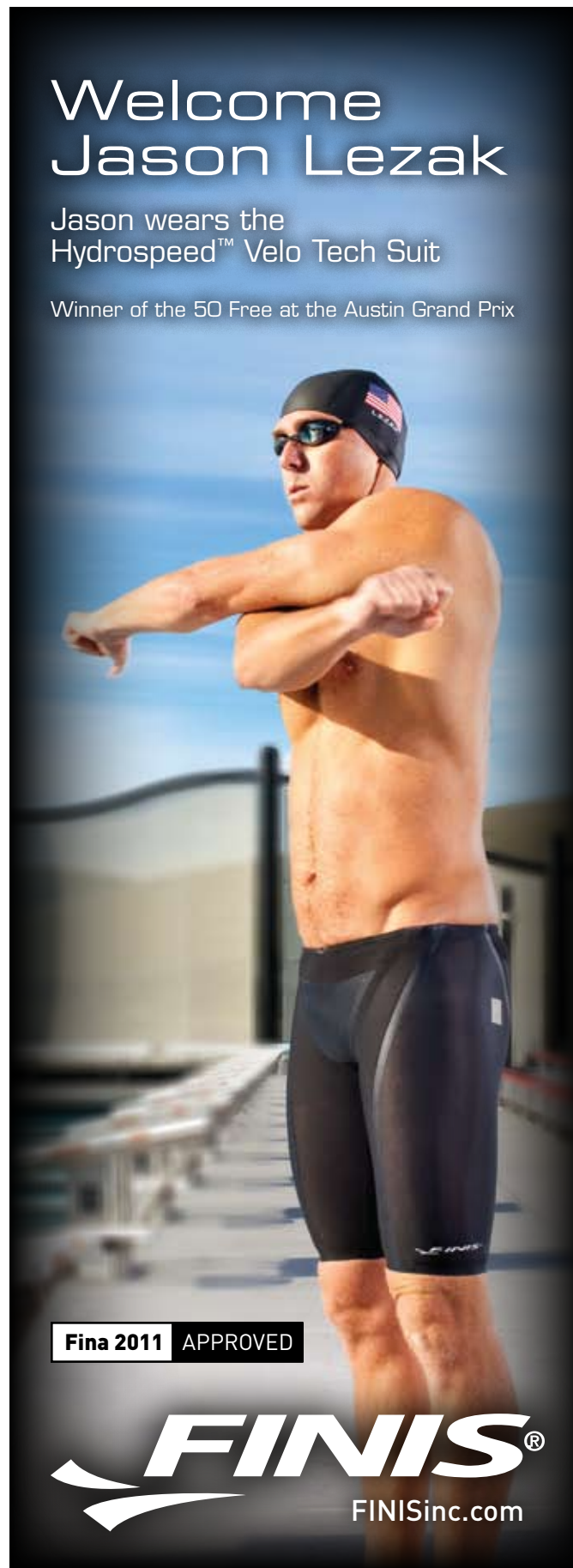
"One of the things we are working hard on is making USMS events the best. We are going after events that are not USMS sanctioned and trying to bring them into our family. I want USMS to be where the best events are found, and right now that is not always the case, but we are making progress. USMS wants to be a leader in open water swimming and is investing in growing our presence in the sport."

One of the ways USMS is stepping out as a leader in the open water world is in the area of open water safety. After Fran Crippen's tragic death during the 10K World Cup in the United Arab Emirates in October 2010, Gill and Steven Munatones, noted open water expert and consultant for USMS, have organized a safety conference—the first of its kind—featuring experts and meet directors from all over the world. The first of what may be an annual conference is scheduled for March 2011 in San Francisco and will include keynote speaker Shelley Taylor-Smith, one of the greatest open water swimmers in history.

By all indications, Gill's predictions are only a matter of time. Through continued education, marketing and event support, he hopes that this recent burst of interest in open water swimming is not a fad but rather the wave of the future.

Whether you are new to Masters swimming or looking for ways to invigorate your dedication to the sport, a foray into open water could be the key to unlocking your undiscovered potential. So go ahead ... add an open water swim to your bucket list ... today!

>>> Alex Kostich, a former member of the U.S. National Swim Team, is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. He has an extensive swimming résumé including many first place finishes, in both pool and open water events.



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