

An Amazing Journey - by Andrea Packard

Editor's note: Andrea finished 2nd in her age group, 5th woman overall and 12th swimmer overall. CONGRATULATIONS ANDREA.

Two days ago, I finished one of the more memorable chapters in my swimming career when I competed in the USMS 25K open water championships. I almost think I could write a book about this amazing experience, but for the sake of this little blurb, I'll stick to the highlights. Before I talk about the event itself, I must first touch upon the months of preparation. As they say, it's all about the journey, not the destination, and this is one of those times I found that to be very true. It was while I pushed myself through week after week and yard after yard of training that I learned a lot about myself and came to appreciate how wonderful it is to be a swimmer.



Some of the workouts I managed to finish were significant accomplishments in and of themselves, and often I'd be on a high for days afterward. But it wasn't just about me, and what I endured. I am blessed with an understanding family who made sacrifices so I could get in the necessary training. I have truly awesome swimming teammates and friends who offered encouragement and support along the way.

I met an awe-inspiring group of very accomplished open water swimmers on Facebook who offered a wealth of helpful advice. As race day approached, I felt nervous but had confidence that I had trained and prepared as best I could, and was looking forward to putting it all to the ultimate test. What I couldn't control, however, was the weather. Much to my dismay, I awoke race-day morning to thunderstorms. My first thought was: "This was all too good to be true and this race is just not going to happen." Fortunately, my fears were misplaced as the storms cleared and they were able to start the race 2-hours late.

My 6 hour 45 minute swim was one of the most difficult physical and mental tests I have ever endured. Even now I look back and can't believe I actually did it. There were extreme emotional highs when I was feeling good and was very proud of what I was accomplishing. Then there were the many low points when I wasn't sure if I could continue and I just desperately wanted it all to be over. But just as we sometimes have to take life one day at a time, so I learned to face the swim one buoy at a time, or even one stroke at a time. Through it all, my teammate and support paddler Craig was a rock. He knew just what to say to encourage me and keep me on course, and he responded to my every need. It is no easy task to sit in a kayak for almost 7 hours, and he and all the other paddlers deserve a lot of credit.

Ironically, while finishing this swim was one of the most significant accomplishments of my athletic life, it was also one of the most humbling. I was honored to be in the company of some very accomplished open water swimmers. There was a 59-year-old who finished just 2 minutes behind me. There were countless other swimmers who had either completed or were training for much more daunting events such as the English Channel, Catalina Channel and Straights of Gibraltar.

Some friends and fellow swimmers have asked what's next on my list. Most likely not anything more extreme than what I just did...I'm admittedly not good with cold water or rough conditions (neither of which were a significant factor in this race). But who knows what the future holds. At any rate, I want to thank all the people

who have been a part of this wonderful journey, and I'll keep you posted on my next endeavor, whatever that may be!