



THE INAUGURAL FOUR ELEMENTS OCEAN CHALLENGE 2014 - 3 MAY 2014

The genesis of this uniquely conceived swim occurred about 3 months ago when Olivia Taylor, the 17 year-old CEO of Four Elements Conservation NPC and a pupil at Durban Girls' College, was considering an environmental awareness initiative for World Oceans Day on 8 June, a day endorsed by the United Nations. In a series of discussions Olivia had with John McCarthy (why not some kind of competition?), Rob Rusconi (I want to do a long swim in Durban) and Julian Taylor (I'm preparing for a long swim, too) she received enthusiastic support for a formal swimming event in Durban from Blue Lagoon to the north harbour wall, 7km across the Durban Bay. As Olivia's father, I didn't have much choice but to commit as well.

Olivia started ambitiously – would Lewis Pugh not come and join this modest band of swimmers? Lewis couldn't make it, so he suggested Olivia contact a few friends, some of the 'greats' of extreme open water swimming in SA: Otto Thaning and Roger Finch were very keen and then suddenly Carina Bruwer announced that she had booked flights and Olivia realised that it was getting serious. From there she recruited a small group of swimmers who not only had big names but had interesting stories to tell and a passion for the preservation of the oceans. The idea was to keep it small and manageable: 'invitation only' with no entry fee but simply a commitment to raise funding and awareness for Four Elements Conservation NPC to direct into local projects with a focus on ocean conservation in celebration of World Oceans Day. It was also intended to be more of an ocean challenge swum by a group of friends, and less of a race. However, with some of the competitive pedigree in the swim, a race was always going to be on the cards, especially after Glen Gore threw down the gauntlet to Julian.

Olivia had sponsorship meetings with Grindrod and FMI which led to the main event being funded, then Stegmann Golf, Nandos and UK-based Paragon Entertainment stepped up with support which meant that all event costs were covered and there was funding over to go straight to the local marine causes identified by Olivia (all her work is voluntary). Donations flowed in from friends, swimmers who either swam or were unable to make it, including Sasha-Lee Nordengen (who won the 7km Robben Island Freedom Swim in CT the same day as the Ocean Challenge).

Finally, the main thrust of the event was for Olivia to produce a short film for release on World Oceans Day and she secured Richard Hambloch as videographer and post-production expert - they discussed the scope of the film and its message for World Oceans Day at length. Graham Stuart was appointed photographer. After Olivia had designed and ordered the branded caps, T shirts and banners, and appointed OJ Symcox to handle PR, the final issue was to finalise the safety plan.

Safety is always important even if you have seasoned swimmers, so Durban Surf was tasked to handle safety and Jaycee Thomson took control of the process. The first kilometre from Blue Lagoon has no shark nets so we consulted the Sharks Board: May was the safest time to do the swim if the water was clear but they couldn't recommend it. Then we needed swim buoys. We were concerned that if the on-

shore winds were blowing, it would be hard to monitor swimmers, and blue bottles could be a real risk (I'm allergic to these little stingers) so we wanted a safety paddler for each swimmer. We had antihistamines on the safety IRB and ER quad bike. The currents in Durban can move very strongly, the surf can get big, so you need to know what you are doing in these conditions, especially with spring tides bedevilling conditions further. And to complicate matters, several swimmers wanted to swim more than one lap!

We approached some paddling friends, including Barry Lewin, to help us find paddlers. Pretty soon we were oversubscribed with a bunch of enthusiastic and supportive ski and board paddlers from different lifesaving and surf ski clubs around Durban. They really made a huge difference, helping to give us the line through the washes and currents and feeding us energy gels and the like. In many respects, the paddlers were the unsung donors who gave their time to support the swimmers.

Finally, Sue Taylor got roped into various forgotten roles, such as catering for over 50 people, setting up a gazebo and finishing zone, and keeping semi-official time.

Three months of intense and difficult work by Olivia included developing an 'Ocean Eye' surfboard with Spider Murphy, as an art project. Knowing that surfers are generally concerned about their ocean environment but that surfboard manufacture is not great for the environment, Olivia recycled her old 7'6" mini-mal surfboard by inserting a Perspex viewing window into the board at the level that she could see into the water while paddling. The key message in the unique design was that degradation of the earth is easy to see because species of fauna and flora are disappearing. However, in the sea we can't easily see what damage is being done to the ocean, for example, that 100 million sharks are fished out every year, 70 million of these for their fins alone. The 'Ocean Eye' is a metaphor for this dilemma, an effort to draw back the curtain on how poorly the oceans are faring.

The evening before the event, Olivia hosted an early dinner for all the participants, paddlers and safety team so that we could do a detailed safety briefing. During the evening the swimmers met each other and Olivia reminded us all why World Oceans Day and marine conservation is so important.

The next morning a light off-shore wind heralded beautiful conditions – a solid swell was running but the sea was otherwise clean, warm and glassy and would stay that way until the wind intensified and swung on-shore. John forecast that this would be around the time that those swimmers who were doing multiple laps would turn to swim back into the wind chop. How right he was.

At the sound of the hooter at Blue Lagoon 15 of us ambled into the sea (who would sprint into the sea with 7km of swimming ahead of you?!), accompanied by a sneak late entry, Jed Borrill. The safety paddlers got smoked, Savannah's ski was smashed in two, Sanele went over the falls on an outside set and had to re-equip himself. The nippers, Connor Botha, Conna Steadman, Josh Hook and Richard Taylor, all fresh from a successful SA lifesaving champs, slipped out on their Malibu boards and the inaugural Ocean Challenge had begun.

The first kilometre was optional because there are no shark nets, so most of us swam it slowly together as a warm-up. Sounds risky? More people die worldwide from toaster accidents than shark attacks every year. When did you last look at your toaster in fear?

Then the swimmers who were less inclined to swim the first kilometre joined us at backline at Laguna Beach for a wet start. I did a count of all of the competitors, ensured that they had their designated safety paddlers and the swim started in earnest.

Glen Gore, a professional triathlon and open water swimming coach with a formidable competitive track record, and Julian Taylor have an old rivalry and they chased each other for the next six kilometres each trying to break from the other in an epic battle, not for prizes, awards or glory, but for unspoken bragging rights. In the final part of the swim, Julian, who represented SA in swimming and lifesaving, and was the first person to swim 20km from Amanzimtoti to Umkomaas, succeeded in creeping ahead and pipped Glen on the line.

Meantime, not far behind them, 14 year-old Ayanda Maphumulo, a pupil at Durban Girls' College who has represented SA by swimming in the Africa Games, had the swim of her life, coming in 3rd – her longest open water swim ever prior to this was just 3km and she had been a little anxious about the conditions.

Carina Bruwer, who came in next, is based in Cape Town and is a flautist and lead musician of EQ Sterling. She has a gnarly swimming pedigree being the first woman to swim around Cape Point, 8km in freezing waters, has swum the English Channel and Robben Island 9 times - this was a breeze for her.

Joburg-based Roger Finch, better known as being the first South African to complete the Triple Crown of open water swimming, the English Channel, Catalina Island and racing 52km around Manhattan, cruised in after Carina sporting his characteristically nonchalant smile.

Lwazi Deyi, a top Masters breaststroke and medley swimmer, who initially had misgivings about being away from the comfort of a pool, powered in next having had a superb swim. I'm sure we'll see more of him in the open water swims, having reported that he would 'do it again in a heartbeat'.

Sarah Ferguson, who represented SA in swimming, followed Lwazi but didn't even stop at the finish, choosing to turn back and grind her way into the building on-shore chop. She added another 6km onto her 7km incoming swim, having been joined by dolphins for part of her swim. Sarah is preparing for a 15km swim from Umhlanga Rocks to Durban in the second half of June to raise awareness about the oceans, so this was a great tester.

At this point, there was a quick conference amongst Julian and Carina and they decided to chase Sarah 6km back to Laguna Beach – the three of them completed a massive 13km – respect to the three of them!

Following in a group together were Jill Hanass-Hancock, Heather Campbell and Wilma van Niekerk. Jill was recently awarded SA masters colours for open-water swimming, is a Midmar Mile medallist and a tireless fundraiser for the physically disabled through 'The Extra Mile'. Heather, world champion Masters swimmer, swimming coach and founder of the Dolphin Mile Swim Series in Durban, had a great warm up for her own Dolphin Mile swim event the next day. Wilma van Niekerk, who had special dispensation to wear a wetsuit because she is my swim coach and I was currying favour, is a sports teacher at Durban Girls' College where she is a bit of a folk hero, having held world titles in masters swimming and represented SA in triathlon.

Rob Rusconi, another Joburger, who has swum the SA open water 10km race at Midmar, had lost his safety paddler, liquids and nutrition, in the surf, had a great first lap notwithstanding his privations, had turned around for a second lap, so after I finished my swim, I fetched my double ski, loaded up his refreshments and paddled after him. With the chop, Rob was getting very seasick and eventually made his way to shore just short of Battery Beach after about 11km of swimming.

Terry Bantock, also from Joburg, is a regular age group medallist in the Midmar Mile and national masters swimming with some very big open water swims under his belt, took the swim easy having only done some light training, showing why he is such a good competitor.

Otto Thaning, CT-based heart surgeon, finished very fast. For a man in his 70s he really must be the informal 'godfather' of open water swimming in SA. I felt an immense privilege to have been in the water with him. When Otto speaks, you can hear a pin drop because not only has he walked the walk, he is still walking it - Robben Island, the Gibraltar crossing, the English Channel (maybe another one next year, which will make him the oldest Channelist in the world), and now the Four Elements Ocean Challenge. He and Roger Finch decided that they had only just warmed up so they turned around and swam 3km back to Durban Surf to have a beer after rounding their swim up to 10km.

Jed Borrill, who has just had a back operation and hadn't done any swimming training, told Olivia the night before that he might swim the last bit of the swim. Instead, he sneaked in quietly at the start at Blue Lagoon and completed the whole swim. Jed headed straight to the massage table for a massage with Jen, who had kindly donated her services as a physiotherapist to the tired swimmers.

John McCarthy, a very accomplished and hard core waterman who recently swam from Aliwal Shoal to the Greenpoint lighthouse, spurned the other swimmers by insisting on representing the surfing community by wearing his board shorts. He'd been delayed on the way after chasing dolphin calls and swimming through a massive shoal of fish and he got a vocal hero's welcome from his children, Jess and Guy as he completed the swim.

And my swim? Well, I had done some huge training swims with John and Julian and was feeling confident but I got cold waiting and treading water at the wet start (the Capetonians will mock me for eternity for being such a wussy). Then I started developing cramp in my legs with 5km to go, possibly exacerbated by wearing incredibly tight and anatomically poorly-designed racing jammers instead of a speedo (or board shorts!). I was in a lot of pain and considered withdrawing at Battery Beach with 4km to go. On my way in to shore I changed my mind, turned around and swam on - my daughter would kill me if I dropped out! I spent the next hour managing my stroke to try and move the cramp from my adductors, to my hamstrings, on to my calves, and then back again, so as to distribute the pain. The following day all that was stiff were my legs... Nonetheless, the conditions were exquisite, visibility was at least 15m and in the last 3km you could see the skates playing on the bottom of the striated sand, and then the fish life on Vetch's Reef. It was the longest swim of my life and I feel a great privilege to have been a part of it.

There were some common themes shared among the swimmers as we caught up at Durban Surf after the event: swimming across the Durban Bay is one of the most beautifully iconic swims we had ever done (and many of us have raced all over the world), the Durban beachfront is world-class, the format of the event was refreshing and led to us making good friends. The final judgment was that we have to do this again next year. I can't wait!

Mark Taylor