

The Organizer's Observations

The 36th Annual Swim Around Key West (12.5 miles) was a wild and wooly ride, at least the actual event proved to be. The events leading up to the swim were quite smooth and straightforward. The preparations for the one-day affair are in the works months before the swimmers arrive.

It starts with a review of the previous swim. We are always laboring to improve the event. We take in the comments of the swimmers and support boat people and analyze that information with our own observations. Then the next big step is to determine the date for the next swim. Captain Don Nelson sends me a copy of the tidal charts for the year ahead and we look for the best tides on a Saturday in June. Why June? Originally, the swim took place around or near the 4th of July. We moved back to June as the water is becoming much too hot as we move into July, and hurricane season generally is less pronounced at the very beginning (June 1st). This year we swam on June 23rd and we struggled with the outer bands of Tropical Depression Debbie. There is no way to predict the weather, and so I find myself doing a lot of praying. Actually, there is a lot of prayer and prayerful consideration that go into this annual event.

I never desired to be a race organizer. I became the organizer of the event about 10 years ago. The swim founder, Anna Fugina, was leaving Key West for the Port Charlotte area of Florida and asked me to continue the event. I took her request seriously, considering it a sacred trust. I swam my first around-the-island swim in 1989. I did not swim in 1990 because it was on the Lord's Day. When Anna asked me why I didn't join in that year, I told her of my conviction about racing on the Christian Sabbath. She made sure the event was on a Saturday the next year. I have swum in every Annual Swim from 1991 until 2004. In February 2005 I had bone spur surgery and a tendon reattachment on my left shoulder. I wasn't ready to do the full swim that year. Since then I have swum in each Annual Swim.

As the organizer of this event, I look at it from an athlete's perspective. I have done a few half Ironman events and several marathons and I know what I like when I travel to the various venues. The others I work with - Don Nelson, Katie Leigh, Terence White, his wife Abby, and my wife, Sessie - each one is an athlete. I think all who swim with us can sense that we approach the swim with that perspective. It has never been about making a lot of money and trying to do so as cheaply as possible.

Everything we distribute to the swimmers is date specific. The t-shirts, the finisher medals, and the awards: all have the date on them. Is that a big deal? I think so. Why? If

the weather doesn't cooperate, we take a major hit, along with our swimmers. The swimmers pay their entry fee. They pay to get themselves to Key West. They pay for their lodging. If the swim was cancelled, they would suffer great loss, so we too would suffer. That is why we can't give refunds. We invest the money. Nothing we do is generic.

I attempted to swim Tampa Bay several years ago. I made 20 miles of the 24-mile course (I was so cold!), and aborted when the tide began to turn against me. I received a t-shirt that was so disappointing. No date, no year. Those shirts you can buy hundreds of, at a great discount, and use the same shirt, with the same design for years to come.

As long as I organize the Annual Swim Around Key West, I would never let this happen. We take the risk like the swimmer takes the risk.

This year we came close to calling the swim. We were perched on the razor's edge. The Tuesday before the Saturday swim, the weather turned funky and it looked like it was going to sit on top of us. My stomach began to turn. I was inundated with calls and emails from swimmers as to whether the swim was going to happen. My response was that weather changes and we were proceeding forward. The last thing I wanted to do was to cancel the Annual event. If you cancel one year it is not an Annual Swim any longer, is it? This is by far the longest running sporting event in the Florida Keys!

I received a phone call from our liaison with the US Coast Guard. He called me on Thursday, June 21, at 11:00AM. He wanted to know what our criteria were for canceling the swim. I had not clearly thought on this. I told him I didn't want to make a unilateral decision and asked for a few hours to consult others. The only one I could get in touch with was the race director, Terence White. We came up with the following:

Criteria for Cancelling the Annual Swim Around Key West

If during the event, the winds reach sustained speeds of 25 knots.

If lightning flashes are within 5 miles, during the event, swimmers will be instructed to exit water. Distance will be measured by the Flash to Bang technique (25 seconds between lightning flash and clap of thunder indicates lightning is within 5 miles). The race will be restarted when lightning moves from the area. Swimmers will be permitted to re-enter the water at or behind the point they exited. If the conditions do not improve within 45 minutes, then the race will be officially cancelled. This will be communicated to all the swimmers and support boaters by way of the Committee Boaters, who will be assisting swimmers and kayakers out of the water.

If either or both of the two preceding paragraphs describe the conditions at the race start, the race will be postponed up to 60 minutes; if the conditions don't clear, the race will be cancelled. There is no alternate race day.

If the director deems it necessary to cancel the event after the start, the swimmers in first place (according to the categories) after mile 4 will be declared the winners and the time posted as unofficial.

All final decisions will rest with the Race Director and are uncontestable.

Was this year's swim successful? The first thing I am grateful for after each swim is the fact that no one died and then the fact that no one went to the hospital. Certainly, tragedy can happen anywhere, at any time, even under the most idyllic circumstances. However, all things being equal, if something like that was going to happen, this year's conditions were more conducive to that end than previous years.

I have to highly commend all the Committee Boat personnel. Their job was exceedingly difficult. I must also commend all our safety kayakers who were out on the course. Race Director Terence White excelled. His cell phone recorded the fact that he fielded 160 calls during the event. Kayak coordinator Katie Leigh had her hands full with phone calls and the need to make quick executive decisions.

Kayaks were flipping in the waves, swimmers and kayakers were seeking one another out, knowing if the swimmers entered the Key West Harbor without their kayaker, the swimmer would be directed to abort the swim. Things improved some after the first couple of miles, once we entered the Harbor, but the improvement was only by comparison. The bottom line is that it was a rugged and challenging weather day!

The weather caused our start to be less than clear. It also made it more difficult for kayakers and their swimmers to find one another. The finish was also negatively affected by the weather. The director had to do his work from the point of the jetty and that made it hard to see which swimmers were finishing. The amazing thing was that, despite these adversities, few finishing times were askew.

As I reflect on the preparation of the event, I feel we stayed ahead of the curve the full time. We were well aware of what we needed to get done, what we needed to order, who we needed to talk to so that all would be ready when we needed it. In all the preparations, Katie Leigh and Don Nelson were all-stars. Both are exceptionally affable, dependable and astute.

Mona Rainer and all the crew at the Sun Collection (the company that owns the hotels we work with) were likewise accommodating. The use of the facility for registration and our prerace meeting and the post-race buffet were graciously donated. Alison Young, who manages In Kahoots restaurant, and her people prepared the food and she was proactive

to set up the restaurant so that we could eat inside rather than chance the elements poolside.

Terence White and Don Nelson spent hours after the event putting the finishers' times and the winners' placement together. For the fourth straight, year Pastor David Bickers of Urbancrest Baptist Church led a group down from Lebanon, Ohio, to serve the swimmers. They served in many capacities: registering the arriving swimmers, selling t-shirts, filling "goody bags," transporting whatever we needed transporting. On the day of the swim, they marked swimmers, and once the swimmers left to swim they prepared the beach for the finishing athletes. They (and others) were there to place medals on the finishers and to serve food prepared for the swimmers and their families and friends. Then there is the cleanup: after the last swimmers left the beach we were removing all debris.

We were tightly packed into the In Kahoots restaurant, but all seemed to adjust to the situation. We had more than 50 gift certificates to raffle off to the swimmers. I thank all the businesses for their generosity and I also thank my wife Sessie who spent many hours calling and visiting businesses to collect these gifts.

After we pay the bills, we give a gift to the Key West High School Cross Country Team. I am pleased to report that many from the team were out at the beach helping out as needs arose.

I think we can say that, in spite of severe challenges, the 36th Annual Swim was a success.

Blessings,

Bill Welzien, Organizer