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Photo by Michelle Evans-Chase

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Photo by Patricia Santucci

Cover: Photo by Anthony Skorochod.

# liberty sports magazine

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LSM omissions and corrections: The staff of Liberty Sports Magazine would like to apologize for any misquotes, misrepresentations, and general mistakes which we may have overlooked.

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# Finding the Longest Distance to the Finish Line

By Bruckner Chase

I hit the first jellyfish at 4:30 in the morning. I hit the next one at 4:31. By 5:30 when the sun was rising I had lost count of the stings. When I could finally see into the cold darkness of Monterey Bay, our plans for an uneventful twenty-five mile swim across the Bay crashed. Below me were schools of jellyfish as dense as anything I had ever seen, and as the sun rose in the calm waters the jellies rose to the surface as well. When I describe the scene in presentations I tell the audience to imagine everyone they see is a jellyfish, and I then tell them to imagine those jellyfish being bigger than those people. When I describe the experience to fellow triathletes I ask them to imagine competing in an Ironman distance triathlon with a hornets nest strapped to your back.

Long before I was learning to identify jellyfish by feel and sting intensity I was a first time triathlete nervously looking out over a lake in Arkansas hoping to survive my first 400 meter open water swim. Years before that lake it was a first 10k run in Tennessee followed by a marathon in Melbourne, Australia at the age of 16. Even at the sports I chose back then, I was less than mediocre. The 10k was fifty minutes, and the marathon was five hours. As endurance athletes we don't suffer from a lack of time to reflect and contemplate the demons and doubts that surface during the toughest training sessions and the hardest races. After three decades of endorphin fixes on the roads, along the trails and in the oceans, my personal demons are not anything out "there."

They are the fears I carry with me. Choosing to move forward in the face of that fear, despite the uncertainty, is what continues to drive me forward.

I came from a family of non-athletes, and a high school varsity letter was never on the table. My early memories of sports involve stinging eyes and last place finishes. As an adolescent swimmer and two brief years as a tennis player, I hated to run. Needless to say I should have looked more closely at each sport's requirements before I dove in. I was just like every other teenager trying to figure out what life was supposed to look like, and felt that I didn't belong in a world ruled by the football, basketball and baseball jocks. I was a high school exchange student living in Australia when running and training became my thing thanks to my host father, a quirky runner himself. I ended up on the starting line of the Big M Melbourne Marathon after just a few weeks of training. The plan was to just see how far I could go, and I had a ride waiting for me at the halfway point. Halfway came and went, and each step beyond that self-imposed limit took me further into a realm of infinite potential. Marathon's were the domain for the superfit, and triathlons in 1983 were even further on the fringe, pursued only by people you only saw on TV. After five hours I limped across the marathon finish line transformed. Without limits set by anyone but myself, anything seemed possible. Uncertainty was no longer a reason to stop. Uncertainty became the reason to move forward and explore.





When I returned to the States I plunged deeper into endurance sports, and I was hungry to learn everything I could along the way. I ran a second marathon my senior year logging more miles than the cross-country team, and unwilling to let someone tell me how far, how fast or when. My first triathlon soon followed, and I realized it was hard to shake the negative self-images created as an early teen. In 1984 the top of the line bike was a 10-speed, and the most popular upgrade was cork handlebar tape. Walking through that first transition area preparing for a quarter-mile swim, 12 mile bike, and 3 mile run, my fear was not finishing, or, worse, finishing last. I did not win, but finishing in the top twenty put me a long way from last. More importantly I learned a lesson that I repeat to new open water swimmers even today: the scariest things in the water are usually the thoughts and fears we bring with us from the shore.

Eventually my triathlon career encompassed everything from Ironman distance races, to sprints, to overall wins, and to course records. Ironically, through all those years the swim was something to be survived. I took to the bike quickly, but even back then I got to see how extraordinary truly gifted athletes can be. The kid I seemed to race most often in Texas was Lance Armstrong, and at fifteen he was minutes faster than almost everyone else on the bike. I was good, but I was not great. I was, however passionate about every step I took and every mile I covered. As a result I discovered how much each of us impacts those around us just by showing up. I became an age group swim coach and fitness trainer out of college, and I found that we all need a little passion in our lives. Guided by that philosophy, how far or how fast meant less than how the pursuits could positively impact our lives and the lives of those around us.

Long before the oceans took over my life I was learning to go with the flow. When transition areas began to feel too crowded I discovered a new passion in trail running. According to Thoreau, “The swiftest traveler is he that travels on foot,” and the further I began to run the less the destination even mattered. Miles alone in the mountains seemed the ultimate immersion in the natural world. On favorite trails I knew every turn and every stone, and I reveled in this new connection to my environment. As I discovered 50 and 100-mile runs they came with a whole new peer group in ultra-distance running. Most of us celebrated at the finish line, but in all those years I never heard stories of placing and times. It was always the miles in between the sunrises that mattered.

After years of being landlocked and hardly touching chlorine I was forced back to the pool while recovering from what would become my last ultra-distance run. I had always preached that swimming is one of those rare activities that we can take with us for a lifetime. Water demands an athlete’s full attention, and the medium is as happy to stop forward progress as it is to pull you under. When swimming moves beyond the pool, anything becomes possible. At times knowledge lets the old guys rule and at other times distance and conditions give women the edge. I had originally come to open water swimming as a triathlete just wanting to get to his bike. This time I came to the ocean seeking the opportunity to discover what was beneath every wave. As it turns out, those years of IV’s at finish lines were an indicator that my body runs hot, and in the fifty-degree waters off Northern California, the last of my triathlete perspectives on open water were tossed aside with my wetsuit. I do not believe there is a more intimate connection to the natural world than that experience by a long distance swimmer immersed in their environment.

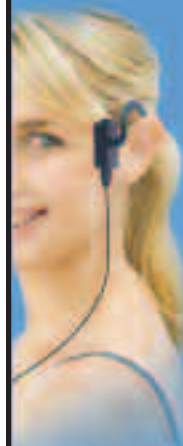


We can recognize temperature changes of a single degree, and like delicate coral we can either thrive or die with the subtlest changes in the water. At the same time, we are the invasive species, and if we are striving to be ocean conquerors we all may lose in the end.

A desire to positively impact how we feel, think and act towards the oceans is what landed me in Monterey Bay on August 24, 2010 amongst what we calculated later to be hundreds of thousands of jellyfish. Since discovering a passion for all things aquatic I had landed in waters around the world from England to Alaska and from New Jersey to Hawaii. In all those travels there was something special about my first home waters of Monterey Bay. Cold, dark and filled with wildlife, the Bay is both the scariest and most exciting environment I have ever encountered. The Bay had taught me how to find serenity in chaos and focus in the face of fear. The swim across Monterey Bay was a once in a lifetime chance for an adventure that would help launch the BLUE Ocean Film Festival and highlight the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program. The swim would also cross the largest of NOAA's fourteen National Marine Sanctuaries, special protected places from Stellwagen Bank off Cape Cod to Fagatele Bay in American Samoa.

To start the fourteen hours it took to swim from Santa Cruz to Monterey, I watched the sunrise to my left over the mountains and the moonset over the Pacific. Aside from the ever-present jellyfish we encountered blue whale, seals, dolphins, rays, sunfish and the immensity of the deepest underwater canyon on the west coast. We never saw a great white, but a couple of tracking tags would later show there were at least a couple swimming through on their way to the Farallones. Getting across that Bay was the hardest thing I have ever faced physically, mentally and emotionally. My wife, Michelle, has been with me on every swim, and I believe she and the crew suffered even more than I did on the support boat and kayaks over the course of that day. What had always been something that connects Michelle and I became something that would connect us to far more once we stood together on the beach in Monterey.

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The swim was covered by the press, but somewhat isolated to the water. Once accomplished, the story and experience our crew shared reached millions and made the news on both coasts. Michelle and I both feel an intimate connection to the ocean, and in one day that passion changed our lives. Jacques Cousteau once said, "When one man, for whatever reason is given the opportunity to live an extraordinary life, he has no right to keep it to himself."

The director of the National Marine Sanctuary program was with me on the beach in Monterey. His goal to connect people to the places he is charged with protecting has made our shared connection to the oceans my full time job. In the last twelve months I have traveled and swum in waters from California to Key Largo and from Greece to Washington DC. Along the way I have given presentations to thousands of individuals and even spoken at the National Aquarium's Shark Weekend. Ironically it is the smallest and most remote National Marine Sanctuary, Fagatelle Bay in American Samoa, that is now my life's calling.

In May of this year I found myself heading to Pago Pago to attempt a swim between two islands that the Samoan's thought was impossible if not deadly. More important than the swim was the preceding week spent speaking to the Governor's Ocean Forum and to 5,000 of the Territory's youth. The cultural history of American Samoa goes back 3,000 years, and there is a spiritual connection between the people, the island, and the ocean that makes more than just Fagatelle Bay a special place. The swim from Aunu'u to Utulei was the scariest swim I have ever been on. Many Samoans talked about sharks, but our research showed maybe one attack in a hundred years. Aside from the sharks, I feared swimming across a section of water that no one had swum in thousands of years. While the Monterey Bay's jellies taught me to find serenity in chaos, the people and waters of American Samoa restored my faith.

Throughout the swim I was accompanied by the entire Marine Rescue division, the Commissioner of Police, a television crew, Sanctuary staff, my best friend and Michelle. As I left the safety of Aunu'u's harbor and the coral reef dropped away, it was not the boats that made me feel safe; it was the purpose. We were out there to show the younger Samoans what could be accomplished when individuals and a community respect and embrace their connection to the ocean. There is a strength in American Samoa that I have not seen many other places. This small group of islands in the South Pacific continues to survive and thrive despite tsunamis, crashing economies, and changing ocean systems on which their lives depend. I am convinced that their strength comes from embracing a deeply spiritual connection to their families, community and environment.

On the one-year anniversary of swimming Monterey Bay I was again crossing the Pacific, but this time by plane heading back to American Samoa. At the Governor's request and with the American Samoa Department of Commerce's blessing we are launching the Toa ole Tai youth program. Samoan for "Ocean Heroes," the program is grounded in the culture and community of Samoa while teaching ocean conservation, swimming, and marine safety to the 34 percent of the population that is under the age of eighteen. In May the village of Aunu'u bestowed me with the title of "Matai," chief, and the Samoan name, Uile ole Sami, which translates as, "Electricity in the Ocean." As a youth I never dreamed of becoming a South Pacific chief, and in Tennessee there weren't that many mentors who travelled the world to understand and protect the world's oceans.

Inevitably I will continue to find myself staring out at the ocean in the middle of the night pointed towards a goal I can not see but believe is there. I still can't predict the chaos, but there will be a passion driving every stroke.

To follow Bruckner's work in American Samoa, with Special Olympics International, and at home on the East Coast, visit [www.brucknerchase.com](http://www.brucknerchase.com) and [www.libertysportsmag.com](http://www.libertysportsmag.com).