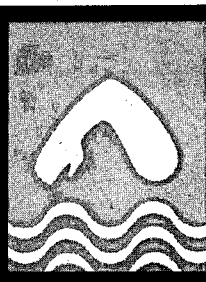


DISTANCE SWIMMING

By Dennis Matuch



Quite often, newspapers will publish a spectacular account of a solo marathon swim. When this happens, I am besieged by friends, acquaintances and students for some sort of comment. Frequently I decline to discuss the swim or swimmer for all too often, the swimmer is either a mediocrity or a fraud.

They have, by adroit promotion or luck, gained the attention of the popular press. Many of these swimmers I have met. Some I have even swum against. To recognize them verbally or in print would be a travesty to the dedicated pro or amateur swimmer who by extraordinary effort have obtained their recognized place in any of a number of official organizations.

Marathon swimming today, as always, is belabored by eccentrics, frauds and mediocrities. They were one of the reasons the World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation was set up. Under its auspices, only the best organized races and swimmers were accepted. Quite early in its history, the proving ground for competence was established. Just as early, the incompetents learned to shy away from these highly selective sanctioned races where their mettle would become quickly known. Let us see why!

Experience quickly showed that a top pro would average about two m.p.h. (give or take 0.3 m.p.h., depending on waves and water temperature) for a 10 to 30 mile swim. This would be what the first three finishers (many of which were Olympic, national or local champions; e.g. Greta Andersen, Abo-Heif, LaCoursiere, Willemse) would average.

Thus, when a newspaper article describes some fantastic or projected 20 to 136 mile ocean swim in which the marathoner would average three m.p.h. or better, I holler "FRAUD."

It is almost as bad, but not quite, when a mediocre swimmer gets superb coverage for a swim that a competent pro could do in almost half the time. You rarely see the top pro marathoner making the solo swim because he is already making money in the established pro swims.

Once he has been financially rewarded and recognized by his peers, it seems the height of folly to spend money and effort on an endeavor that will only result in the plaudits of the unknowing public. He has learned quite early in the game that the grocer and landlord do not accept plaudits. The few times that great solo swims have been swum, they have been swum by highly qualified marathoners who had been sponsored by a knowing backer well aware of their legitimate accomplishments.

And the river swims? Forget them. Unless it is a professional race, the pro marathoner avoids them like the plague. Being men of integrity they would feel foolish letting the water do the work. It would be like getting your M.D. in neuro-surgery from a mail-order diploma mill.

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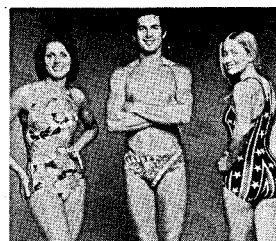
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