

Chatuge Swim Challenge

<http://www.surf.to/triathlons2000> - Great Smokey Mountains Triathlon Club

"Bow down thy heavens,
O lord, and come down,
Touch the mountains,
And they shall smoke."

HEY! Well, it was Sunday morning (July 23) & all the good people of Hiawassee Ga. were at church, the lake was deserted, it WAS overcast & rainy and we were swimming in a lake in the smoky mountains on the border of Georgia & north Carolina.

It had all started innocently enough:

There was the obligatory pre race meeting of the 36 participants at the fieldstone inn, located on the southern shore of lake Chatuge. At the meeting the event director, Scott Hanna, explained that this was a 4 ½ mile swim to the dam located on the north end of the lake & there would be a number of escort boats that would assist navigation to the finish. We were shown a chart with markings of the preferred course, there were to be 2 red buoys placed at strategic locations along the course, and the usual rescue procedures were explained. After the introduction, we piled into a few platform boats & were ferried a short distance out of the marina. Next to a "no wake" marker everyone entered the lake & milled around for a minute. Someone said someone else had said, "GO!" & then we were off, swimming in a northerly direction.

After a typical open water start, things settled down & we all attempted to find our places in this conga line that was heading to Chatuge dam, somewhere up north in North Carolina.

Now, this was my first experience of swimming a "point to point" type race. I soon found that navigating without the aid of large, bright, marker buoys was going to be different, I would be sighting on peninsulas, headlands and mountains. Oh, well, I really didn't look at the chart before the race and the lead pack that was mostly composed of Scott Frederick, Gary Eaton, bill bond, clay Stanton, Beth Gardner, cord Patrick mammoth & Tom Piacentini were swiftly getting further away from me. Soon they were far enough ahead that I couldn't sight off them any more, this left the geographic approach... I did mention the thing about the chart, didn't I?

In a short period of time I was lost. When I say, "lost" I really mean to say that I had NO idea where I was supposed to be swimming, what peninsulas to round, which escort boat to swim toward, nothing. All I knew was that the dam (finish line) was located to the north & I was swimming in that general direction. Even though I was "navigationally challenged" my comfort level was high, the water was incredibly clean & clear, the air temp was about 81-84, the water temp was about 77-80, there were no jet skis or turbo charged bass boats around and there was light breeze driven rain falling. All in all, I was having a great time! This was excellent recreation!

So there I was, out in the middle of this big old lake, swimming along, having some kind of identity crisis (you know, the lost kind) and wondering how long it would take me to FIND this dam. At this point, I found out later, I was all the way to the eastern side of the lake, well off course. I was starting to actually enjoy myself out there, just the pureness of endless stroking.

I raised my head to take a breath & saw a clay county fire & rescue boat complete with dive flag 30' away. The guy standing in the bow held his arm out to the west, and pointed, indicating the course I should take (about 30 degrees to my left) to get to the finish.

Attempting to be conversational, I tried; "how you boys doing?" the reply came back; "boys? No boys on this boat, just men." Shaking my head, I put my face back into the water & paddled off in the recommended direction. I thought, what was that all about, anyway? We don't talk like that to each other in

Georgia! And then it hit me! I WASN'T LOST ANYMORE! I knew exactly where I was, why; I was now in North Carolina. God's country! I had crossed the state line and was now deeply into god's country. With renewed vigor & a clear sense of direction I swam toward Chatuge dam & the finish.

In short order, the low, dark, massiveness of Chatuge dam came into view. I DID remember that the finish would be to the right side of the dam. After a few more minutes I saw a tent, a pontoon boat, an ambulance, a large tent & people milling around on the shore at the extreme right side of the dam. Ok, this area had to be the finish.

Where do I go to finish, I thought? No chute, no flag, no buoys, the water was getting shallow now & what do I do? Should I run up the shore to the tent, tag the pontoon boat or what? I tried to remember what Scott Hanna had said about the finish & drew a blank. The water was too shallow now to swim. Screw it, I thought & stood up. Hearing cheers I took a few steps to the shore & tried my best muscle beach flex. and it was over. I walked up to the tent & got something to drink, there weren't any cookies left, cord Patrick had eaten them all.

And this is the way it ended up for the dynamo group:

Scott Frederick 1:26:29
Gary Eaton 1:32:12
Bill bond 1:32:20
Clay Stanton 1:33:03
Beth Gardner 1:36:10
Cord-Patrick
Kammoltz 1:37:17
Tom Piacentini 1:37:58
David Shinn 1:49:24
Ralf Macintyre 2:07:14
Doug Papciak 2:44:15

the fastest men's time (1:26:29) and overall winner of the event was Scott Frederick. The fastest women's time (1:36:02) was 12-year-old Allison Maxwell of the n. Ga. rapids swim team. Now that is some very fast swimming!

The "great smoky mountains triathlon club" chaired this event. Scott Hanna appears to have done most of the heavy lifting in organizing & promoting the swim. Debbie Garrison clocked the finish & officiated the awards ceremony held in the dining room at the fieldstone inn & conference resort (main sponsor). The clay county fire & rescue squad helped tremendously with escorting the swimmers & insuring the event went safely. Fieldstone inn provided pontoon boats and refreshments. In all, there were 17 volunteers, almost 1 for every 2 swimmers. Thanks to each & every one of them for making it possible for us to do this swim.

This is the third year that the "great smoky mountains triathlon club" has run this race. In 1998 there were 4 swimmers, in 1999 there were 3 swimmers and this year there were 36 participants. This year the club contacted various clubs, put info about the event on the web and opened the event to age group swimmers. They plan on growing the event, in the future, to the point where there are about 200 entrants. Next year they plan on having more marker buoys & escort boats. There is also a new event to be offered either this fall or in 2001... the "Chatuge double cross", you guessed it, out & back! Sounds daunting but exciting.

This race will become a southeastern classic in the years to come. The elements of the swim are difficult enough to challenge even the most gifted athlete while the typical swimmer can exult in the mountainous scenery & pristine water conditions. All who swim this event in the future will never forget it, as those of us from dynamo who swam it this year will tell you.

Come, join us next time as we stroke our way into "god's country", you won't be disappointed.

Swim or die, Ralph Macintyre