

Great Chill Swim

31/1/15, Windermere

It is possibly the most stupid thing I've done. Swimming 120 metres in the depths of the winter is quite mad. Even mad people think it's mad.

I wasn't too sure what I was going to learn from this. It's going to be cold, and hopefully over before I ask myself why I'm doing this. However in those few minutes, I learnt so much.

The swimming area was between two pontoons on the side of Windermere. There were 8 lanes. On the start pontoon, the distance to the other side is probably a swimming pool length. A few strokes and you're across. My 120 metres was four lengths.

'Clothes off' and we're standing there, inappropriately dressed for the Arctic breeze. Trunks, goggles and a silicon cap, that's it. Chest out, stomach in, nervous smile, posing for the crowds. Surprisingly warm as I climbed down the steps. No gasps or panting for air, I'm going to nail this.

Shoulders under the water, and horn goes off. A few strokes, head down, looking good. I even managed to kick. A little bit of turbulence gave me a bit of water in the mouth which didn't help, but sorted, no worries. I'm suitably trained, well for warmer waters that is.

The blurb says that I should be conditioned for cold water. Well I figured that given I'm a hardened northerner, a couple of cold showers should do. In hindsight, that's possibly where I went wrong.

My arms quickly become like lead weights, hard to lift out of the water, and even harder to pull the stroke. Almost from the start, coordination and strength was a problem.

Then my style really starts to go. My head is more above the water than in. Even so I'm taking in more water than I should. I think I'm sinking, not drowning, just unable to keep a good profile. My legs are way below the surface, almost being dragged along. Barely half way across and I'm not impressed with myself.

Desperately trying to perform well, head goes down again, and I'm powering on. So much so, I find myself caught up in the line between the lanes. That was a shock, and wasn't welcomed. My arms are flapping with the line trying to untangle myself. I'm confused on which lane I should be in. Was I that disorientated, I think I probably was. Still a bit of head rolling and I'm clutching the steps at the other end. Phew, that wasn't easy. 1 out of 4 done.

No time for hanging about, turn around and swim back. It looks longer this time. It's almost all head up crawl. I bit like that youth that has no real idea on how to swim. Arms splashing forwards like the blades of a windmill, head rolling from side to side. No style whatsoever. I'm actually embarrassed, I'm



floundering, and I'm getting slower. I think my swimming profile is normally good. Not today it wasn't.

Rhys, get to the steps, concentrate on the steps. I'm half way across. I've now decided that I'm pulling out. I felt the clock was ticking on how long I could stay afloat. The closest I've been to drowning for a long time. Rhys get to the steps, and pull out.

Breast stroke became a life saver. My arms were getting weak, but my legs kicked me to those steps. Yes, I'm safe.

Thank goodness I was there. Climb out and warm up, easy.

But you don't. I'm still there in the water, holding on to the steps. And all it took was the assistant saying, 'go on, you can do it'. That, or it was a voice in my head.

I turn around, deep breath and push off. It wasn't too many strokes before the

fear came back to my eyes. Any strength in my arms really wasn't there. Good strong legs propelled me, but didn't stop my head continually going under. I was annoyed at not pulling out now. This is serious.

I felt so vulnerable, so far from any help. I was alone, and I knew it. For the first time in ages I am scared. I thought my inner strength was going to be enough, that I could blag it. Not today.

Then, I felt the strangest of senses, there seemed to be a current pushing me along. I was being drawn to the other side, how weird. With my now minimal effort, the far side was getting closer. I'm slow, naff style, but who cares. I'm not drowning.

Again holding the steps on the other side, for a moment or two longer than I should. Let go Rhys, you have to let go.

Turning around brings no comfort at all. The impending doom is ahead. It's all grey, slightly choppy water. I push off. I'm sticking with breast stroke. Very slow but no drama. It was clear that failing to properly train in cold waters wasn't good preparation.

No negative thoughts, I'm going to do it. That tide is with me again, how can that work?, pulling me towards my goal. The crowds have ramped up their cheering, it's getting really loud, so much encouragement. The other swimmers are out and drying themselves off. I'm going to do this. I'm clearly last but hey looks like I'm going to be a hero. That 4th length became a breeze. Grabbed that ladder, and climbed out, ready to give my bow.

The crowds were still cheering, I look around and there are two others still swimming. One in a terrible state. I'm not last, I chuckle to myself.

A brew, a soak in the hot tub, a laugh with the other nutters, and the world is such a lovely place. Even so it must have taken a further 20 minutes in the warmth for me to stop shaking.

The water temperature on the day was 5.1oC, which technically is 0.1oC too warm to be registered with the International Ice Swimming Association. It should have been even colder, how lucky was I.

...and you already know the answer to your 1st question, but maybe I'll do the 60m next time, but make sure that I do some cold water training. As to your 2nd question, let's just say nothing fell off, although it was some time before I could confirm this ;-)

Rhys