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The Cuba Swim: From Dream to Reality



photo Christi Baril

August 22, 2012 - Key West, Florida

The disappointment of exiting the ocean yesterday, after 42 hours of once again attempting to swim from Cuba to Florida, weighs heavily on my heart.

The first go was 1978, as a prime-time athlete, age 28. Unpredicted fierce winds whipped up and blew us west.

Perhaps ironically, that time spent in water was 41 hours, 49 minutes. This time it was 51 hours 5 minutes.

But yet again, alas, with two attempts last year in between, the Xtreme Dream was not to be. It's a wild, wooly confluence of Mother Nature forces, these waters that stretch between Havana and Key West.

Enormous tropical squalls flare from seemingly nowhere, bringing in 35mph winds and fierce lightning bolts. Both Saturday and Sunday nights, we were engaged in what the official observer of our swim deemed "life threatening emergency."

Large sharks parked under me for the entire second night. Our six shark divers spent every hour in the water, looking at pairs of eyes in every direction. Luke Tipple, one of today's leading shark experts and shark conservationists, an Aussie who usually speaks with a soft and quiet voice, commanded me aggressively to swim very, very close to the boat.

The powerful Gulf Stream literally pulled our five large vessels completely off their compass points and we struggled for several early morning hours to right our course.

But beyond even those crises, it was the jellyfish -- again - - that brought us to our knees.

Last year, stung badly by the potentially deadly Box Jellies, the most venomous creature in all the oceans, I swore I just couldn't give up, give in, without coming back with a solution to somehow making it through them.



photo Christi Baril

I contacted the world's leading authority on the Box, Dr. Angel Yanagihara of the University of Hawaii. Angel spent six months researching and developing a front of defenses to protect me. She developed a cream to spread across my hands and lips and nostrils, a sting stopper that would at least mitigate the effects. She helped the swim tech company FINIS fabricate a skin suit for me that wouldn't cause too much drag but would not allow the tentacles to penetrate.

Our Xtreme Dream Team came into this year's expedition as a world-class operation. As I look back today, there isn't one minor aspect of our preparation that I would change. Our shark divers, our ops team chief Mark Sollinger, our navigator John Bartlett, our drivers keeping vigilant, our kayak shark team, our med team out of University of Miami, our social media team working around the clock to deliver the story, my personal handlers, headed by Bonnie Stoll, the individual any of you want in your corner as you face trying times.

Angel and her jellyfish protocols... All of it, all of it, was top-notch.

As I swam through the two fairly peaceful days, the azure of the Gulf Stream of oil canvas beauty, stroking happily with Beatles songs streaming in my head, I was so very proud to see the team, each of their groups falling in military precision into their positions. As shifts would change, kayaks would stream in and out next to me, boat drivers would take new positions at the wheel, shark divers would take their positions on the top deck, handlers would nestle into their station down near me. We were making progress.

The Box Jellies came out the first night. Nine stings. Just about every square inch of my body was covered with protective materials (even gloves and booties, which slow me down), but Bonnie and Angel quickly innovated even further. Bonnie cut lengths of duct tape for my ankles and wrists and another swatch to cover my nostrils. Angel prepared hot salves and tried to coat the stung areas to at least lessen the dire effects. And yet my lips, the only exposed area left, were repeatedly hit by the small wisps of these tentacles, no wider than a strand of human hair. The pain was searing. Then came the systemic effects. Chills all over. Tremors. Angel's treatments kept the very worst, pulmonary distress, from happening. Bonnie's duct tape coverage and my FINIS suit also reduced the effects. Nevertheless, I am going to admit to you right here and now that these animals are too much for me.

So what do I do now? Does my inner voice tell me that I have failed because I didn't reach the other shore? I can recite a very long and impressive list of things I've learned, magnificent people I've collaborated with, strong qualities I've developed within myself over the course of pursuing this dream the past three years. Matter of fact, once rested, I'm going to explore that list, even if just for my own edification, to fully appreciate what going after this intensely ambitious dream brought me, and everybody involved. And many people tuning in from afar.



photo Andy Newman/Florida Keys News Bureau/fla-keys.com

When we came to shore yesterday, every single crew member, 53 of them, came to me to say the mission changed their lives. We lived large out there. We lived large getting ready for it. No stone unturned. We were our best selves every waking minute of every day for three years. You just can't look back at a period of unwavering commitment like this one with any regrets.

Many people who write me, friends and strangers alike, use the phrase "watching how you live your life has inspired me." I myself need to remember this. There is no doubt that I would have been jubilant to touch that Florida shore, to have made history, to at long last lived out the vision I've had in my brain for so very long. Yet I've been living a grand life, driven by this very quest.

The age-old discussion of journey-versus-destination is most apt here. As my great writer friend Jane Anderson says it best: The journey is the destination.

Those Box Jellies aren't going away in this area. They are proliferating. I can't swim breaststroke with a bee bonnet around my head. I'd never make it. I need to have at least my mouth free. For all the other obstacles, I would go after it again. It's not in my nature to admit that no matter how much will you summon, no matter how much courage you express, no matter how much intelligent and complex planning you do, no matter the excruciating long hours of training, no matter the dedicated and expert individuals you choose to help you, sometimes you just don't arrive at your destination. And somehow you still have to find the pride and the joy in your journey.

That's the road I'm walking today. Feeling that pride, that joy.

As I was swimming these hours Saturday into Monday, I was thinking about the Olympic athletes. So many epic moments. But the one that moved me most was Nathan Adrian's interview after he won the 50-meter freestyle. He wasn't favored. Not even for any color medal. But he said he stood on the blocks, looked down his lane and thought to himself: "I hear a lot about the pedigrees of Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte and Mark Spitz. I'm not in their league. But for the next 50 seconds, this is MY TIME and I'm going to seize it." And so he did.



photo Christi Baril

So I was thinking, stroke by sometimes painful stroke, "This is MY TIME. I'm seizing it."

I didn't make it all the way. But I surely did seize the time. I couldn't have done any of it a fingernail better.

And, to broaden out the concept of MY TIME, can't we easily say that life is so damn precious, our short span on the Earth is for each of us Our Time.



photo Christi Baril

Seize your days. All of them. Be bold. Don't give in to fear. To paraphrase my favorite quote, by Mary Oliver: "So, what are you going to do with this one, wild and precious life of yours?"

--Diana Nyad



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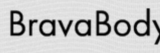
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