

## ROTTNEST CROSSING 2006

While it's fresh in my brain I'll write down an account of this year's Rottneest swim, especially for all the well-wishers who phoned and emailed me before the event.

The plan was that Steve (boat skipper once again), Fiona (paddling), Foz and Jock (reserve paddlers) and I would all meet up in Fremantle on Friday night for the traditional carbo meal. Everyone had obviously been watching the weather patterns carefully all week including Foz and Jock who suddenly phoned in to say they couldn't make it. Fiona was not very pleased about this, as we sat on the boat in the howling southerly punching in a new set of GPS waypoints. To the rescue came Troy and Will, who had been possible the day before and obviously hadn't seen the forecast (Troy wanted to paddle his surfboard beside me). Eventually we all got together and had a solid Italian meal with a team of 4 from Margaret River, and talked about everything except the weather. I was still hoping that the forecast was wrong and that at least a south-easterly would help us across. I'd trained for a sub-5 hour swim and hadn't thought much about non-perfect conditions.

We slept at a friend's house in Cottesloe, and Deb dropped us down to the beach at 4.30 with plenty of time to prepare. The southerly was in already, we all knew then there was no chance of an easterly. Fiona was happy about the waves, they were small enough to get the ski through the surf, her second greatest fear, after sharks. There were lots of well-wishers and familiar faces at the start and pretty soon all the sunblock and Vaseline was on, the timing strap was around the ankle and I was wondering if I should start with a rashvest on for insulation. I'd taken nutrition more seriously this year and had been filling up on energy food and electrolytes, and seasick tablets, which last year I forgot. Looking at the sea I was sure it wasn't going to be as bad as the 2003 conditions, when I took nearly 8 hrs in a NW wind, and decided not to wear the rashie. I helped Fiona launch the ski, and off she went, repeating her instructions to pick me up at the front of the pack, south side. Then all the male solos lined up, joking nervously and counting down to the 5.45am start. The organizers did a good job of keeping a clearway for swimmers, with patrol zodiacs insisting that offending boats move out. We could see the tallship Leuwin moored at 1.5km, the point at which only swimmers with support boats could pass.

Finally the hooter sounded and we were off, the first thing I noticed was the warm water and I knew I didn't need the rashie. The roar from the crowd (or something) seemed to last for a while, and there was a healthy pace at the front to get out of trouble. The swell was much more than it had seemed from the beach, and I had a few bad thoughts about a long battering ahead. I kept to the south of the clearway and didn't stop, knowing that Fiona would look for me at the front. Soon she was there on my right, and I didn't have to look forwards anymore, trying to find a 4-strokes to one breath rhythm. All the wind and wave action was coming from the south, my left side, just as well as I can only breathe on the right. I was trying to find a pace which was steady but not tiring, the focus this year was to be comfortable at 15km, for a change. Five minutes went by and I couldn't see any other swimmers, and never did for the rest of the race. No stingers yet, felt good, it was all going to plan. Fiona had spotted the boat, and soon they joined us, bright yellow wet weather gear easy to pick in the gloom. I was thinking who else would be near the front, but quickly banished those thoughts, the first 10km were not a race, just a slow steady pace. We must have passed the Leuwin on the left, I didn't notice her at all.

The ski was pitching up and down, I could see the nose appear through waves and then disappear into a trough, but she hadn't fallen off and I hadn't felt nauseas. I kept the pace going, knowing it was steady but not tiring, and hoping I could keep it going in the swell. I thought the kms were around 15 or 16 minutes, and handed over my wristwatch which I'd started at the beach. I stopped a couple of times to pull my cap down, it was slowly working its way off, dragging the goggles upwards as well. We got to 3km, which was where the vomiting started last year, and still felt good, stopping for the first drink. I still couldn't see any other boats, let alone swimmers, due to the swell. I noticed it getting lighter, and plenty of cloud cover, so sunburn wouldn't be significant. Surprisingly I could see the seabed for most of the way, the sand ripples were not quite north-south, or else this was a dud GPS

course. Trying not to think of the distance elapsed yet, we kept going, often I'd be quite a bit in front of the ski, knowing that Fiona was struggling to keep it punching across the wind and to keep level with me. The swell got larger as we went, and occasionally one would break over me, and I'd look across to see how Fiona handled it. The only thing I could think of was to try long slow strokes and keep the hands moving water for as long as possible, and up in the air as little as possible. I wondered how Troy was going on the boat, he reckoned he wouldn't get sick, but he was standing up. There were helicopters flying over with ad banners but I couldn't read them; any distraction was welcome. I was stopping every 2km for drinks and getting distance updates every km from the boat. Soon 5km had gone, and I still felt OK, no shoulder pain, if I still felt like this at 15km I knew I could finish strongly. The legs were doing nothing, just flicking along, not worth wasting energy there. The cap was still slipping off, so I pulled it down hard at the front and it never moved again. Usually big waves give me lower back pain, but so far, none, probably the 30km training per week in January was paying off.

Fiona got knocked off by a wave and I did the dedicated swimmer, bad husband thing and kept swimming. She soon caught up but from then on got cold from the wind. I remember her saying 9 km gone, which was nice, I thought it was about 8, usually I'm over-hopeful with the distance. I stopped for food soon after, and Will said "almost at the 10k mark". I asked what the time was, and he gave me the time of the day, 8.15, so I worked out that was 2 hrs 30, quicker than I expected. Getting past half way is a big psychological victory, and that kept me going for a while, but I could feel the fatigue starting, and each km seemed to take longer. Steve said later that the pace and stroke count dropped off a bit around 14km, but then picked up again. At 12 km, Fiona got too cold and swapped with Will, who had a full length wetsuit. They had to change the seat position on the ski and I swam on alone for a while. Will kept tipping over and kept me entertained between bouts of vomiting, from swallowing seawater. Every time I saw the paddle vertical in the air behind a wave I knew he was off. Being comfortable (not exhausted) at 15k was a priority, but I was also starting to think about places by now, and wondering who was catching me. I was starving but knew I couldn't keep food down. A coffee and a chocolate muffin were going to be demolished at the other end. We knew there was one swimmer ahead of us, but couldn't tell about the others, the flotilla was so wide. Fiona was head down in the boat, I knew she must have been seasick. The guys were shouting support every time I stopped, which was getting more frequent. We got to 15k, and I knew that I could finish strongly, with only 2km to Philip Rock, where the protection of the island would start. I looked up a few times from the top of a wave and saw the pine trees on Rottneest, they didn't look over 4 km away. I was tired but felt stronger than before at this point. We had finally cracked the pace, nutrition and course, after 6 crossings. Philip Rock came and went, 200m away but I never saw it. 2.1k to go to the finish. The first reef fish, and a few overhanging reef ledges for a welcome distraction. There was no protection from the weather, it kept up until close to the end. Will was telling me to head straight for the lighthouse. There was still nobody visible either in front or behind, one km to go. 15 minutes to go. There was a large boat, Underwater Explorer moored on the right. I wanted the boat to peel off and get ashore so they could see the finish. The clearway through the boat moorings was fantastic, previously we had to weave through moored boats and emerge just metres from the line. I was looking up for the finish, could make out reds and blues against the small jetty, the blue was the finish. I got my only two jellyfish stings, switching the mind off the shoulders for a few seconds. I waved the boat off and Will took me down the final straight before he had to peel off too. The bottom was weedy but getting shallower. There was a big blue arch at the finish line, with fences to keep the spectators back. Counting down the last 50m, almost collided with the jetty, looking for that first chance to stand up, still weedy, then sand. Finally I stopped the arms and stood up, no cramps thankfully, and ran in the last ten metres and over the timing pad. Maeve and John and Janet were in the crowd, then I saw Hamish and Lily, all trying to hug me. The announcer asked me a few questions about the race and then I checked in my timing strap and collected a bag of sponsor's products. Security had prevented Fiona and the crew from getting back down to the line, but I saw them soon afterwards. I was taken off and checked for hypothermia, which I didn't have, and they finally let me go after a few jelly beans for good behaviour. I was 3<sup>rd</sup> male, and 4<sup>th</sup> overall, my best ever result, in 5hrs 26. I'd never heard of the winner, Deek Zimmerman (5 hrs 01), who came from Sydney. Ben Walker, a 17 year old who I train with, came second (5 hrs 17), and Melissa Benson 1 minute faster than Ben (females started 15 minutes after the males).

The coffee and muffins went down in no time, and I kept eating all afternoon. Wind and swell conditions actually got worse after we got in and most solo swimmers were in the water for 1-2 hrs longer than they might have expected, several getting hypothermia. We spoke on the phone to a few teams of 4 who were on the way, and waited for 'Sharkbait' (Harry, Shayne and two Johns) to come in after an 8 hrs 30 crossing. I think I busted the myth about the beer tasting great in the pub afterwards. With all the salt water and a tongue like a sponge, it tastes vile.

At 5.30pm on the beach they held the formal presentations and call up all the solo swimmers to get a plaque. Incredibly, there were still some solo swimmers coming in, having swum for 11.5 hours. They were outside of the official race cutoff time of 10 hours, but were too stubborn to give up. Two swimmers I know (Dean from Kalamunda and Douggie the Pom) had to abandon the race near the end due to boats becoming swamped by waves, and there were several ambulance cases, including an Israeli who is still in intensive care 2 days later.

The rest of the weekend was more relaxing, and we stayed in a cottage at Geordie bay, had some BBQs and did some snorkeling. We all recovered well, although Fiona still can't open jars yet, the finger strength has gone. We've booked again for next year, not really sure why...

Thanks to all of you for your support during the lead-up, and especially to Fiona, Steve, Will and Troy for keeping me going on the day.



Finishing 2006 solo crossing



View of Team swimmers & boats heading towards Rottneest, 2006