

Monterey Bay swim Aug 26, 2014
25 Statute miles
13 hours

- **A Special Guide For The Start**

The gift of an escort to the start of this swim was incredible. It was very practical to have someone guide me in the dark from the dock to the beach to start the journey across the bay. But I got more than just an escort. I was helped by a kind spirit and gentle soul who exuded a calm confidence that I was not crazy for walking through breaking waves at 3:00 am and diving into cold water in the dark. Its hard to imagine that there are people in our lives who will step out of their comfortable routines and their warm beds to help with a crazy adventure. I wouldn't dare to ask anyone to get up at 2:00 am to help me walk to the beach, take my clothes and watch over me as I ploughed through the waves to start a night swim. But in the world of open water swimming or just any athletic event where people take on goals bigger than themselves, there are amazing souls who will do just that. Thankfully Joel found a joyfully willing person to help.

Steve Hobert calmly and carefully walked me to the breaking waves at the south side of Seabright beach. He counted the waves and quickly gaged the pattern. I was too focused on staying warm and listening to the talk on the hand-held radio than to count the waves. I was ready to go and very keen to get started. I wanted to get in and off the water before the wind picked up on Monterey Bay like last time. Steve took my coat and shoes, turned on my blinky and gently sent me off. I had no idea at the time that he would be at the end as well.

- **Swimming in the dark**

The stars were bright and in beautiful formation. I saw the big dipper but that was about all I saw when I took a breath - - left, stars, stroke stroke stroke, right ,stars, stroke stroke stroke. I was focused on moving forward and covering the miles. The water was velvety and not quite black. It was a deep green black. I went into a blissful zone almost like sleeping when I was hit by something and then again in quick fashion. I chuckled when I realize that it was flying fish. Poor things were running into me and were probably a bit stunned. I was hopeful that they weren't being chased by something big.

Erin was kayaking to my right and let me know that my pace was a bit fast so I backed off a bit. Earle hovered to the left while Joel stayed outside of our protective formation - - me between the two kayaks. All three are delicately illuminated by glow sticks, just enough to see without attracting unwanted attention. I have been asked several times if the boat puts a beam of light on me when swimming at night. The idea makes total sense to ensure that the boat is able to watch over me at night. But that is exactly what squid fisherman do when wanting to hook a Humbolt squid.

They shine a big bright light on the surface to catch the attention of the deep dweller. That's fine for calamari but not ideal for a swimmer. I'm afraid of the Humbolt squid so we rely on a few florescent glow sticks to keep us together (plus radios). That is much better than having a giant tentacle thrust itself at the source of a bright light thinking its food, grabbing me and racing to the bottom of the bay in seconds. Humbolt squids are amazing creatures but I'd rather not see one eye to eye.

- **Dawn**

The water was so smooth and peaceful that I found myself falling in and out of a state of sleep. My arms and hips moved in a synchronized way and my mind unhooked and drifted into a place of quiet and ease. I trained for this but I was surprised how easy it was to turn off my thinking brain on this swim. The stars and soft lights on shore created a soothing ambiance. I felt safe between Erin and Earle and knew that Joel was also hovering and watching me. After a while, my sleepy state was interrupted by small knocks from finger-sized jellies. These were jellyfish that I had not seen before. In a matter of minutes, I was in a huge swarm of these jellies. I was immediately concerned thinking "Do they sting?" "Will I have a reaction to their toxin if they do?" "How many of them are there? Where is the edge to the swarm?" I reacted with some alarm by stopping and cutting right to get out of the swarm. It's then that I realized that I wasn't getting stung and that I would have to swim through them for a while. I was coated in a mixture of Safe Sea, Desitin and Lanolin which was a type of repellent shield. I was literally white from head to toe.

I did relax a bit but it was still unnerving since I didn't want to ingest any of them. If they do have a toxin (which I couldn't gage), swallowing one could end the swim. It's like ingesting a yellow jacket while you are riding your bike which could sting you as it goes down your throat and your body would have to cope with the venom in your stomach. Maybe our stomach acid would neutralize it or maybe not. Who knows how a body would react to that while working hard. A lot of open water swimmers are unenthusiastic pioneers when it comes to jellies.

I dug into my mental tool bag to get back to swimming with ease again. It was a waste of energy to keep dwelling on my jelly friends. Even worse, it was opening the door for other unwelcomed thoughts to enter my head like my cold hands and feet. I didn't want a party of these unwelcomed guests so I pulled out the blanket tool. I envisioned a warm blanket of energy surrounding me like a cocoon. I thought of lots of sources of the warm energy; a cord from the kayakers and Joel, energy from the creatures in the water and bay itself. In the darkness this was hugely comforting. I also asked for a 'spa treatment' in which Joel pored warm water on my hands to reset them. The next great source of comfort was the sunrise. It started at 5:45 and I sang 'Here Comes the Sun' in my head. For a swimmer, sunrise

is magical. You've made it through the night of literal darkness and you've overcome the coldest part of the swim. Even with the overcast clouds, the sunrise was beautiful. I jokingly yelled at Michael, who was kayaking on my left, that he was blocking my view. He graciously slowed down so I could watch the sunrise when I breathed to my left.

- **How to stay warm**

The water in Monterey Bay was warmer this year but until I had the strong sun on my back, I still felt the cold surrounding my body. I never felt "cold-cold" but I did need to lean some other tools to purge the thoughts from my head. Since there was so much time to think on this swim, my imagination became an important ally for focusing my thoughts. To feel warm, I imagined an array of solar panels on my back that rotated towards the east to collect the sun's rays no matter how weak they were (or behind clouds). The panels 'converted' the rays into energy and heat to move me forward. I valued the thought of energy more than heat but it was comforting to think of both. I naturally generated heat through the constant swimming but I took quick feeds to make sure that I kept the warm blood circulating to my muscles. I was grateful that I was wearing my personal 'puffy jacket'. I designed my 'puffy jacket' by adding some body fat. Like so many cold water swimmers, adding brown fat means spending a lot of time in cold water and we eat a bit more to put on white fat. I loved my puffy jacket since it was helping me get across the bay but I was looking forward to "hanging it up" during the off-season.

- **Kayakers**

From the start of the swim, I formed a pod with the kayakers. I relied on them for more than just navigation. Their calm presence was huge. I was amazed at how easy they made it look while navigating in the dark. And on a practical note, they monitored my stroke count to make sure that I was not going too fast since I was revved up on adrenaline. I reflected a lot on the fact that one of the many amazing aspects of open water swimming is the community. I remember at first that I felt that open water swimming was a bit isolating since I spent a lot of time in the water but it quickly turned into a very social sport that went beyond swimmers. Kayakers have been profoundly important on all of my swims. They watch over me with humor and grace even in the face of rough conditions and after paddling for hours.

- **Crew and Other Support**

One of the things that I did regularly throughout this swim was think of the things that I was grateful for. The crew was at the top of the list. Finding crew members was harder than other swims since it took place on a weekday. Asking friends to

take time off from work wasn't easy. I was so grateful for the offers to help and those that were able to find a way to be on the boat or support the swim on land.

I also thought about how equally grateful I was for the support and encouragement to do the swim one more time. No one ever asked me why I was going to do the swim again after three disappointing attempts. It never crossed my mind to stop. Being surrounded by so many positive and nurturing people was a gift unto itself.

- **“Fishbook”**

While I swam stroke after stroke making my way to the other side of the bay, my crew was sharing the swim and gathering a chorus of cheers and well wishes. LeeAnn helped with communications and when she received messages via Facebook she put them on the whiteboard she named *Fishbook*. An old school communication tool with a twist. I read *Fishbook* during a feeding. With my feeds every 20 minutes, I got regular jokes, drawings, and encouragement across the bay.

- **Hurdles**

The journey to complete the Monterey Bay swim involved a lot of problem solving. Solving the jelly issue, wind issue, figuring out how to get hot or warm food to me while keeping away for the diesel boat, finding the best way to transfer kayakers, and keeping the boat on a straight line while going really slow and getting pushed by wind and swells were just a few of the challenges. Each one of the challenges required some trial and error to solve. No one ever gave up or suggested that the swim just wasn't doable. That's a testament to the broad team who brainstormed on the issues and figured out ways to address them.

Of all the hurdles, jellies were the biggest for me. I love these beautiful creatures but my system doesn't like their toxin. Being allergic to them made me very anxious when I swam into the swarm. Restricting my breathing would be bad enough but the slowing of warm blood being circulated because the toxin impacting my muscles would not be good. Hypothermia would set in, and end the swim. I will never forget the look of concern on everyone's face when I was pulled the 2nd swim. I had difficulty breathing and it was alarming. Being stopped on the 1st two attempts was frustrating and I didn't want that to happen again. Nor did I want my crew to suffer through another anaphylaxis reaction. Im grateful that I learned on the Night Train relay swim down the California coast that jellies rise between 1 and 2 am so we knew that we had to start later in the early morning hours. The trade off was that I would then be swimming when the wind picked up in the afternoon. I also learned about a new jelly repellent on the market that was designed for the Pacific Nettle.

- **Overcoming Dark Times With Gratitude**

All marathon swimmers find themselves struggling with negative thoughts during their swim. We all know that a crossing is both mentally and physically tough. But

Thoughts And Reflections Of The Monterey Bay Swim

its still always a bit surprising when the unwanted negative thoughts and notions emerge. I always pack a mental toolkit along with my swim 'kit' but Im always optimistic that I won't have to dig deep into the mental one. For me its usually between 60 - 75% of the distance when the negative thoughts appear. Its as if my brain sets an alarm clock based upon the estimated length of the swim. It's a funny notion but its pretty consistent. It was no different for this swim. This time the negative thoughts came out as a form of irritation. Seeing shore the entire time of a swim was a blessing and a curse. It never seemed to get closer until I could literally see cars. So I saw the same thing for hours and hours.

The unhelpful alarm went off at mid-day (65% of the distance) and the negative thoughts sprang up. I used metta meditations on and off during the swim (*May I Be Safe, May I Be Healthy*). But when things went dark, I focused solely on things that I was thankful for; my crew, my family, my friends, my dog Bear, the opportunity swim in gorgeous water, to experience the bay at that moment, every birthday gift I have ever received and anything that popped into my head. I found myself also thinking of how thankful I was for all the technology that makes a swim possible. It was incredible how many things I was connected to as a swimmer that enable me to get across the bay. Beyond the layers of technology on the boat including the navigation and the engine, I thought about the materials used to make the warm stuff my crew was wearing, the research that made the jelly repellent a reality, what went into my goggles and suit and my mind wandered from there. This isn't necessarily something that I think about on land but during this swim, it was profound for squeezing out the negative thoughts and getting back to a state of ease.

- **Swim like it's a 10K**

The last 1/3 of the swim was difficult not because of having already swum for 8 hours but because of the changing conditions. A swell was pushing me and the kayakers to the east causing us to swim at an angle towards the beach. It was a washing machine under the water due to the wind pushing the waves in a different direction and the standard swell out of the west. It was a bit dynamic to say the least. Once I pushed the negative thoughts and feelings of irritation out of my head, I had the clarity to know that finishing the swim was entirely up to me and that everyone was following my pace. I was tired of seeing an unchanged horizon so I decided at that moment to 'swim like it's a 10K'. That is to say, pick it up and swim at a strong pace until I could see cars. I doubt that I matched my time of a 10K event but it felt good and gave me a structured way to tackle the remaining distance. The swim had 4 phases; the night swim with the cold and jellies, morning swim with calm waters (and jellies), the washing machine swim with the taunting shoreline (and jellies) and the final 1,000 meters of crying and joy knowing that I would get to the beach.

I was so happy to see my friends on shore. It was such an emotional relief to walk out of the water and to turn around and look back. The Santa Cruz side of the bay was barely visible. I was definitely a bit overwhelmed. But, still present enough to ask for a sandwich. I enjoyed a delicious BBQ sandwich and beer followed by a hot shower. Joel helped with an oversized van so my crew and I got to ride back to Santa Cruz happily reflecting on what we had just accomplished over the last 13 hours. Very cool!