

Swim Through 'The Sanctuary'

by Chuck Douros

Bruckner Chase, of Ocean City, New Jersey, is a solo marathon, open water swimmer and ocean ambassador. He's a USMS member, coach and founder of Ocean City Swim Club, a USMS team. Chase is also a registered professional member of the U.S. Lifeguard Association.

Since January 1, 2010, Chase has logged more than 850 miles swimming; mostly in the open ocean, and usually without a wetsuit. In a typical week, he'll swim 20 to 30 miles, often in the Atlantic Ocean off the New Jersey shore. By his own admission, he is just as at-home today in the 56-degree F water of the open ocean as he was as a young boy in warmer waters of the community pool.

Chase's passion for distance swimming is a perfect complement to his love of the ocean. He believes, whether we live in Akron or Aptos, we share an intimate connection with the ocean. "The ocean can be a classroom for life. I want to inspire people to be more connected with the ocean," he says, adding, "I want people to get beyond the waves and the whitecaps, both literally and metaphorically. Whether it is a novice swimming between the breakers or someone attempting their first 1-mile swim, I want people to think about what it is they can do. Whatever it takes to have them feel a connection to the ocean while reaching their own potential, it's worth it."



Swim Through The Sanctuary: Santa Cruz to Monterey Bay

The marathon swimmer's most challenging endurance event took place on August 24, 2010. Chase successfully swam 26 miles through the chilly waters of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary in California. He entered the water at Main Beach, Santa Cruz and emerged, stumbling onto San Carlos Beach in Monterey, 14 hours later. The August swim, dubbed, Swim Through the Sanctuary, was his second attempt and is only the second time the swim has been successfully completed.

The goal, according to Chase, "Was not to be the first or second, the fastest, the longest, or even the only one to do it." Instead, Chase wants to attract people to the water. "Not only do I want to bring awareness to the amazing Monterey Bay and the National Marine Sanctuaries, I want to get people to think about what they can do."

In 2009, Chase's first attempt at this swim was cut short after he endured intensely painful jellyfish stings, 6 hours (12 miles) into the swim. The venom accumulated in his body and short-circuited his natural ability to stay warm. Chase experienced an accelerated onset of hypothermia. "I knew that something wasn't right," he recalls. He noticed a loss of motor control to his fingertips and a general disorientation. Simultaneously, his crew noticed a diminished stroke count. "I notified my crew and they agreed with my assessment. My wife, Michelle, made the call to bring me in the boat."

In 1980, Chase's friend and fellow marathon swimmer Cindy Cleveland was the first and only other person to complete the swim. Cleveland completed it in an estimated 15 hours.

Anything But a 'Solo' Marathon Swim

Chase is anxious to set the record straight about the August, 2010 swim in California. "They called this a solo marathon swim. It was absolutely not a solo event," he said. "I would never head out across Monterey Bay by myself. It's a ropes course, to the extreme. I have to depend on my team."

Chase carefully selected his team for the swim. He studied what went wrong last year and understands his limitations. "One of the key things about a successful open ocean swim is knowing your limitations and what you expect to come up against. Then build your team to fill in the gaps," he said.

His team for the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary swim included Pat Roach, a Coast Guard rescue swimmer; Bruckner's wife, Michelle, herself an accomplished swimmer; a camera crew that documented the swim; and other ocean rescue professionals from Santa Cruz and New Jersey.

During the final mile of the swim, Bruckner was accompanied by Dan Basta, Director of NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries; William Douros, West Coast Regional Director for NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries; Justin Keney, Director of Communications for NOAA, and; Kelley Gleason, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries staff member.

Research Vessel Fulmar

To ensure a safe and successful swim, Chase's team deployed a really big secret weapon. In partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Chase had constant ocean support from NOAA's regional operations team aboard the Research Vessel Fulmar, a 67-foot vessel owned and operated by NOAA. The NOAA vessel provided Chase's support team with a formidable ocean presence, including reconnaissance of jellyfish and stinging nettles, monitoring the current, evaluating water temperature, and helping the team assess the swim route during the marathon swim.

“Who better to turn to for weather, current and ocean condition reports, than NOAA,” Chase admits. “I'd rather swim a half-mile out of the way, because of information provided by [the Fulmar], than swim through the jellies, like I did last year.”

According to Douros, the MBNMS vessel supports science, monitoring and general surveillance for three National Marine Sanctuaries on the central coast: Monterey Bay, Gulf of the Farallones, and Cordell Bank. It sails 180 days a year, covering an area greater than 8,000 square miles.

Endurance

The Swim Through the Sanctuary was rife with hazards besides wildlife and weather. Marathon athletes, while competing for hours-and-hours, must maintain a healthy level of nutrition, hydration and fuel to keep the pace. Solo marathon swimmers are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to refueling. It is difficult to simultaneously swim, eat and breathe. In cold-water swims under English Channel rules, stopping to eat means treading water, unassisted. Going vertical in the water means more of the body's surface area is exposed to the cold water, which could quicken the onset of hypothermia.

To answer this challenge, Chase's strategy was to stay horizontal on the water as long as possible during the swim. Every 30 minutes, he was thrown a bottle of Gu Brew, a liquid recovery drink made with a mix of carbohydrates, protein, amino acids and vitamins. Once per hour, he was thrown a Gu gel pack to help maintain the calories he needed to burn swimming and staying warm. To offset hunger pangs, Chase's team sent bananas and strawberries—soft fruit that was easy to eat under the circumstances.

Visibility

Chase began the swim in the pitch dark, pre-dawn hours. Until the sun rises, especially in choppy water and foggy conditions, maintaining visibility is a challenge for both the swimmer and the crew. For this, Bruckner used compact waterproof strobes clipped to his goggle strap and waistband. Glowsticks around his wrist made it easier for his team to count his strokes.

Reflection

“This is by far the hardest thing I have ever attempted, and accomplished,” Chase says about the swim. “I've done 100-mile runs that took more than 24 hours. I've had to wrap my head around competing continuously from sunrise to sunset. I've swum shore-to-shore in Tahoe. I've contended with dangerous ocean wildlife and weather conditions. Last year, I had a pod of Orcas just 400 yards in front of me for the Monterey swim, and I endured the jellyfish as long as I could. This year, I had to make the difficult decision to put on a wetsuit because the jellies were so thick. It became less about competing, and more about bringing awareness to the National Marine Sanctuaries, so it was the right thing to do.”

He continued, “This isn't like Everest or the English Channel where people come up and down all the time. This has only been done once before. There's always comfort when many people have done something and shown that others can do it. It paves the way—makes it easier.”

Chase goes out of his way to continuously remind people that he is not interested in drawing attention to himself. Instead, he is quick to redirect attention to the water he loves so much.

“There was a time when I looked at the ocean from the shore in Santa Cruz and saw nothing but cold, dark, intimidating water where I knew there were sharks and jellyfish,” he admits. “It wasn't until I connected with it, that I realized it is an amazing place; a true sanctuary. Our lives depend on the health of the ocean,” he says.

Chase feels differently now: “Now when I look out, I don't see cold, dark, intimidating waters. I see beautiful whitecaps and amazing wildlife. ... Last year, as I was being stung by jelly after jelly, I saw some amazing stingrays gliding along with me and Orcas out ahead of me.”

Since the August Swim Through the Sanctuary in California, Chase has taken on the friendlier waters in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and completed a 9-mile swim to kick off the National Marine Sanctuary project, “If Reefs Could Talk,” NOAA's 10-day expedition in the underwater Aquarius laboratory. Chase has his eye on summitting similar swims in other protected areas in the National Marine Sanctuary system in the near future.