

Long Distance Training Camps: a Subjective Comparison

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This paper is based primarily on my own experiences of three long distance swim training campsⁱ which I participated in from April – June 2010, both as part of my own training for an English Channel swim in August 2010, and as part of a sociological research project on the process of becoming a Channel swimmerⁱⁱ. The three camps were:

- Swimtrek Long Distance Training Camp (Gozo, Malta), 10-15 April, 2010
- Sal's Open Water Swim Camp (Jersey), 30 May – 4 June, 2010
- Ned Denison's Long Distance Swim Campⁱⁱⁱ (Cork, Ireland), 11-20 June, 2010

Each of the camps provides the opportunity to swim in a variety of stunning locations and to experience swimming in a range of conditions; however, they differ significantly in terms of costs, goals, participants, support, required swim standard, scheduling etc. In highlighting these differences, I am not suggesting that one is any better than another, but rather, that one may be more suitable than another at a given point in a swimmer's training process. The purpose of these notes, therefore, is to compare the three camps from a swimmer's perspective with the goal of offering feedback to the organisers of each camp, and also to aid prospective participants in choosing the camp(s) most appropriate for their goals / experience / swimming standard. It is important to note, however, that this is a subjective account and others may well have experienced the camps differently.

Costs

Swimtrek: c. £800 (5 day camp, including registration fees, hotel accommodation and flights; excluding evening meals)

Jersey: c. £1200 (6 days, including registration, hotel accommodation and flights; excluding lunch and dinner)

Cork: c. £600 (9 days, including registration fees, travel costs, ferry, campsite fees; excluding meals)

Higher costs by no means represent poor value for money, and staying in hotel or rental accommodation would have pushed up the costs of the Cork trip further. However, absolute costs are undoubtedly a factor for many people, for whom Channel swimming is already an expensive pastime.

Temperature and distance

Both the Swimtrek and Jersey camps involved similar distances / time in the water (c. 18 hours of swimming, and (in my case) approximately 50km of swimming), although in Malta,

this was in a more compressed timeframe than Jersey. In Cork, I did 33 hours of swimming over the 9 days, covering approximately 100km.

In Malta, the swimming was all in salt water, in temperatures ranging from 13-15 degrees. In Jersey, the sea was slightly cooler (12-14 degrees), and in Cork, sea temperatures ranged from 11-14 degrees, with fresh water swims going up to 16 degrees.

Aims and objectives

The primary goal of the Swimtrek camp is the completion of the 6 hour qualification swim (for the English Channel, or a similar marathon swim) – a goal which structures the swim programme and for which swimmers need to be thoroughly prepared in order to get the most of it. This is complemented by the goals of trying to equip participants, through a series of seminars, with the information and skills that they need to train for, and complete, an English Channel swim (or similar). The Cork camp also culminated in a 6 hour swim, but this was just one element of the camp, where we swam considerable distances every day, and then did a 6 hour swim on top, with endurance the key focus of the camp as a whole, rather than qualification. In contrast, the Jersey camp had much more diverse goals based on the needs of swimmers with a much wider range of swimming experience. These included, for example, individual time-in-the-water PBs ranging from 30 minutes up to multiple hours; building open water confidence and skills; and early season acclimatisation. Whereas both the Swimtrek and Cork camps were very time-oriented, the Jersey camp was more relaxed, focusing instead on individual PBs rather than a single group-wide goal of X hours.

Participants

The camps appeal to different, but overlapping, cohorts of swimmers. The Swimtrek camp comprised largely of individuals who did not know each other prior to the camp and most of whom were aspiring Channel swimmers. This particular group was predominantly men, but the gender break-down of these camps varies from week to week; the following week, for example, had a much higher proportion of women. The majority of the participants were tackling a six hour swim for the first time, and the degree of open water experience and long distance training prior to the camp varied significantly among the participants, with approximately half completing the six hour swim. In the case of both the Jersey and Cork camps, the participants were comprised primarily of local swimmers already involved in those swimming communities, plus a small handful of visitors. In Jersey, this included a very wide range of swimmers (in terms of ability and experience, and including children), with a fairly even mix of men and women. In Cork, a cohort of local aspiring and experienced Channel swimmers who had been training together for some time formed the core of the group. Although there was a lot of very competitive swimming among the faster swimmers, the time-based nature of the swims meant that slower swimmers with good endurance could fully participate. The majority of the swimmers on the Cork camp were men.

Coaching

The Jersey camp had daily pool sessions that were focused on both general swimming technique and skills specific to open water swimming, while in Malta, the guides used below- and above-water filming which was then collectively reviewed and discussed with a view to improving technique and preventing injury. In Cork, there was no coaching or stroke correction component, although there was one short presentation on hypothermia.

Safety Cover

While all the camps emphasised the need for participants to take responsibility for their own safety, there was considerable variation in the degree to which the camps facilitated this. The Swimtrek camp had a very strong safety presence, with three guides watching closely over 15 swimmers, with the use of two, and sometimes three, safety boats within a bay or stretch of coastline. Participants are also given detailed safety briefings and can summon help quickly if they get into difficulty because of the presence of motorised safety boats. In Jersey, there was much more emphasis on the self-management of personal safety (for example, by swimming in groups); some safety cover in the form of kayaks was also present, especially for some of the less confident swimmers. Volunteers also kept a list of who was in the water during a swim, ticking off names when people exited in order to be sure that everyone had got out safely. In Cork, we had occasional kayak support, and on one occasion, motorised boats, but there was relatively little formal safety cover overall, beyond being advised to swim in groups. This is made very clear in advertising materials for the camp, and most swims also took place in locations where swimmers could exit the water if in difficulty and call to another swimmer for help.

Scheduling and Organisation

The Swimtrek trip was tightly scheduled, including both swims and seminars, leaving very little leisure time (although the last day of the camp was a leisurely trip to the island of Comino). Participants were transported to and from swim locations, as well as being provided with swim feeds, plus snacks and hot drinks post-swim. The Jersey camp was also very active with a full schedule, but much more relaxed and free-flowing, with social activities emerging in the moment and very flexibly. Some feeds were provided for those doing longer swims, and non-local participants had to either make their own way to swim locations, or, more often, were able to arrange lifts with local swimmers. Cork, in comparison, had a full schedule of early morning and late evening swims (plus longer weekend swims), but with the days entirely free and unstructured. Participants were responsible for getting themselves to the different swims, and had to provide their own in-water and post-swim food and drinks. There were, however, socialising opportunities, particularly after weekend swims, and on two occasions, over dinner at the homes of local swimmers.

Summary

Swimtrek

The Swimtrek camp offers an opportunity to get the 6 hour qualification swim done early in the season, in warmer waters than in the UK for that time of year. It is a great confidence-builder, and gives swimmers a good chance to evaluate their progress so far, with sufficient time remaining before the Channel swimming season to make meaningful changes to training plans. The camp is quite short, and several participants had underestimated how demanding it would be. In my experience, good preparation is essential to get the most out of it and this could perhaps be emphasised more in the promotional materials. It is a very safety conscious, smoothly run camp in a lovely location, and the guides are very experienced swimmers and coaches. It's also a great chance to meet a cohort of people who are going to be swimming the Channel that season, creating networks of support extending beyond the camp itself.

Jersey

The Jersey camp offers some beautiful swimming locations, an incredibly welcoming and sociable swimming community, sea temperatures slightly above those in England for the same time of year, and an opportunity to build confidence and skills in the sea, especially for those with less experience. For those training for the Channel, the slightly higher sea temperatures make this an opportunity to do longer swims than are possible in Dover at that time, plus there are several very experienced Channel swimmers within the Jersey swimming community from whom to learn. As well as the swim programme, there is a strong emphasis on this camp on the pleasures of open water swimming, as well as a substantial social element to the camp. In hindsight, in terms of my two-year training plan for the Channel, I think it would have been more beneficial to me to do this camp in my first training year, while I was still relatively inexperienced in sea swimming.

Cork

Like the other two camps discussed here, the Cork week offers the opportunity to swim in some stunning locations; indeed, as the longest of the three camps, this included the widest variety of locations, including both sea and fresh water swims. This was by far the toughest of the training camps I've been on, with the relentless routine of morning and evening swims making significant physical and psychological demands that were unlike anything else I've experienced in training to date. This is not a week that would suit everyone, in terms of the distances covered (not everyone subscribes to a training regime based on such long distances), and the general autonomy required of swimmers. The promotional materials for the week make this very clear, as well as emphasising that participants should have done another, more formally organised camp before attending this one – a sentiment that I would also endorse. I definitely would not have been ready to do this in 2009, but found it to be excellent preparation for my Channel swim in 2010, both in terms of physical conditioning and in confidence-building.

In conclusion, I don't think that attending one or more training camps is essential to a successful Channel swim. However, especially for someone like me who has very limited local access to decent open water swimming locations and who lives miles from the sea, the camps were a valuable opportunity to get some variation into my training, to build my skills

and confidence, and to test my limits under a range of different conditions. I learned a lot and met a lot of great people along the way. Not everyone will have the opportunities that I have had to participate in so many camps, but I hope that this brief report will help others decide which, if any, would be most appropriate for them, and at what point in their training.

I would like to thank everyone at Swimtrek (especially camp guides Mia Russell, Nick Adams, Andy Williams and Freda Streeter), Sally Minty-Gravett and everyone at the Jersey Long Distance Swimming Club, and Ned Denison and the many other swimmers in Cork for their work in organising and running the camps, and allowing me to come along as both a swimmer and as a researcher.

You can find out more about my own experiences of the camps at my blog (www.thelongswim.blogspot.com), and about my ongoing ESRC-funded research on the project webpage (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/channelswimmer>). If you have any questions about this report or about the research more generally, you can contact me directly at the details below:

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ⁱ The organisers / coaches for these three camps have read and commented on this paper.

ⁱⁱ I have to declare an interest in both the Swimtrek long distance training camp (on which I will be working as a guide in April 2011), and Sal's Open Water Swim Camp (which I will be attending as a helper in June 2011). This paper was written prior to agreeing those commitments.

ⁱⁱⁱ The materials for 2011 describe this event as a "swimming week" rather than a camp to reflect the less formal nature of the event. For reasons of concision, I have used the term "camp" when talking about the three events, but this is an important distinction in terms of the levels of formal support and instruction provided, as described in the paper.