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In Extreme Open Water Swims: Why Understanding the Challenge Is as Important as Training for the Distance

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In Extreme Open Water Swims: Why Understanding the Challenge Is as Important as Training for the Distance.

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Open water swimming is a sport which is increasing and exploding in a way which has not allowed the safety measures to grow with it. Most sports have procedures for safety and for management. One of the biggest changes and developments in the Open Water Swimming is that extremes both in distance and adventures are now becoming mainstream. We have swims like the Skellig Rock being promoted as a 'wild' swimming adventure and there are swimmers who's skill set does not translate from the pool to the open water. Many swimmers swim by time, train by time and sometimes do not factor in the variables, such as tide, currents, flows and breathing challenges. Many swimmers may not have the experience to navigate or to orientate and most may not have the skill set to adjust their plans when their swim brings them to new territory emotionally. It is my belief that many swimmers get into difficulty when conditions are perfect, in situations where cold shock is not a factor and my opinion that if we understand the challenge in swimming as opposed to 'how far' that our sport of open water and triathlon swimming will become more safe.

Many open water swims now especially in the area of Ice, Extreme and Channel have swimmers ending up being hospitalised either during or after completing the distance. The inability of the support teams or the inability of the swimmer to recognise the challenge or to factor in the challenge can have a life threatening outcome. It is my belief that the training and the preparation for many of today's swims are not as complete as they should be. There needs to be more focus on the variables such as conditions, tide, temperatures, air temperatures, remote, experience of the swimmer and the quality and experience of the support team you bring with you.

It is so amazing how when faced with extremes the mind can shut down; how despite there being options for survival the mind prevents the body from exiting that situation. I travelled to Siberia in 2012. The water temperature was 0 degrees, the air temp was minus 33 degrees, and my intention was to swim 1,000m -a mere 40 lengths of a pool. In the first 25m I thought I was going to die and even though the pool was only 25m length with a ladder at each end to exit the water, it never at any time came into my head that I could stand up and remove myself from the risk of death. The water was deep in relation to ice swimming in Siberia. What I learned in 4 years of Ice Swimming was that the mind controls our actions. The mind needs to be educated to the likely outcomes and that is done through preparation and training but also by understanding that the risks are life threatening. Without a real educated understanding of the risks attached to a challenge there is a greater risk to survival based on the decision making of the swimmer. Therein lies the quandary.

What I aim to do is to bring you through many challenging situations where decisions were flawed, where education and training of both teams and swimmers could have been improved and how by knowing the risks the outcomes for recreational swimmers may change for the good.

My presentation is based on experiences, both personal and as support team member, coupled with years of work with medical teams in Russia and elsewhere.



Kerry woman Nuala Moore is a world leading extreme swimmer. She describes distance swimming in freezing ice water as “one of the most amazing experiences of learning, of self-discovery and mindfulness”. In 2006 she was one of the team who relayed around the Island of Ireland (1,330 km in 56 days) and was also a member of the team who swam from Russia to the USA across the notorious Bering Strait over 6 days. In 2012 she transitioned to swimming at 0° ice. She was the International Ice

Swimming Association World Ambassador of the Year 2014/2015 for her work on safety. Nuala published “An Insight into the World of Ice Swimming” in 2016. In April 2018 she was the first person to successfully swim the one mile imaginary meridian line that separates the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans off the renowned Cape Horn (east to west) along with a crossing of the Italy Glacier Beagle Channel 3° water