

The Zen of Ocean Swimming

Ocean swimming was never something I had considered despite having swum competitively in the fourth grade and during my senior year as team captain for our high school swim team.

Truth be told, I never really enjoyed competitive swimming. As a fourth grader, I joined the YMCA swim team thinking it was some after-school program devoid of all the basketball, football, and other team sports in which I possessed neither the interest nor the ability. Understandably, after a year of intense training for meets which I really preferred not to participate in the first place, I chose not to continue after my first season.

Growing up like many other island kids and progressing from bodyboarding and bodysurfing to surfing made me quite proficient at swimming and it was a natural for me to sign up when my high school, during my senior year, re-instituted its swim team. For me and some of my surfing buddies it was a shoe-in for a letter and the try-outs turned out to be a piece of cake! As it turned out, I was assigned to swim the breaststroke (in my mind the ugliest stroke of all) and the 200-meter individual medley, both in which I bronze medaled but never really saw as enjoyable. Perhaps, as I look back on our swimming days, it may have been because we never used goggles!

My senior year in high school went quickly and the whole prospect of swimming was something I gladly left behind without even the slightest feeling that something I had done every day for an entire season would be in any way missed. Yes, it was time to close the chapter of swimming in my life and replace it with more appealing activities like surfing, diving, and boating.

During my four years of college and the fifteen years that would follow I grew impassioned with sailing and never had a second thought about swimming until after the end of a five-year relationship. As is often the case for individuals after a major break-up, I needed to do something different. That's when swimming came back into my life.

Over the years, I had gained some thirty-five pounds beyond the one hundred and fifty with which I left high school not to mention the unhealthy cigarette habit I had picked up along the way. Realizing I needed to regain something of my old lifestyle, I turned to the fitness regimen I knew best, swimming.

I went to the local pool and soon lost interest with the never-ending laps, interrupting flip turns, and overall boredom which I remembered so well from my training sessions back in high school. One day, I went to Ala Moana Beach, a lagoon which was protected from the ocean swells by a large fringe reef and measured just over a kilometer from one end of the park to the other. A group called the Waikiki Swim Club, a masters swim group, would meet every Saturday morning with some members swimming to the half-way mark and back for a kilometer while others swam to the far marker and back for a two-kilometer (2K) swim. The best in the group were doing the "2K" in under a half-hour, a feat which really impressed me!

For some reason a sense of competitiveness I never knew existed arose in me and I wanted to do the 2K in under a half-hour! Soon I found myself going every day to Ala Moana lagoon, before and after work, and also during the weekends. On some evenings, I would be swimming in darkness with only the lighted elevator shaft of one of the Waikiki hotels to guide me back to my starting point.

It was during these long laps at the Ala Moana Beach lagoon that I discovered the "zen" of ocean swimming. Up until this point, all of my swimming experience had been limited to either anaerobic sprints or longer gut wrenching power swims where all you could think about was the finish and your corresponding time. Here, with ocean swimming, in absence of lane lines, markers and other swimmers thrashing about I was on the verge of a kind of swimming where you could truly experience the environment of which you were a part. It was a kind of swimming in which I would find one could actually enter a "zone" similar to that experienced by distance runners.

After running into the reef a few times, I changed my stroke to roll from left to right allowing me to see to my left as much as I saw when breathing on my right. The increased rolling seemed to considerably cut down my drag and increase the glide I'd get with each stroke. On the down leg, with the wind behind me, my strokes could be long and slow while the return leg required shorter and quicker strokes to push through the wind chop which I was now

swimming against. These varying conditions combined with my new "view" on both sides during my 2K swims in the lagoon made for an interesting forty minutes which I would later work down to my under-thirty-minute goal!

Around the point when my times were in the mid-thirties for 2K in the lagoon, I discovered the "high" that so many runners experience. Until that time, I had never heard of such a condition for swimmers. It came for me when I was encouraged to swim the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, a 2.8-mile swim along Oahu's Waikiki shoreline. As a suggested practice for the event, a fellow swimmer suggested I start swimming 4K at the lagoon, twice the yardage I had been swimming each day.

To my surprise, doubling my yardage wasn't difficult at all. Instead, what I discovered was somewhere in between the second and fourth kilometer was what I considered to be the swimmer's equivalent of a runner's high! I found that for a period of time after I had been swimming for awhile I would get a second wind then enter a "zone" where my stroke seemed almost mechanical and I felt neither fatigue nor the usual longing to be done with my swim. Instead, I felt I could keep on swimming forever at what was about a three-quarter speed! For the first time in my life, I truly enjoyed swimming.

My new interest in distance swimming made it an activity I wanted to do every day. I found myself going to pools and swimming laps non-stop for over an hour straight and, within four months of returning to swimming, I entered my first rough-water swim and soon after that clocked my first under-thirty minutes at Ala Moana Lagoon.

After a couple of years of swimming regularly, I seemed to get burned out and again let swimming out of my life in favor of other activities. I returned to swimming in my early forties, a stint that lasted for a year, and then returned again the year I turned fifty. On this last return I started swimming with some masters swimmers who were in their sixties and winning their age group events. They encouraged me to swim again in the Waikiki Rough-water Swim which I did, then the Double Rough-water which is simply the course of the former plus returning to the starting point!

As seems to be my pattern, after the "Double," I had again reached a major goal and let my swimming fall along the wayside. A few weeks ago, I hopped on the scale and saw I was up to 200 pounds once again, a weight I swore I'd never again reach. For some reason, though, the idea of getting back into swimming just seemed so difficult to pursue until my daughters, ages seven and eleven, said they'd go to the pool with me!

Over the last week, we've gone every day to the fifty-meter pool in our neighborhood recreation center. For now, the laps are arduous and the thought of once again experiencing a "swimmers high" seems far-fetched if not impossible. But as I roll from side to side and see one daughter swimming her first real laps then rolling to the other side to see the younger kicking on her board with an expression of outright glee, I can't help but feel I'm "back in the zone" and, once again, swimming is a part of my life.

The author, Richard Young, is the creator of hawaii-beachcombers.com, a website about [Hawaii beaches](http://hawaii-beaches.com) presented through his favorite sports like fishing, kayaking, bodysurfing, bodyboarding, and windsurfing. He has participated in a number of ocean swimming events which include the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, The Maui Channel Relay, and the Waikiki Double Roughwater Swim. His current passion is kayak fishing and is among the recreational activities presented in his website.

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