

Crossing the Channel

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My parents love the water. My father is an avid sailor who spends the winter re-finishing and maintaining his wooden boat so that he can sail it each Sunday morning during the summer. My mother spent every summer of her life in Bay View, Michigan, where she swam daily in the chilly lake, loving nothing more than the waves, sand and sun. When they were first married, my parents used to travel to the Caribbean to go scuba diving. They spent their honeymoon sailing, diving and swimming off the coast of St. John in the British Virgin Islands. Making sure their children were comfortable and safe in the water was very important to my parents, so my swimming lessons began even before I learned to walk. I paddled next to my mother in Lake Michigan, splashing through the waves, at ease despite the nippy water surrounding me. Now, nearly twenty-seven years later, I am still swimming in Lake Michigan, braving the cold water and training for what is considered to be the ultimate challenge for an open water swimmer. In August of 2009, I will swim across the English Channel.

Swimming has always been more than just a sport for me. It has been a way of life. I joined my first swim team when I was five years old. It was a summer team at the Forest Hills Swim Club, the neighborhood pool to which my family belonged. Two years later, my parents realized that swimming during the summer was not enough for me and they allowed me to try out for the Lake Erie Silver Dolphins, the most prestigious year-round swim club in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. On LESD, I had the opportunity to train under the supervision of nationally renowned coaches Jerry Holtrey and Rick Stacy and alongside other nationally and internationally ranked swimmers. By the age of eight, I was swimming each day after school and traveling to swim meets on the weekends. When I turned eleven, I started swimming before *and* after school and by the age of thirteen, I had qualified for my first national-level competition.

Throughout my career, I have always been a distance swimmer. My coaches believed in high-volume, high-intensity workouts and found that the longer I swam, the better I seemed to do. When I qualified for Junior and Senior Nationals, it was in the four longest events offered in standard pool swimming – the 400, 800 and 1500 meter freestyle and the 400 meter individual medley. I excelled in these events, qualifying to represent the USA at international competitions in Sweden and Japan by the time I was fourteen years old. Around the same time, however, I discovered a different branch of swimming and realized my true passion within the sport.

In the summer of 1996, the day after the conclusion of the long-course summer nationals in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Jerry talked me into trying a 5K ocean swim that was taking place the morning before our return flight to Cleveland. I liked the idea of swimming in the ocean and agreed to give the race a try, even though my teammates chose to relax on the beach instead. Neither Jerry nor I had any idea that the race that morning would be the first open water swim of what would become a thirteen-year long career for me.

Although it was frustrating, I enjoyed the hour I spent racing in the Atlantic Ocean that morning. I thrashed through the water, challenged by the waves, wind and currents. The salt water burned my throat and stung my eyes and I was jostled by the other swimmers around me. I

was aggravated and angry... but at the same time, I was intrigued. For the first time that I could remember, I was truly energized and at ease in the water. I felt a sense of freedom that I had never before experienced during a swimming race. I was exhausted both physically and mentally after that swim, but I was also hooked. I wanted to try it again and was eager for another experience.

Two months later, USA Swimming informed me that due to my second place finish that summer in Ft. Lauderdale in what had apparently been the 5K National Championship race, I had qualified for a team that would travel to Australia for another competition. I boarded a plane in January of 1997, dressed in red, white and blue and ready to represent my country in the pre-World Championship 5K race in Perth, Australia. I loved every minute of that trip. Rick Walker and Dave Thomas were the Open Water Swimming National Team coaches at the time and took care of me, teaching me race strategies and coaching me to my first international 5K title.

The next year, after hundreds of hours and thousands of meters of preparation, I returned to Perth, Australia with Rick, Dave and the other members of the United States National Open Water Swimming Team for my first World Championship competition. On January 7th, 1998, at the age of fifteen and with my family present to witness the event, I became a World Champion in the 5K open water swim.

Winning a world title would, for most athletes, be the culmination of an entire career. My journey through the world of open water swimming, however, was just beginning. In addition, I was still in the midst of a pool swimming career and had several years ahead of me in that realm of the sport.

When I returned home after the World Championships in 1998, I continued swimming in the pool, competing for Hawken School in the Ohio High School State Championships. During my senior year of high school, I was recruited to swim at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where I represented the Wildcats for four years on the varsity squad. Head coach Jimmy Tierney focused on speed training with me during the winter months so that I could swim the shorter pool events offered in collegiate competition. Just as I had focused on the distance events as an age-group swimmer, I specialized in the longest distances offered in college swimming as well – the 500, 1000 and 1650 yard freestyle races as well as the 400 yard individual medley. I enjoyed swimming for Northwestern, being part of the team and having the student-athlete experience. As soon as the Big Ten Championship meet was over each February, though, I shifted gears, ramped up the yardage and focused completely on open water races throughout the spring and summer months.

It was during those spring and summer swims when I began training with Coach Bob Groseth, the head coach of the men's swim team at Northwestern University. Bob had watched me train throughout the previous three years and he understood me as an athlete and as a person. He knew that I liked to be challenged and that I thrived on workouts that involved high-volume and high-intensity. Swimming with Bob reminded me of my age group experience with the Lake Erie Silver Dolphins. Each day was challenging, but it was also fun. Bob developed new methods of training for open water races. Each Saturday morning, he tethered me to the diving platform and I swam in place for hours on end. If I was getting ready for a race in warm water,

he made me swim in a wetsuit so that I would get used to being over heated. If I was getting ready for an ocean swim, he asked other swimmers to get in the water and make waves for me during my main set. Bob and I experimented with pushing the volume of my training as high as possible. He came to the pool with me twice per day, Monday through Friday and frequently on the weekends as well. He found cross training activities for me to do so that some days, I was training upwards of eight hours in preparation for an upcoming race.

I enjoyed training with Bob so much that I decided to stay in Evanston after college in order to swim full-time and travel the world competing professionally in the Open Water World Cup circuit. I raced in rivers, lakes and oceans and competed in distances ranging from one kilometer to 88 kilometers. I allowed swimming to show me the world, using it as an excuse to travel to different countries, experience other cultures and make new friends.

When I entered the water for my first 5K in the summer of 1996, I had no idea what I was doing. I simply wanted to try swimming a race in the ocean and I had a few free hours before I needed to catch a flight home. Since that day, I have competed in over seventy open water swimming races in more than fifteen countries. I have won ten national titles and been a member of seven World Championship teams. I have been given the opportunity to chase after my goals and follow my dreams. One swim remains, though, that I have always wanted to do.

When people find out that I am an open water swimmer, they typically ask me if I have ever thought of crossing the English Channel. That swim, although not a part of the World Cup circuit nor on the list of World Championship events, stands out in most people's mind as the one true challenge for an open water swimmer. I have, in fact, thought about crossing the English Channel and it has always been in the back of my mind as a swim I would like to do at some point in my life. In mid-March, I was asked by Nova International to join five other girls from around the world to be a part of the Great Swim, a race across the English Channel that will take place in August of 2009. So, after a few months out of the water, working a full-time office job and living, for the first time, a life without swimming, I am now back in the water and training. I was presented with an opportunity that I could not pass up; I am faced with yet another chance to realize a dream. This spring, I will once again be braving the chilly water in Lake Michigan, swimming for hours to train my body to adapt to the wind, waves and cold. This summer, with my coach, family and friends beside me, I will swim across the English Channel.