

Open Water Experiences

by Craig Siegel

(On the beach at Big Sur, CA - where the water temp was 55 degrees F)

As I began my Masters swimming career in North Carolina back in 2003, training under Coach Frank McGrath at the Twin Rivers YMCA in New Bern, my former teammate Greta van Meeteren invited me to share my recent open water experience in this newsletter.



By way of background: I have always considered myself a middle distance swimmer; in college I swam the 500 and the 1000 primarily because no one else wanted to swim those two events. I made the traveling squad as a walk on because the interim head coach, Pete Orscheidt, appreciated my heart and overlooked my lack of talent. He once told me to never set limits on myself. He also told me that the 500 was a sprint.

Six years ago I moved back to Texas and continued training with Nitro in Cedar Park and more recently with Longhorn Aquatics at the Texas Swim Center on the UT campus. The Masters team is coached by Olympian Whitney Hedgepeth who is on deck every morning with a positive attitude and a challenging work out which she transcribes from memory onto a white board. Remarkably, even when she has sixty swimmers in the water, she knows exactly what each of us is doing. And it is equally important for her to know what we are doing out of the water in our daily lives as well. Our practices run for ninety minutes and average 5,000 yards. We have specified freestyle, distance freestyle, IM and stroke days; we also swim a weekly "Fast Friday" work out where the focus is on racing. I supplement these work outs with occasional 4,000 yard training sessions in Barton Springs, a 200 yard pool fed by an underground spring where the water temperature is a constant 68 degrees.



Earlier this month I competed in my second open water event, the Cap 2K, which was held in Lady Bird Lake. Technically this is not a lake but a portion of the Colorado River that runs through downtown Austin. Flow into the lake is controlled by a series of dams operated by the Lower Colorado River Authority, or LCRA. For the race the flow rate was reduced to minimize the current.

As in past years, there were nearly two hundred entrants, including high school swimmers, triathletes, and Masters swimmers. My goals were to win my age group (M 55-59), finish in under thirty minutes, and place in the top ten overall.

A cold front had passed through Central Texas on Thursday, so the low on Saturday morning was in the forties. By race time the air temperature had warmed up considerably, but the water was a chilly 67. The wetsuit division was ineligible for awards, so I wore jammers.

This was an in the water start, which meant that we had to swim four hundred yards downstream and tread water until the race began. My training partners from TXLA and I positioned ourselves at the front near the starting buoys to avoid congestion at the start, and the strategy worked well. The cold was definitely noticeable but tolerable.

After the start I found myself next to one of my lane mates, and we paced each other stroke for stroke the entire race. The course was straight down river with a slight angle to the left at the finish. The cold water training in Barton Springs was indispensable, but I also have to credit the bilateral breathing I learned from Frank McGrath which accomplished three things: I swam straight, I was able to keep track of the other swimmers, and I could breathe comfortably to the opposite side when I encountered someone else's wake.

In the end I did win my age group, finishing thirteenth overall with a time of 30:23. And while I still consider myself a pool swimmer, I enjoy the unique challenges of open water racing.

See you at Mission in August!