

Rough Water Revival

A Former Competitive Swimmer Finds it Just as Fun the Second Time Around

By Susan Dawson-Cook
Photography by Chris Ferko

I jump into the pool and when the cool water embraces me my day begins. Beneath the water, I escape from the sound of vehicles, jackhammers and angry voices and am enveloped in my own world of aquatic tranquility. In the pool, lake or ocean, the fingertips of rushing water transport me from a world where I feel helpless into one where I reign. When I swim, I feel euphoric, energetic and competent. Even beautiful. In the outside world, I don't feel this way.

I rarely encounter anyone who swims for fitness, which never ceases to amaze me. How anyone can say no to a sport that inflicts very little trauma on the body and tones nearly every muscle?

As an elite swimmer, I once trained twice a day. Today I settle for the status of "recreational" swimmer. Lately, I have found that to be disturbing. As if I am too old to be an athlete. Too many over-forty people tell me they used to hike, travel, bike or scuba dive. Before I married Chris, if a guy said anything close to that on a

date, it would be the last. I didn't want to hang around people that thought they were too old to live. That would never be me.

The movements I performed in Feldenkrais® classes reminded me how much I missed the connection I once had with my body when I pushed it to its physical limits. So I increased my training and when I noticed an improvement in my writing and my coping skills (with such things as the hormonal moods of a teenage daughter), it was just the excuse I needed to dive back into the competitive arena. I'm doing this to "enhance my writing career" and to "become a better parent," not to show everyone "I got it, I got it," I told myself.

So one night, I find myself browsing the La Jolla Rough Water swim web site. Before I know it, I am composing an email and clicking the "send" button. Can I enter, despite the fact that the final entry deadline was last week, I ask. I haven't swum a mile in the ocean for 20 years. What is wrong with me? Am I experiencing some kind of mid-life crisis?

The email response arrives hours later. If I want to compete, I'll have to register at the La Jolla Washington Mutual the Saturday before the race. When I break the news that we'll have to leave the house at 4 a.m. to arrive in time for registration, my husband says early morning departures remind him of childhood trips he took with his family. My request undoubtedly stirs up memories of our adventures to Peru, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama, all of which began "very, very a.m."

I am more excited about returning to La Jolla than competing in the race. After years of accompanying my

husband to the La Jolla Half Marathon each April, the place feels like a second home. As he traverses the undulating hills from Del Mar to La Jolla, I do the 5K dash from UCSD down to the La Jolla Cove, spending the rest of the two hours until he finishes crashed seaside on a sandstone boulder, punching my thoughts into my portable Alphasmart.

As we make our descent into La Jolla, the ocean appears as an endless plateau of rich sapphire blue, studded with diamonds that glitter under the brilliant sunlight. The rocky formations along the La Jolla Cove protect a crescent of sand, which serves as a launch pad for swimming or scuba diving. Nearby, other beaches provide napping grounds for sea lions that lounge in the warm sand like tired old men, with their heavy lidded eyes and whiskers.

At the registration table, I hand in my waiver form that releases LJRWS from unforeseen entanglements with unfriendly marine life, boat propellers or forests of kelp. A woman with silver hair pulled tightly into a pony tail reaches for my crisp \$20 bills and staples a band around my wrist.

"Make sure you don't take this off until after the race," she says. "It's your ticket to the beach. Also, be sure to attach the anklet chip tightly. If it falls off, you will be disqualified."

At this point I'm more worried about being part of the body count than getting a DQ. There has to be a reason they want your number plastered on your wristband, your ankle and written on the front and back of your shoulder in black ink. They say it's to help you find your self on sportphoto.com, but who do they think they're fooling?

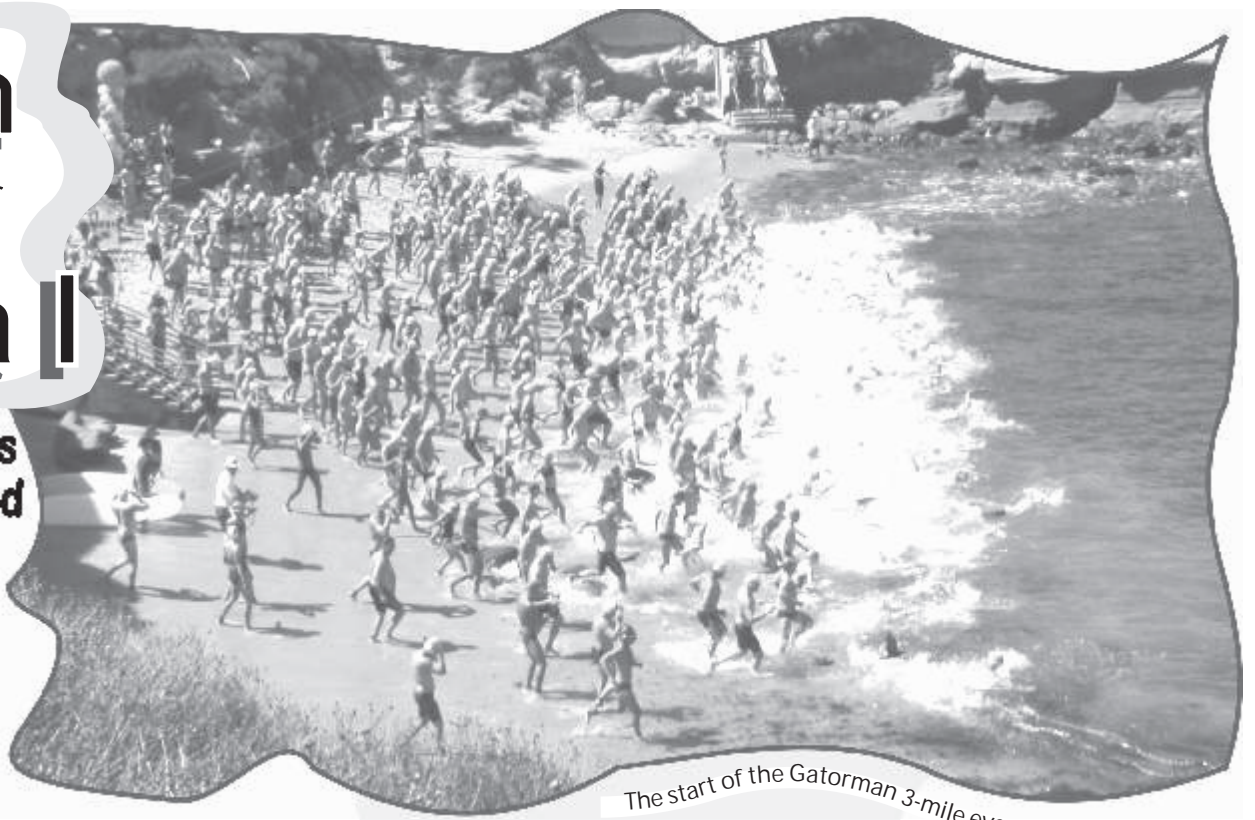
What was I thinking, entering this race? I haven't raced in the ocean since last century, when I swam the Waikiki Roughwater swim. The Hawaiian waters were warm and clear. Here, the ocean is icy, murky and teeming with sharks. To maintain a low profile, I remove my jewelry and my nail polish. I don't want anything on my body to reflect light and attract sharks, barracuda or any other unfriendly marine life.

On raceday, my stomach is in turmoil. I'm not sure whether it was the Smart Water with the electrolytes, the Redbull or the Alfredo sauce on last night's linguine. Against the wishes of my whining stomach, I fill it with a stack of banana pancakes and a glass of Coca Cola before we head for the Cove.

As I wait for the lineup announcement for Women's Master's, I listen to my MP3 player and chat with a group of swimmer/triathletes from Orange County. When the officials motion for us to descend to the beach, I am one of the first to head down the stairs. Hundreds of people are lined up along the railing, clapping and cheering and I wave and smile. Adrenaline flows through my body and into my face like a sensual current, tracing out an arc from my cheek to my ears and all at once, my feet feel as if they have left the ground. The exhilaration of competition reminds me why I am here.

On the beach, surrounded by towering, broad-shouldered women, I feel suddenly diminutive. I turn and peer up toward the road and see Chris waving. It feels comforting to see the outline of his athletic frame amidst the unfamiliar crowd, the tips of his silvery hair appear ignited by the sunlight, like a halo around his head. I see him and know I can succeed. I have been able to accomplish so much more than ever before, because he has always supported me. No matter what. Even when I told him I wanted to be a writer. He never gets jealous of my achievements and whenever I falter, he encourages me to strive onward and not give up. Chris even reads my manuscripts. I can't imagine too many husbands doing that. But there is no one in the world quite like Chris. Having him in my life is enough evidence to me that God exists.

We line up on the beach to prepare for the start and I fortuitously choose a spot where I won't get wet until after the start. After all, pre-race hypothermia would not be good. A woman beside me, noticing my timidity when each wave crashes, tells me "the water won't feel too cold



The start of the Gatorman 3-mile event.



The author before the start of the Women's Masters 1 mile event

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during the one mile." But she and her daughter would never again do the Gatorman (the 3-mile race), since they got so cold, they were miserable the entire time, she says. This is one of those "some things are better left unsaid" moments. I really didn't need to hear this now.

I watch a woman with long blond hair standing in knee deep water, wearing no bathing cap. Another woman with abs of Jell-o is decked out in a skimpy bikini and I'm wondering how long it will stay in place. Hopefully long enough that I won't have to see the consequences. And I am disguised as the true competitor in my aquamarine Speedo with frog green swirls, a green cap and new-fangled Lane 4 goggles that don't leave ring marks around the eyes.

The starting gun disrupts my thoughts and I stumble into the water after the mob of 200-odd over-forty women. For several minutes, I feel like I am going nowhere. Amidst the mob, there is no room to maneuver right or left, so I just float along until things open up. The congestion continues as I reach the first buoy. At this moment, I realize I don't even feel like I am swimming in the ocean. I am surrounded by so many people, I don't feel vulnerable to the ever-changing oceanic conditions and the wildlife that lurks beneath the murky water, the way I would if I were alone.

Amidst the swimmers, I hear an exchange of angry words. It's the only verbal exchange I hear during the race other than some cheering from paddlers on the surfboards near the first buoy. Still inhibited by slow swimmers, I wonder if I should have started toward the front. Then perhaps I could have taken home a medal. But I'm not sure. Perhaps people would have swum over me, inadvertently ripping my goggles from my head, causing my contacts to float from my eyeballs and then "voila," I would have been out of the race. I can barely swim straight when I can see and I would likely end up in Tijuana without my trusty contact lenses.

I swim through the corridor of surfboards, jet skis and rescue boats. Everywhere, observers watch for signs of panic, a cramp or other symptoms of distress. I am in more danger at home when I swim alone in the pool.

When I finally see an opening and decide to kick it in high gear, I try to hear the rhythm of the last song I listened to in my head. Sure enough, as my arms pull through the water and my legs thrust downward, it comes to me. "Whose Johnny, she said and smiled in that special way." Now that my rhythm is established and there are fewer people around I enjoy the sensation of the ocean for the first time. I feel my body rising and falling over the swells and the smooth feel of the water rushing over my freshly shaven legs. And I taste the salinity of the water on my tongue. In places, the ocean bottom is visible and I catch a glimpse of the light brown sand, patches of dark rock and then long strands of yellow-green kelp.

"Whose Johnny, she said, you know I love you," I hear and then suddenly, my world turns black. A sheet of kelp has plastered itself across my face. I peel it away and continue on until I realize the Velcro is loosening on my watch. I try to tighten it up without losing my pace, two and then three times until I feel someone grasping onto my toes. Worried that my timing chip will loosen, I kick hard and increase my pace to pull away from the swimmer behind me. As I rise over the next wave, I feel a tug at my wrist and the watch slips from my wrist and disappears into the deep blue depths. My \$5 Wal-Mart watch will be tonight's fascination for the fish.

I round the second buoy and, now that the endorphins are kicking in full force, I feel streamlined and powerful. This is so much fun. What was I afraid of, I wonder? I am swimming like a true competitor now and soon I see the colorful caps that were beside me fade away. As I approach the shore, I watch a school of long silvery fish do an about-



The elite Gatorman swimmers propel quickly through the ocean waves.

face as if on cue and then dash away into the shadows of olive-green water. Then I see garibaldi; a brilliant orange fish like pond Koi, and then patches of sand, forests of kelp and ridges of coal-colored rocks. I look ahead to see the arch of red and yellow balloons that marks the finish line. We are almost there. I am neck-and-neck with a girl in a white cap so I increase my pace, swimming all out until my fingers touch the sand, when I sprint up the beach to the finish line.

Outside the ocean, I feel like a beached sea creature. Without the support of the undulating waves, my steps are unsteady and I feel mentally confused, dizzy and disoriented. Perhaps I am part fish after all. All at once, my teeth begin to chatter and my muscles to quiver. I long for warmth.

With quivering hands, I peel off my ankle chip and place it in the hands of a young boy before traversing the zigzag of flags, where a teenage girl with dark hair and Paris Hilton glasses gives me a high five. "That was awesome," she says. "Thanks," I answer. But without my watch, I don't even know my time. A freckly-faced woman with flaming orange hair hands me a cup of Gatorade, my medal, and a Snickers energy bar. Then I make my way toward the rocky crossing I must traverse to climb the stairs. By now, I am shivering uncontrollably.

A grandmotherly woman rushes up, throws a towel around my shoulders and begins rubbing my shoulders. She asks me if I'm all right and I nod, although my body is shaking so furiously, its language suggests otherwise. I appreciate her kindness, yet I feel suddenly embarrassed.

"Thank you so much," I say as I hand the towel back to her and give her one last smile of gratitude. Three men in front of me encourage me to step across the uneven

rocks, over which enormous waves are crashing. Two masculine hands grasp my arms and I feel another against my back as I cautiously make my way toward the stairs. I appreciate that everyone is so conscientious about our safety.

After an ultra-hot shower at the hotel, I check the results. 27:37 and 8th in my age group division. Not great, but not all that bad either. The Gatorman competitors are lining up. Male or female, young or old, you can't enter this race unless you have previously swum a three mile ocean race in under 90 minutes. The more than 300 competitors all wear the mandatory bright yellow caps.

As they plunge into the water, I am fascinated by the pattern their splashing arms and legs make across the sapphire water. They propel through the water like lightning bolts, swimming from the Cove to Scripps Pier and back again. The first finisher crosses the finish line at 54 minutes. For a three mile race! And he is nearly 300 yards ahead of the second place finisher.

I watch the pattern of the other swimmers making their way toward the finish. They make a wide "S" over the ocean, their paths shifted by current. I watch them with fascination until Chris tells me he is eager to return to Tucson. Even after my shower, a lingering scent of seawater remains on my skin. I feel a tug of sadness as the ocean disappears from my field-of-view, but I know that we will return next year. In April for the Half Marathon and in September for "The Big Wet One." And the next time I swim in this race, I will hear a different song and be more prepared. Now that I have returned to the competitive arena, I intend to prove to myself that even at 43, I am an athlete. *[Signature]*

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Competitors in the Women's Masters event swim through a protective corridor of surfboards and boats.