



The author swims through early morning mist on Quebec's Lac Brassard.

## The Allure of Open Water

A MASTER SWIMMER TAKES TO LAKES, RIVERS AND OPEN OCEAN WITH WRITERS AND OTHERS — SOMETIMES MANY, MANY OTHERS

**E**VEN THOUGH I'M AN AGING MIDCONTINENT Ottawa boy, I've managed to spend more than 40 years surfing and open-water swimming. My skin's a tad sun-bugged, and recently I had a dozen pre-cancerous splotches burnt off my face; my leather-chapped mug now has an even more Marlboro-Man-as-Waterman patina.

Every spring I get a little giddy about leaving the chlorine confines and flip-turns of obsessive thrice weekly, four-kilometre pool swims to head out for open water. Swimming open water is a powerful aphrodisiac; it cultivates your imagination, helps work out the kinks of living, helps you find yourself and lose yourself and takes you into the womb of nature in a profound way. It's also a form of transportation.

Wherever I travel, it has to have water. The last few summers I've been researching a new book about swimming around the world with writers — a follow up to my Australian travel memoir *House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life*. My work in progress,

*Water and Desire*, is framed by the death of my father and the birth of my grandson, North. Swimming the same waters as writers like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Lord Byron and others, I've set out on a quest to discover the meaning of life. What else?

**A FEW YEARS AGO, WHEN I QUIT COMPETITIVE** Masters Swimming in pools, medalling at the Provincial and National levels in my favourite event, the gruelling 1,500-metre freestyle, my wife Dale and I moved to our Quebec lake house, 35 minutes from Ottawa. Every second day, six months of the year, I do a four-kilometre perimeter swim of our lake in my Speedo (and at the beginning and end of swim season, in my wetsuit). I get to slip into the void, alone in the water, swimming hard enough to generate an incredible endorphin buzz and sense of well being that's totally free — and legal. And because someone laughed when I suggested I'd swim all 30 of our Federation of Val des Monts Lakes, I swam the

perimeter or length of every lake. It was more an act of promiscuity — making love to 30 different lakes. Wonderful.

Last summer, Dale and I flew to Sault Ste. Marie and then drove across the U.S. border into Michigan to Walloon Lake, where Ernest Hemingway had spent the first 18 summers of the 20th century at his family cottage. Next morning, Dale and I launched a tandem kayak so she could spot me. In calm, glassy conditions, I speared into the famously turquoise waters, swimming 10 km to Hemingway's cottage. Arm over arm for a couple of hours, I had a lot of time to soak up some Hemingway mojo. He was never happier than he was here, those first summers on this lake, learning about words, fishing, swimming, friendship, irony, pity and sex. After his stint with the *Toronto Star*, living in Paris, and then all over the world — taking in two World Wars, four marriages and writing iconic books, he put a shotgun to his head. Treading water in front of Hemingway's cottage, I realized that his life ended when he was about the same age as me. The wind came up, so I quit lollygagging, climbed into the tandem kayak with Dale and we paddled rough water back to the other end of Walloon Lake.

Next, near Ontario's Big Rideau, one of my former Carleton University writing students, Andrew Forbes, accompanied me in his kayak

for an hour-and-a-half swim around the island of his family cottage on Sand Lake. In a literary sports magazine Andrew helps edit, *The Barnstormer*, he published a funny, deep article, *The Swimmer*, about how I'd inspired him to become a writer. Although he is athletic, Andrew wouldn't call himself an open water swimmer, but in his article he nailed it:

"I try to think of things I could do for a sustained manner for an hour-and-twenty-three minutes. There aren't many. But immersion, Rick has shown me, is what's needed. Total attention to the forces beneath the surface. To dip beneath the waves and resurface only for air, and continue that way until you get there... stroke, stroke, breathe. Steadily on toward the goal. The far shore. Some days are strong headwinds, other days the water lays out flat before you, flawless as a supine page..."

**ALL SUMMER, I'D BEEN SOLO SWIMMING OUR** lake and many other Ontario and Quebec lakes, including eight-kilometre swims of the Ottawa River at my mom's cottage in Quebec. Don't ask how I convinced her, but on September 2, 2013, for the 40th anniversary of our first meeting, Dale and I flew to Hawaii so I could do the 3.84-km Waikiki Roughwater Swim with 1,100 other crazed swimmers.

Considered by many aquatic folk to be one of the most beautiful and toughest open water events in the world, the Waikiki Roughwater Swim inspired the swimming leg of the Ironman World Championship. Spiked by its inclusion in the 2008 Olympics, open water swimming is one of the fastest growing sports

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worldwide. And more and more non-competitive swimmers all over the planet are jumping into wild water to experience the joys of open water swimming.

Dale and I had spent the last two winters in Hawaii, and so doing the September Roughwater Swim had been a bit of a fantasy for me. In the dead of Hawaiian winter, I've done this swim a dozen times before, alone in the food chain, on spooky days with gnarly rips, heavy seas, sea turtles the size of flying saucers and who-knows-how-many lurking sharks.

My fit friend Bob, a local waterman who since the '70s had lived on the side of Diamond Head with the lapping Pacific at his door-

step, agreed to swim the near-four-kilometre Roughwater Swim route from Kaimana Beach near to Hilton Hawaiian Village. All year, a few times a week, Bob and his swim-buddy Claudia do various one- to three-kilometre open water swims over coral reefs, sometimes swimming through enormous swells and surf that breaks in front of their condos.

A few days before the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, and because Claudia couldn't make it that day, Bob and I set out one hot, glassy afternoon. Half a kilometre past the surfers and the stand-up paddlers, we seemed to have the entire Waikiki Bay to ourselves. Bob motored along quite fast, steadily breathing with his snorkel, not looking up but looking down into the depths, his legs pumping and his fins slashing efficiently through the ocean while I swam a mellow freestyle beside him, enjoying all the fish, sea turtles, enormous coral heads and swathes of blonde sand below. From time to time, I stopped to savour the iconic outline of Diamond Head and the impressive glass and concrete wall of Waikiki and Honolulu.

Swimming open water gives you lots of time to reflect. From my first of a dozen trips to Hawaii since 1972, my hero has been Duke Kahanamoku, arguably the world's greatest waterman. (How can you not love and admire a guy who made a career out of being a world-class beach bum?) Every swim and surf I do in Hawaii is with Duke, Hawaii's most famous son. Aside from being Olympic Water Polo gold medalist and elite Hawaiian outrigger paddler, Duke is the father of modern surfing. While the First World War raged in Europe, Duke introduced surfing to Australia. Duke is still one of the most celebrated Olympic swimmers, whose gold medal triumphs in two Olympics were only bettered at the time by his buff friend, Tarzan, Johnny Weissmuller. After their careers as Olympians and movie stars, they became friends and swam the open water of Waikiki together for years.

Two days before the Roughwater Swim, I did my last training session with another friend, Betty Ann Barnett, who was recovering from double knee surgery. Born and raised on Oahu, living on the side of Diamond Head and always in close proximity to the ocean, at 67 years of age Betty Ann is an open water swimming phenomenon.

"I need to swim every day. It gives me clarity of thought, relaxation and pleasure," she had said.

Amazingly, she has won her age division for the last 30 Roughwater Swims. Because her knees were still shaky with three pounds of metal, Betty Ann hobbled painfully across the sand to the shoreline saying, "Rick, the ▶



Richard Taylor swimming in Byron Bay, Australia.

box jellyfish are still around, so keep an eye out.” But as soon as she was in the water, she was transformed into a beautiful swimming machine.

We swam a half-kilometre into the Pacific. Floating with our heads barely chinning above the rhythm of leviathan swells heaving us all the way up and all the way down, she offered some good advice to a rookie: “Every year we fret about the best route: inside, outside, or buoy to buoy; finishing through Kaiser Bowls or along the reef to the right of the boat channel. Every year it’s a little different depending on the surf, the tide and currents. Just swim for the Twin Towers.” I eyeballed the tiny twin high-rise towers miles down the coast towards Pearl Harbour and shuddered.

The Waikiki Roughwater Swim attracts many types of water-people from around the world: loners, romantics, eccentrics, insanely obsessed nutballs, young age-group competitive swimmers, beach beauties, Bronzed Aussies, iguana-skinned octogenarians, people of all shapes and sizes. And razor fit, Speedo clad world-class open water swimmers.

#### THE MORNING OF THE RACE I WAS A MESS.

I hadn’t done a competitive swim in years. Dale and I went to see Betty Ann in her condo, where one wall was covered with open water swimming ribbons and trophies. She was so calm it was scary. I had to fake being happy about the race. We looked out at the four-kilometre Roughwater Swim route marked off all the way to Hilton Hawaiian Village where it finished at Duke Kah-

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anamoku Beach. So far, we were lucky; it was a fairly light swell without much wind, unlike another year when over 200 swimmers had to be yanked out of the water because of high surf and dangerous currents.

Thinking about years of swimming alone in glassy Ontario and Quebec lakes and rivers, I stood among a thousand swimmers milling around and waiting to go off in heats of about 200. Because of my fairly fast time, I was in the second heat with a couple of hundred other nervous swimmers. We lined up along the sand at Kaimana Beach, made famous by author Robert Louis Stevenson who had spent an idyllic five weeks here in 1893. He wrote about how clear and perfect the water was for sea bathing, but he wasn’t racing open water with a thousand other swimmers all the way to the other side of Waikiki.

After the gun sounded, it was like being poured out of a huge pail of minnows — thrashing arms, legs and feet in the face as we funnelled through a gap in the coral reef. Out half-a-kilometre to the first turn, there were even a few dolphins.

On the three-kilometre straight stretch, to keep my mind off the pain of swimming so fast for over an hour, I watched hundreds of

shimmering fish above the reef. I was trying not to kick too hard, worried my legs would cramp and I’d have to be airlifted out of the ocean in the fetal position. I stroked on, and looked over one shoulder to see three fiendish swimmers drafting off me. So I veered to the left and then to the right to shake them off my tail.

I kept lifting up my head hoping to see the halfway marker, imagining that I’d already passed it and I was going much faster than I expected, imagining I’d win my age group, imagining I was swimming like Duke Kahanamoku. I was giving my winning speech when I finally spotted the big markers. I was only halfway and already I was just about spent, so I had to concentrate on finding my focus and maintaining my pace.

Then, miraculously, a beautifully fit woman in a sports bikini that could fit into a teacup was swimming beside me, shapely arms and legs pumping, and suddenly my pain was forgotten. I could pace myself on her and concentrate on her perfect form.

On an incoming tide, I made the final half-kilometre turn, catching a bit of push from the surf at Kaiser Bowls but getting caught in the backwash that slowed me down. Mercifully, I didn’t see the hammerhead shark some of the other swimmers spotted. I stroked over the shallow coral reef just below my body then almost did a face plant into the sand as I lurched up and raggedly galloped with my spindly, cramping legs to the finish line on Duke Kahanamoku Beach, trying to maintain my Duke demeanour. I finished 327th out of 983 finishers. As usual, Betty Ann won her age division, about eight minutes faster than me. As usual, Betty Ann was so gracious and humble about winning.

#### THE NEXT MORNING, STILL PUMPED AND

buzzed, I decided to go for a soul surf. Like a dopey idiot, I kept whistling the rhythmic riff from Supertramp’s ‘70s song, *Fools Overture*, as I walked along the Waikiki seawall to the huge statue of the legendary Hawaiian waterman, Duke Kahanamoku. His neck was wreathed in flower leis left by mostly clueless tourists. I remembered a line about Duke — open water swimming was his shrine. Suddenly I realized that Betty Ann was much closer to the heroic ideal of Duke than I would ever be.

Down on the beach I rented a 10-foot surfboard, waxed it up and did a half-sprint spear into the shore break. I happily paddled out into a sea of turquoise, sapphire, emerald and indigo, so much open water filled with so much life-enhancing mana. ■