

Maui Channel Swim

by Bill Miller

I thought I would share my Maui Channel Swim experience - the training and challenges. FYI - The Maui Channel Swim is a 9.6 mile (straight line) swim between Lanai and Maui. There were 70 relays and 20 solo swimmers. I was a solo swimmer.



Training: For the past 9 years I averaged swimming 10,000 to 12,000 meters weekly. Not a significant amount of swimming for a youth but a steady diet of exercise for a working travelling adult. In May, I increased my weekly distance to 15,000 meters a week and included at least one 1 hour swim.

Beginning in June I increased my weekly distance to 20,000 meters and included at least 2 lake swims practicing breathing and sighting techniques including following a kayak. The lake swims would range from 60 to 90 minutes in duration.

In July my weekly distance increased to 25,000 meters. I increased my lake swimming and for the first time began to like swimming in the lake rather than the pool. My weekly workouts now included two 2 hour swims each week. I could not believe a two hour swim felt good. Who would have guessed except maybe Bill Davis? I also began practicing with fluids and gel packs. Some gel packs are absolutely awful. I ended up with an apple cinnamon gel (Hammer brand) which was tolerable and used Gatorade as my fluid. The other major concern was my stomach, swallowing salt water as well as general aches and pains in joints. In the 2009 pier 2 pier swim I was very sick while in the water so I started experimenting with combinations of Tegamet and Advil as well. Advil became my drug of choice.

August was here and felt like I was not prepared. I decided not to swim for two days in preparation for a 6 mile lake swim. The first week of August I completed the swim in a little over three hours and it felt great. I know, not fast by Morten standards. I also discovered that not taking my Lipitor for cholesterol and Advil were the right combinations for my muscles and joints. Lipitor does cause your joints to hurt after prolonged periods of exercise.

I never tapered well in the past but knew I needed to give my 54 year old muscles and joints a break. During the last week I swam less than 7000 meters and only one 1 hour swim. Not a very sophisticated training schedule, just lots of long swims.

Maui Channel Swim Pre Race Meeting: For an event that has stood time for 40 years it was a bit unorganized. Emphasis was placed on safety but yet some of the published literature was not current so the race director blasted out announcements regarding emergency numbers, etc. It was however interesting to see some of the relay teams at the pre race meeting. They were very serious. Several teams from Australia had their own polo shirts and had come in days earlier for training and preparation. There were world champion open water swimmers participating.

Race Day: I had spoken several times with our boat captain and provided him with all of the race details. I had a sense the captain was not qualified and decided to leave thirty minutes ahead of schedule to prepare him.

Upon entering the boat at the Mala wharf I handed the captain the map and reviewed the start and finish lines. It was during this discussion I learned he had never had his boat in the water on this side of the island. I had a captain that knew nothing of local currents and wind conditions.

We travelled for approximately 40 minutes only seeing a few boats on the horizon. When we arrived at Manele Bay we were the only boat. I pulled out the map and asked the captain if this was the correct place and he confirmed it was. We sat in the boat for another 30 minutes wondering why there were no other boats at which time Connie phoned the race director. We were a good 10 miles from the starting point! The captain then raced his 17 ft boat to the start against the wind and waves at which at one point I thought we were airborne.

I was not relaxed and knew I had a 20 to 30 minute swim just to get into shore for the start of the race. We arrived at the correct starting point and most swimmers had already entered the water and began swimming to shore. I inhaled my Tegamet and Advil and entered the water. It would be an hour later that I forgot to use my chafing stick, which I would soon discover as my underarms stung from the saltwater. As I approached the shore I was dropped over a shallow reef only hoping the trough of the waves would not make me hit the coral. Fortunately, I did not get cut on any Coral and made it to shore.

There were no inhabitants nearby on Lanai (most unpopulated Hawaiian Island) and the dock for the start was very run down. We all waited around for 15 minutes for the race to begin. Strangely a helicopter landed about 100 meters away, the pilot got out and started to swim, but not with us. Must be nice having your own private helicopter.

The race start was a series of flags from the dock and we were off. I do recall not being nervous about swimming but had serious doubts about the captain. The start was an absolute zoo. There were 90 boats trying to find their own individual swimmers. As I swam from shore I entered another area with coral. Nothing mentioned about this during the pre race instructions. I was cautious swimming over the coral actually touching it with my right hand on two occasions.

Approximately 400 meters from shore the boats are all around trying to identify their swimmers. The bow of a large yellow catamaran started over my back. I pushed off and yelled to their crew I was present beneath their boat. Approximately 15 minutes later I met up with our boat. There were six large red streamers in the back of the boat on log fishing rods to aid in the boats' identity. We were off.

Several hundred meters away from our boat there was another escort boat sinking. Later it was learned, the captain swam to another boat leaving everyone else on board. So much for the captain going down with the ship!

The plan was to take a 2-minute breaks on the hour for the first three hours and one every 30 minutes thereafter. I discovered during the first hour I could not do my alternate breathing as planned without swallowing significant amounts of sea water. I modified my stroke so I would breathe every stroke on my left side which meant the boat had to be positioned on my left. Again, the captain had specific instructions to stay to my left for sighting.

The captain struggled keeping the boat to my left. Very early in the race the bow of my escort boat was far too close. The captain over reacted turning left and gunned the boat forcing the engine and propeller way too close. I told him again to please keep a safe distance.

The first, second and third hours I felt great. Again, just a nice easy swim approximating 2 miles an hour. During the third hour I was pleasantly surprised on how well my muscles and joints felt. I guess I did taper correctly. And I was glad to not know of the lingering 12 to 15 foot tiger shark swimming in the area where two swimmers had been pulled from the water 10 minutes earlier.

Unknown to me the captain was insisting to Connie that I should swim on his left side. He would point out other swimmers could swim on that side why could I not do the same. At one point she had to remind the captain I was the paying customer. Clearly it would have been easier for the captain since the wind often would push the boat closer but would require a whole new stroke for me.

We ran into some very tough winds and waves at the 7 mile marker. I was expending huge amounts of energy just to take a breath and the captain could not keep his boat steady. I was concerned on how long I could endure and whether we were in the right position for currents, and the boat kept getting far too close. After approximately 45 minutes swimming in a washing machine I stopped and asked if we were moving forward. The captain was yelling "no, no" we need to move towards shore while Connie was saying we need to follow the other boats. I asked how far to the finish line and they yelled, "2 miles." I could not hear very well with the wind and the captain speaking over Connie. At this point I told the captain to be quiet and I wanted to hear from Connie. The seas were at least 5 feet and the wind would blow water off of the top of the waves and the boat bounced around me like a bobber.

I never heard the 2 miles and thought that I could not swim in this chop for another two hours. I was not just swimming but trying to navigate as well and was a bit confused. I agreed to move into shore thinking we would be swimming diagonally forward to shore. We were not. For every 100 meters forward I was drifting 50 meters to the south, the opposite way to the finish line. I later learned that this decision was the wrong one and would cost me an official finish.

In 15 minutes we were in some good water and I was back to alternate breathing. We were probably 4 1/2 hours into the swim and I felt great. At five and a half hours I hit a dead zone in the water. I could see the hotels from the distance but could not get there. The captain had me swimming against the current again while he was thinking the wind was the current. And he was asked after 5 hours which hotel we were swimming to. Unbelievable! He neither knew the starting nor the finishing point!

I swam for another hour and still was making little progress. At 6 hours and 40 minutes I was totally frustrated, the captain had no idea what to do and for the first time thought about climbing in the boat. Connie said that I had an hour and 20 minutes left to finish and so we started to shore again but made little progress. The captain suggested heading to a beach about a mile away. I thought to myself that my real goal was a personal one to swim from Lanai to Maui so the beach sounded good.

Swimming to the beach was in the direction of the wind and waves but against the current. It took at least an hour to reach the beach. I swam over a reef the last 100 meters and finally stood on the beach. No fan fair but just personal pride and locals looking strangely at me in my jammer.

Lessons Learned: 1) Intuitively I did not feel comfortable with the captain the first time we spoke. I should have insisted on someone more competent. 2) Have a backup plan. In my case I should have made it clear from the beginning that Connie would speak for me on the boat. When you are swimming, tired and can hardly hear it is confusing and decision making is difficult. 3) Safety is first. Always make certain that your captain has experience following a swimmer. It was far too dangerous. On one occasion the bow of the boat was on top of me. FYI – One swimmer lost his left arm and his right hand earlier in the day where he was sucked into the prop of a passing boat. He is recovering and it is under investigation.

Personal Satisfaction: Although I did not cross the official finish line I did accomplish a goal on my bucket list. I also surprised myself in how far and long I could swim. With all of the frustration with the boat I was surprised I did not call it quits earlier and for that I am quite satisfied. And I shared the event with someone who understands swimming, goals and offered great inspiration.

Two days later Connie and I swam in the 2.4 mile Waikiki Rough Water Swim. The best organized open water swim I have ever participated in. It was great.

On to the next adventure. There is a 10 mile 4 person relay event in Charleston in October. Anyone interested?