

## Jen Schumacher's Catalina Channel crossing

The events of Friday, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009 are finally starting to sink in for me. Up until fairly recently, the idea that I had finally successfully crossed the Catalina Channel did not always seem real. For about a week, I experienced a strange mix of disbelief and excitement; it was very surreal. Each time I watched a video or read an article about the swim, I felt like I was watching some other girl do this incredible thing that I've always thought would be so cool to do. Finally I'm starting to accept that was me and I did it, and it's such a great feeling.

This time last year I was a support swimmer on Dave Galli's Catalina Channel crossing. After watching him accomplish the goal he had trained for and had for over a year, I decided this was something I wanted to do. Dave introduced me to his mentor, Jim Fitzpatrick, who took me under his wing. I learned that the training involved swimming in the ocean year round and acclimatizing to the cold.

Luckily, I knew of one swimmer my speed who was willing to do this with me – the infamous Uncle Dan. Uncle Dan and I swam at Laguna 2-3 times per week, in addition to our pool workouts. That eventually turned into 3-4 times a week, and as the water warmed up, we began to make our weekend ocean swims (at Corona Del Mar) slightly longer. But I had to get in some swims much longer than Uncle Dan needed to do (or was willing to do!). Again, I was fortunate enough to have another person willing to invest serious time to help me achieve my goal – my mom. She kayaked with me on the majority of my long swims, which started at 4 hours in June. The long swims in Jim's training plan increased until every weekend consisted of two back-to-back swims that totaled 10 hours. My mom did at least one of these two swims each weekend, and on more than one occasion did all 10 hours with me. Lenny also took on some of the longer 5-6 hour kayak shifts. Uncle Dan usually swam 2-3 hours of one of the swims.

On one such swim, Uncle Dan and I got more than we bargained for. When we began swimming on a regular basis last year, we came to believe that Laguna and CDM were our beaches. We had this goal to swim from one to the other, a distance of 7 miles. This seemed crazy to us at first, but by November we felt ready and attempted it. The water was about 62 degrees, and because it was such a warm fall and we had so little cold-water training under our belts, we had to get out at El Moro after 2 hours of swimming because I was so cold. We vowed to try it again when it warmed up. Well we set out for our second attempt on June 20<sup>th</sup>, and had our whole plan on how we would get picked up and how the kayak thing would work out. When we arrived at CDM, we were greeted with white caps and stormy conditions, but figured we could still pull it off. Lenny met us in the kayak, and conditions did not improve. Near El Moro, we were barely making forward progress. After 3 and a half hours, Uncle Dan had had enough. The 7 miles took me just shy of 5 hours (Uncle Dan and I tackled it again the following weekend in only 3 hours!). That was by far my toughest training swim, and while I did not realize it at the moment, or even immediately after, it gave me so much confidence when I ran into difficult times in swims after that.

While that swim gave me confidence for dealing with adverse situations, there was another weekend that gave me confidence for dealing with the distance of Catalina. Three weeks before my swim, I did two 5-hour swims within at 24-hour period. My mom

kayaked the entire 10 hours, which turned out to be about 24 miles. The second swim was entirely in the dark to get used to night swimming. After that weekend, I felt ready. The following weekend's 8-hour swim only added to that. One week and a half of rest and I was ready to go!

To adjust to starting my swim at midnight, much earlier than I started most of my training swims, on Thursday I tried to relax and sleep as much as possible. I ate dinner in the morning and my usual breakfast in the afternoon before leaving for the boat. My crew and I boarded the boat that evening at 8:30pm and we cruised over to Doctor's Cove. I had planned to sleep on the boat ride, but could not fall asleep until about 10 minutes before we got there. I woke up and began to get ready. The water seemed relatively flat, but I tried not to get too excited knowing conditions are fragile. My heart was pounding and everything seemed to happen at lightening fast speed. Even though I had imagined the start countless times nothing could completely remove the butterflies. Once Uncle Dan and I were ready, we jumped into the pitch-black water and swam to shore. My mom and Lenny were in the kayaks. After some words of encouragement from Uncle Dan, I gave the signal and began to enter the water. We swam towards the kayaks, and we were off.

I immediately noticed how much darker it is to swim at night near Catalina than it is to swim alongside the coast of Orange County. Clouds covered the half moon I had expected to see. I kept swimming, but was having a hard time seeing the kayakers, and could not see Uncle Dan. The first feeding was complete chaos. No one seemed to be in sync for the first few stops and for that brief one-minute period, I was pretty frustrated. Eventually, we found a rhythm and things settled down. Uncle Dan, who had become seasick from being so disoriented from the dark, had to put fins on, and then eventually got out after 2 hours. At about that point, I realized it was possible I had taken it out a bit faster than I had planned. For a split second, I flashed to the Tahoe race Uncle Dan and I had done in July, and how badly I felt after taking that swim out way too fast. I quickly wrote that off as due to the fresh water – nothing that would necessarily happen here. I thought about the conditions, which were wonderful (relatively flat with small rolling waves in my favor), how I felt (great!), and how much I love night swimming, and decided to take advantage of those things and keep the pace up. I decided I would just try to get as far as I could before the sun came up, and then see how long I could hold that pace. I understood it was a possibility that I could burn up and have a rough spot, but my idea had always been to leave it all in the channel anyways.

I only wound up swimming for 50 minutes by myself. Marc, my pool training partner and professional motivator, hopped in earlier than planned. *You're either doing so poorly they thought you needed him to encourage you, or you're so fast they had to bump him up so everyone can swim.* Neither of those were good things to think about, so I decided to conclude that he wanted to swim twice to keep me company at night. Either way, it was nice to have someone to swim with at that moment, and we got into a good rhythm. He encouraged me during my feedings and kept me cheery.

"You're half way there!" I'm still not sure who said it. I had asked my support crew at our meeting not to tell me when I was half way, or where I was at all unless I asked, but it could have been one of the boat crew, or I suppose just a figment of my imagination. I did not want to know because I knew all too well how that can get in your

head. When I heard I was half way, I did exactly that, I let it get in my head. It was not all bad though. Because I was able to keep track of every 25-minute stop, I knew when that was said I was at 4:35. I turned to Marc, and asked him if this was true. He said I was at least half way. I began to get too excited about the time, realizing I was 9:10 pace, and started doing all kinds of math. Over the next hour or two, I would catch myself thinking about the time, tell myself that I did not want to have those thoughts because the weather can turn at any time and I did not want to be discouraged, and try to think of something else. I spent a lot of time being or trying to get back to the present moment by focusing on what my arms were doing and by listening to the rhythm of my stroke.

Marc stayed in over two hours with me, all in the dark. He was replaced by a succession of support swimmers, each taking 50-minute shifts and beginning with my dad. The second kayak (which was used to collect data for a case study) switched from Lenny to Dan. My dad had never swum in the dark before, so this was a new experience for him. It was very cool to be in the water, in the middle of the Catalina Channel, doing this swim with both of my parents helping me out and at my side. I tried to think of each support swimmer as a different segment of the swim. This helped break up the monotony and I felt a surge of energy each time someone new got in. As the sky began to lighten up, my dad got out and Carri, a friend of the family who grew up swimming with Katelyn, jumped in. Carri was a recent addition to the support group. When I learned my other uncle, Rick, was unable to make it, I had just come back from a great hour long swim with Uncle Dan, my dad, Katelyn, Carri, and Dan in the kayak. It was just a taper swim, but I felt great and swam well with everyone, including Carri, and asked if she would like to come on the boat and do some support swimming. Thankfully she was able to make it, because we had great rhythm together and it was very energizing at a time when I really needed it.

Katelyn came in for her shift after Carri. Excitement of how well I was doing at that point came over her and it is possible that she gave me a hug in the water, I won't say. When we began to swim together in our matching Nova caps, I felt like we were unstoppable. I felt like we were completely in sync and going at such a strong yet smooth pace. I kept thinking about my stroke and just how cool this all was. Towards the end of Katelyn's shift, I noticed another female in a suit next to my uncle, who was about to get in for his second shift. Carri again, so soon? Carly! I was so surprised and excited I exclaimed that out loud. I was sandwiched in between her and Uncle Dan for 25 minutes, at which point she got out after running into possibly the only piece of seaweed in the entire channel and getting spooked.

At 8:20, Marc got back in for his second shift, and it was he, Uncle Dan, and I. I asked how far away I was, and Marc said I only had 2,000 meters. I knew I could do 2:00 100 meter pace no problem, I still felt relatively good, but picked up my pace anyways because I had no idea which way the current was going; pool pace can mean next to nothing in the ocean. At the last feed, I knew I would be incredibly close to 9 hours. The shore just looked 15 minutes away and that was all the time I had left. I picked up the pace again, determined to make it under 9, but at the same time reminded myself that if for some reason that did not happen, I was still much faster than I had expected and I would be incredibly happy regardless.

The greatest moment at the end was when I saw all of my support swimmers bailing out of the boat to swim the last bit with me. I could hear them cheering as I got

closer. Someone yelled at me to follow Dan's kayak, so I did as fast as I possibly could. I was trying to sprint but knew I was going no faster than before I began to try to sprint, there was just nothing there. As I sighted Dan, I could see the large sign at the finish that said "Congrats." Finally, I could see the bottom. It was covered with rocks and a couple of fish darting away – the only wildlife I had seen the entire way. One last challenge: getting out. As I neared shore, I reminded myself of how the finish would feel, and what I would need to do. After being horizontal for 9 hours and being completely exhausted, I climbed on all fours up the slippery rocks. I fell twice before finding my footing, and then hopped over a couple of rocks to dry land. I was finished.

I looked back at all the people in the water and the boat who helped me do it and made it possible. I could not have done it without them. Then I looked back at Catalina. I could not believe I had just swum from that island, to this shore.