

OPEN WATER SWIMMING AND USMS: AT A CROSSROADS?

By Jon Blank

Abu Dhabi and Maui – what links these diverse geographical sites other than the fact that both appear to be typographical errors? For the world of Masters swimming, it is that both played a significant role in events leading to a current crisis for USMS.

Open water and long distance swims offer great potential for USMS growth. North Carolina's Masters Swim Committee and the USMS Dixie Zone have proposed an Open Water Championship Series for 2013. Several event organizers have already approached NCMS Registrar George Simon about sanctioning events for 2013. Triathletes are courted with ardor by USMS. Despite jocular ribbing by "real" swimmers about triathletes' use of fins for an entire workout, or swimming freestyle even during stroke drills, tri-swimmers are a desirable demographic for USMS. They often prefer open water swimming to pool swims.

In addition, there are many former pool swimmers who, having grown tired of the view of black tile lines and repetitive flip turns, are reinvigorated by the prospect of open water events. Ben Holland, the current Secretary of the LMSC for NC, is a good example of the latter. Another good example of pool swimmer turned open water swimmer was Fran Crippen.

From everything I have read and seen, Fran Crippen was an exemplary man. Not only was he a collegiate All-American swimmer, he had become one of our country's greatest open water swimmers. He won several events as a professional, earned back-to-back podium finishes at World Championships, and was a multiple US National champion. It was not just his prowess as an athlete that drew people to him, though. He was, by all accounts, one of the most accessible and friendly of athletes. Every on-line video I've watched demonstrated his infectious enthusiasm and outgoing personality.

Note that I am using the past tense when referring to Fran Crippen. Tragically, Fran Crippen died during the final event of the 2010 professional open water season. Despite alleged protests from the athletes about dangerous air and water temperatures hovering near 100 degrees Fahrenheit on the day of the event, the Abu Dhabi event organizers would not defer the competition. Consequently, when Crippen's lifeless body was found several hundred yards from the finish, athletes and fans alike mourned this senseless loss.

Meanwhile, the Maui Channel Swim "is one of the most popular masters swimming events in the nation". According to its website, Maui has held the longest open water relay races in the world since 1972. Unfortunately, the USMS-sanctioned 2011 Maui event was the site of a horrific accident in which an escort boat inexplicably entered the swim area and literally ran over an athlete, causing severe injuries.

These incidents necessarily and appropriately led to a unilateral re-examination of safety precautions for open water USMS events. Meanwhile, in apparent response to the incidents in Maui and Abu Dhabi, insurance premiums for open water events have skyrocketed for USMS. USMS leadership and legal representatives have worked very hard with insurance brokers to maintain accessible insurance for open water event organizers for 2013. Despite such efforts, USMS is now faced with sanctioning fees of thousands of dollars per event.

The USMS National Office is doing what it can to support the growth of open water events, setting aside an over-budget authorization of \$75,000 to offset insurance fees for these events. Even so, local event organizers must either pass along this burdensome cost to entrants, or incur the nearly a thousand dollar extra expense per competition themselves. Sanction fees potentially will move from 2012's \$20 per event to \$1000 per event in 2013. The huge insurance cost can only harm USMS's attempts to expand its open water involvement, since event organizers are not required to obtain USMS sanction.

Just as USMS continues to struggle with its response to the insurance burden, so too is your NC LMSC Board working to overcome this problem. Open water swimming is going to grow with or without USMS sanctioning. Your NC Board has several staunch advocates for USMS-sponsored open water events. To quote Ben Holland, "the slow decline of an organization into irrelevance is seldom obvious. In OW, this organization (USMS) not only has a chance to keep itself relevant, but to push its influence in the sport we all love substantially beyond where it has ever been".

In our effort to expand open water offerings under USMS sanction, should your NC Masters Swim Committee underwrite the added cost of the insurance fee for the event organizers, recognizing that the large cost of doing so will benefit only a few competitors (at least initially)? Alternatively, should entrants and organizers pay the entire expense of increased insurance? Or is there a middle ground?

Let your NC leadership know your thoughts – email me your perspective and thoughts, so your Board will best represent the membership. I will keep you informed in next month's newsletter.