

Lightsticks and Goggles – After 2nd Channel Swim

Cliff Golding

Now that the season is well under way I thought you might be interested in a discovery we made just this weekend which could assist swimmers and pilots during night swimming. But first a confession.

Experienced in Channel swimming as I claim to be (eleven years and counting) I made a basic error in preparation (ok Mike/Freda, I made three basic errors!) before my recent crossing. This error could have compromised the swim and led to my pilot halting it for health and safety reasons (his health and my safety!). The week before my booked swim date I bought a light stick. This was precautionary, I thought, because, as I was due to start at 5am, I felt fairly confident (oh dear!) that I could finish in daylight. However weather stopped play for 9 days and, as the start time moves on a bit each 24 hrs of the tide, on the day of my swim I finally set off at 10 am. This meant that I swam the last few hours in the dark. Unfortunately I didn't have the common sense to think that I should have got more than one light stick in the event of a malfunction! "It's never happened before," I bleated on the way back. Mike smiled that, "failing to prepare is preparing to fail" look of his and I learnt a lesson. (A week later when we went to see Marcy and Somer off on their swims the starter motor on Sea Saturn failed just as Lance was about to leave with Somer. Was the swim cancelled? No because Lance reached into the bowels of the boat and produced a spare starter motor and minutes later the engine fired into life. I swear Mike smiled that same smile at me as he left with Marcy on Aegean Blue).

So the lesson was: Buy several light sticks - from more than one store - in case of malfunction. Fortunately Mike had spare on board and I was able to change good for bad. It is also a good idea to hang two or three from the side of the boat. It really helps the swimmer find the line of the boat in the dark and in a strange way which I don't understand they are quite soothing!!! Also green seems to be the best colour to get and would appear to be easier to see from the boat. Which leads me on to the discovery I mentioned.....

Despite what I just said about being seen from the boat, after my swim Mike said that even after my stick was changed it was quite difficult to see me as I swim with my backside low in the water!!! Well that would be a crushing blow for any man to hear let alone a Channel swimmer and it was certainly new to me. But it does highlight that a pilot has to be a psychologist as well as a skilled seaman. Imagine if he had told me that during the swim. "Cliff, your bum is too low in the water!" It could have been over right there and then. What if I had broken down and demanded an air ambulance straight to the hospital in fear of my life? Can you imagine the scene at the A&E - "Mr Golding, this is one of the worst cases of Low Bottom in the Water Syndrome that we've ever seen. It's a wonder you can walk, the pain must have been unbearable!

So, since then I have been wrestling with how to overcome bad visibility from boat to swimmer and Low Bottom in The Water Syndrome. Obviously donning a ladies' costume and wearing a lightstick high on the strap is out of the question and would look faintly ridiculous as Charlie has found out on numerous occasions! Actually Freda also told me that the constant bashing of the lightstick on a girl's back can be very irritating. One thought was to stick one down the back of the goggle strap. Julio

did this when he got in with me for the last 100 metres and I found it very easy to see him. But It could also irritate and mean that the goggles leak. So the discovery is - gosh I hope it's been worth the wait! - to not only buy light sticks but one (two in case of malfunction!) of those necklace type versions that you see at fairs and rock gigs. They are nearly two feet long with a diameter slightly smaller than a pencil. I tried one on Sunday during a three hour swim and didn't even know I had it on. Although it was daytime (and yes I did look strange) I think it would have been very visible at night. Best is to wear it like a hair band on top of your head and thread it through the back of your goggle strap - one end slots into the other fairly tightly and, even tired, a swimmer could manage to secure it..

I think it could be of use. An added benefit for those of a spiritual inclination is that you would take on a saintly appearance at night and all sins, past, present and intended would be forgiven!! I promise you I am not on commission and have never been in the shop before but a nice chap in Channel Angling close to the beach in Dover served us. A word of caution - they are easily activated so take a poster tube 2 foot long to store them until needed.

I referred to three errors. Number two was also connected to visibility. I didn't have clear goggles for swimming at night - Doh!! How dumb was that? (rhetorical!). I thought they were in my kit but they weren't. I found it difficult to line up to the boat. Mike said it added time to my swim. It was basic, it was stupid and I should have known better. Fortunately my experience did help me through this. I knew that I was coherent, I knew to shout out that I was ok. I knew that Mike had known me a long time and had piloted me before. He knew too that I was still strong enough to finish. But what if I hadn't have been? What if I had been on the very edge of endurance, floundering about unable to see but only 400 yards off the beach and success? What a stupid and unfair situation to put my pilot in. If he had pulled the swim for safety reasons no amount of complaining or recrimination would have altered the fact that I was solely responsible for the situation. All for the sake of a few pounds and proper planning. Sorry, laboured on a bit there but some of you are travelling half way round the world to achieve a lifelong ambition so any reminder of basic stuff has to be worthwhile.

My other error actually worked in my favour. At my first feed I was handed a drink in a large MacDonalds type cup. I realised instantly that I had also forgotten to put cups on board. (Honestly, sometimes I can be quite switched on! I think it's a bit like the Old West in Dover Town only we hand our brains in at the Sheriff's office instead of our guns). I cursed myself but didn't say anything as there was no point. Fortunately Mike had loads on board. The benefit was that they were all large and Laura, simply because they were large cups, filled them up on each feed. Result - it didn't matter if I spilt some and I drank far more than I normally do. It helped me enormously and kept me far more hydrated. So, from now on, big cups!

Other stuff came out of mine and other swims but I've dragged on too long - sorry. It's just that I love this sport and I don't want to see someone fail on a Channel swim simply because of a basic neglect.

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