

The Iceman Cometh. (eventually)

As you will all remember from my previous article in the loop, "open water and me," I have been an open water swim addict for over 10 years now. My journey started when after doing triathlons for a few years, I decided that the swimming part was much more fun than the other disciplines, and as I started to get into my 50's, I began to struggle matching my previous years times. It's a sad, but true fact in all our lives, which we all have to face. It's what we do with that fact that is the reality between giving up, adapting our targets, or finding new challenges.

Open water swimming for me was the ultimate new challenge. I found that although my speed was greatly reduced, my strength and endurance was a match for any youngster. I may not be the fastest fish in the pond, but I can keep going through that discomfort barrier until it disappears, and then turns into a state of meditation, which becomes peaceful.

The transition from open water swimming in temperate summer temperatures, and the cooler autumn, turning into cold water winter temperatures is seamless if handled in a methodical and carefully planned training regime.

A friend told me that it's all in the mind. Well, yes that's true, but the mind is a powerful thing that tells you things you don't wish to hear. I just know from experience that the feeling I almost always have before a cold water swim is, I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS RIGHT NOW. I know however that as soon as I focus and enter the water the feeling is very, very different, and the feeling afterwards is awesome and the glow lasts for the day.



During my first wetsuit free winter, I swam lesser distances as the cold increased until I was able to stay in the water for up to 30 minutes at around 6C, or at least kilometre. My recovery was drastic during the first year and I had some severe shivers and had to learn to recognise the signs whilst in the water. I entered Tooting Bec Ice Championships and PHISH cold water event, but only competed in the 30m heads up breaststroke and relay event. The temp was 1C at Tooting, and the following year was 5C at Chillswim in Cumbria, and PHISH in London, where I competed in 122m, 244m, relay, and 1000m races in the same day. I knew I was ready the following year to do my ultimate goal...The Ice Mile!

During my training for The Ice Mile, I knew that acclimatisation was going to be the key, and having two winters behind me swimming in temps of 2c, I knew that it was going to be a question of regular exposure to decreasing temperatures with increasing periods of time in the water.



The training can be boring and if not done in such a way that is also fun, then motivation is difficult no matter how focussed you are. I am so lucky to have friends who share my passion, and a supportive partner who has helped me to achieve my goal even though she does not swim herself due to cold tolerance problems.



I was lucky enough to discover a wonderful training venue only 25 mins drive from my house, so instead of travelling all the way to Cumbria and using gallons of petrol, time and accommodation cash, which I really couldn't afford, I was able to train locally at last.



Over the past few winters I have travelled all over the country looking for cold water and swum in some amazing places, such as Glaslyn 3/4 of the way up Snowdon, Stickle Tarn in the Langdale pikes, Cumbria, among so many other wonderful locations, but finding Stoney Cove near Hinckley made such a difference. If you can possibly find friends to train with and a venue where you can swim at least once or twice weekly, then acclimatisation is just a matter of time.



Two winters behind me and I was ready. First step was contacting the IISA, (International Ice Swimming Association) and getting approval for an attempt. It is a long winded and tedious process, but if you want an official ice mile recorded, then this is the route you have to take.

The requirements are, a qualifying swim of at least 1km in water of 6C or below, a full medical including an ECG, and a venue which is attended by IISA officials,

measuring temp with three separate

thermometers and taking average to determine actual temperature on the day, then there is safety boat cover, and recovery seconds to get you back into the land of the living after your swim.

Rules state that you enter water wearing only swim costume, goggles and one swim hat. No neoprene whatsoever, then you must swim the course, finish, stand and exit the water without assistance. Video evidence of entry, during swim, and exit required also.

That is a lot to organise and it's not cheap, plus you then need to pay a registration fee to IISA of 100 dollars, plus expense for venue, officials and travel and accommodation.

Not selling this am I?!!.

Dec 2016, the day of the medical came, which should be your first step, as it's pointless putting your body through all the training if you don't pass. I went to my GP and paid £135 for the pleasure, which was going brilliantly until my ECG showed that I had Atrial Fibrillation. This meant that the doctor couldn't sign me fit to swim an extreme sport event, and recommended I went for specialist treatment.

My dream was crushed, and I spent the next two years getting treatment for my condition. We tried several options, which did not work until in June 2017 after another operation and a different procedure, my A Fib was cured. HOORAY.

I had not stopped my swimming during these two lost winters and completed many 10k open water swims such as The Dart, The Hurly Burly, The Jubilee, and many private distance swims and winter cold water events, all without wetsuit. I also managed to run two half marathons at ultra reduced pace as the meds I was on restricted my max BPM to 140,

but this did not affect my swimming and especially my ability to continue to swim in cold water.

So on the winter of 2017/18, I decided in December I would start the process again. I contacted a doctor in Yorkshire who did sports medicals for extreme sport, and for £60 I passed my full medical and started the ball rolling again.



My training would begin in earnest again, but from a much stronger position than previously. I now had 4 full winters of cold water non wetsuit experience, and had competed in more than 8 official cold water events, swimming 1km in waters from 2C to 4C without recovery issues. During the next two months I would swim at least once a week, but twice when I could. My plan was to swim 2km until water dropped to 10C, then reduce to 1600m till 7C, once below this I would swim a max of 1km every week, occasionally stepping up to 1200m depending on wind chill, air temp and other factors such as strong winds etc.

My friends were a major part of my motivation and without having our regular Sunday swim meetings at the cove, I would have found training much more difficult.

One by one my friends reduced their distances and time in the water as temp dropped into the 3's but I continued with my plan of 1km minimum distance.

The PHISH event came up in January 2018 and the temp was 4C. I swam my usual 122m, 244m, and 1km endurance with little or no recovery problem. Then on February 24th 2018 I swam the IISA UK championships in

Yorkshire, the venue where I would swim my ice mile the following week. The temp was 3.6C and my event was good. It's funny how I can't get my face in quickly when training, but during an event I'm straight in, even though it's not comfortable at first.

All the training was in place and I was ready. I work in a school for children with special needs so I always seem to have a cold or chest infection during the winter. I really didn't want one, so dosed up on vitamin C, garlic, other vitamins and looked after my diet as well as I could.

When the day finally came I had a bad night with cold sweats and was unable to sleep. I almost talked myself out of it, but Maxine made me see the error of my ways in no uncertain terms. Thank you Maxine.

We arrived in Hatfield, Yorkshire, at 8am and conditions were perfect. Temp was 4.68C, water was calm with a very slight wind, and air temp was 6.5C. All these numbers make an enormous difference if you are a cold water swimmer. The stage was set and I was up.

All the training overcame my doubts and I focussed and remembered the advice I had received from my friends. BELIEVE, KEEP THE PACE EVEN, DON'T LOOK FOR THE END, RELAX, ENJOY, TRUST YOUR TRAINING, LISTEN TO YOUR BODY, NOT YOUR MIND.



I swam to the first buoy, then the next, and then the next, always only looking that far ahead. I saw Maxine and Hywell walking along the edge of the lake with me, and that really boosted my spirits too. My fear had been to fade during the last 400m, but to my surprise I found myself comfortable throughout the whole swim except at the start where I always struggle to settle into my stroke. I had trained well and only 3 days previously had swum 35 mins in 3.5C at the Cove on an evening after a

long day, in harsh conditions. This was easier. I knew I had cracked it when I came round the second lap and could hear people shouting COME ON RAF.

I remember when I stood up and walked out, someone asked me, How was it and I said in a clear voice. Wasn't too bad.

After a swim like that I knew the after drop would set in within 10 mins or less, so even though I felt fine right then, I was whisked off in seconds to my clothes and recovery room where I had laid my stuff out beforehand in a specific order. I was changed and wrapped up like a baby with hot water bottles and so many layers that I looked like the Michelin Man from the old TV adverts, and given hot drinks and kept talking.

My recovery team Maxine, Hywel and Ally were fantastic and took total control of that side of things enabling me to just burble and shiver away till I was stable again.

My training at the Cove had allowed for 35 mins in the water at 3.5C with unassisted recovery, so I knew that on the day at 4.68C I was good for at least another 5 mins on top of that. I had done it so many times during training I knew it was in the tank. I finished in 41 mins including the acclimatising 50m to start buoy and back from finish buoy to beach.

I would advise anyone wishing to do an ice mile to take your time with training. Find out about after drop and recovery and test yourself gradually pushing the boundaries slowly but surely. Understand and learn how your own body works in this. Everyone is different and what is easy for some, is harder for others. Recovery is a serious issue and I've seen some very bad cases over the past few winters. When you get it right and you understand your limits, then the swim itself is something very very special. It's like nothing else you have ever done before.

Next goal. Well, lets see what the year brings.