

9-1-2011

Not Your Typical Morning Dip

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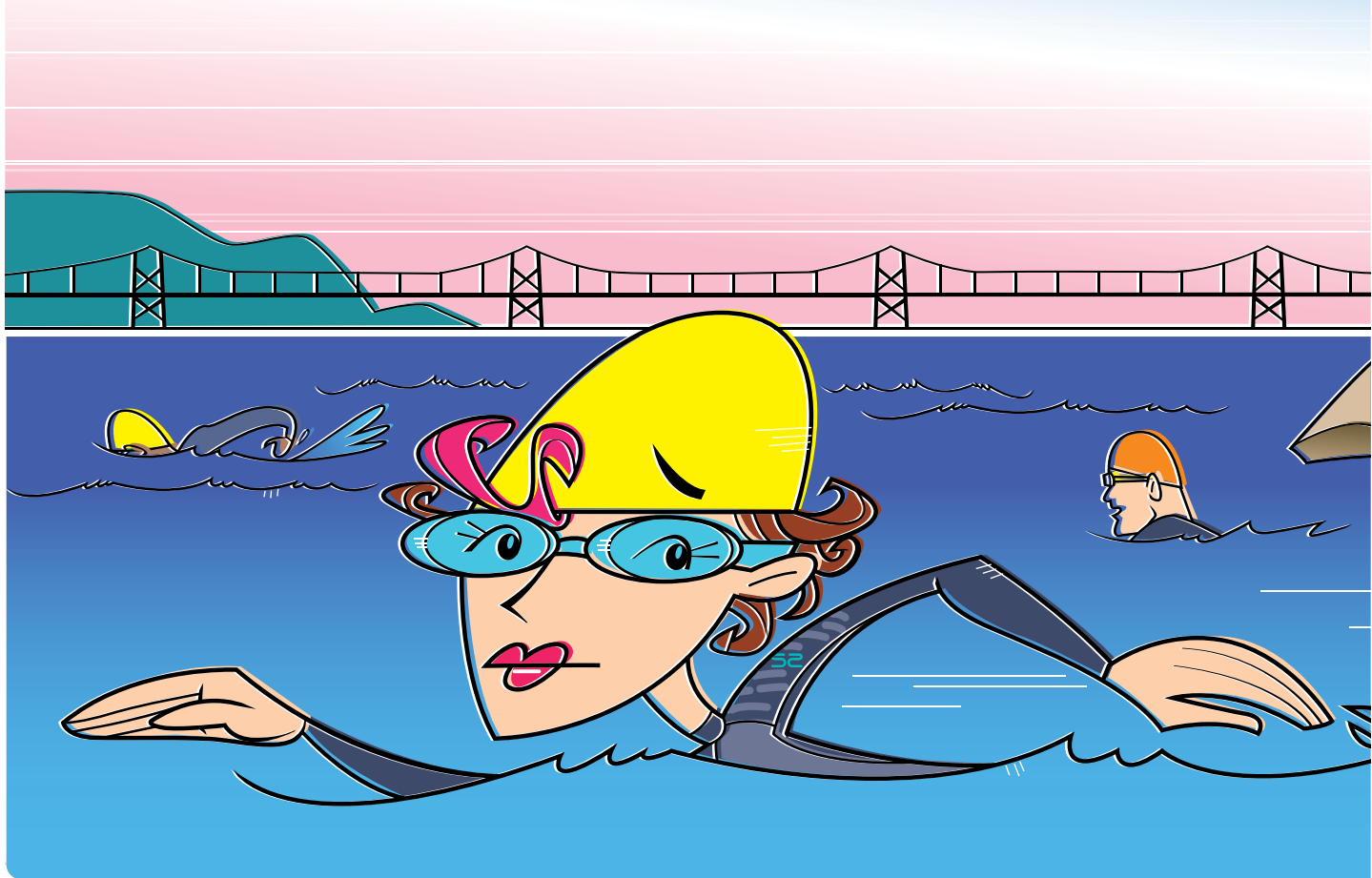
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Recommended Citation

Menzer, Melinda and Speer, Julie (2011) "Not Your Typical Morning Dip," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss3/8>

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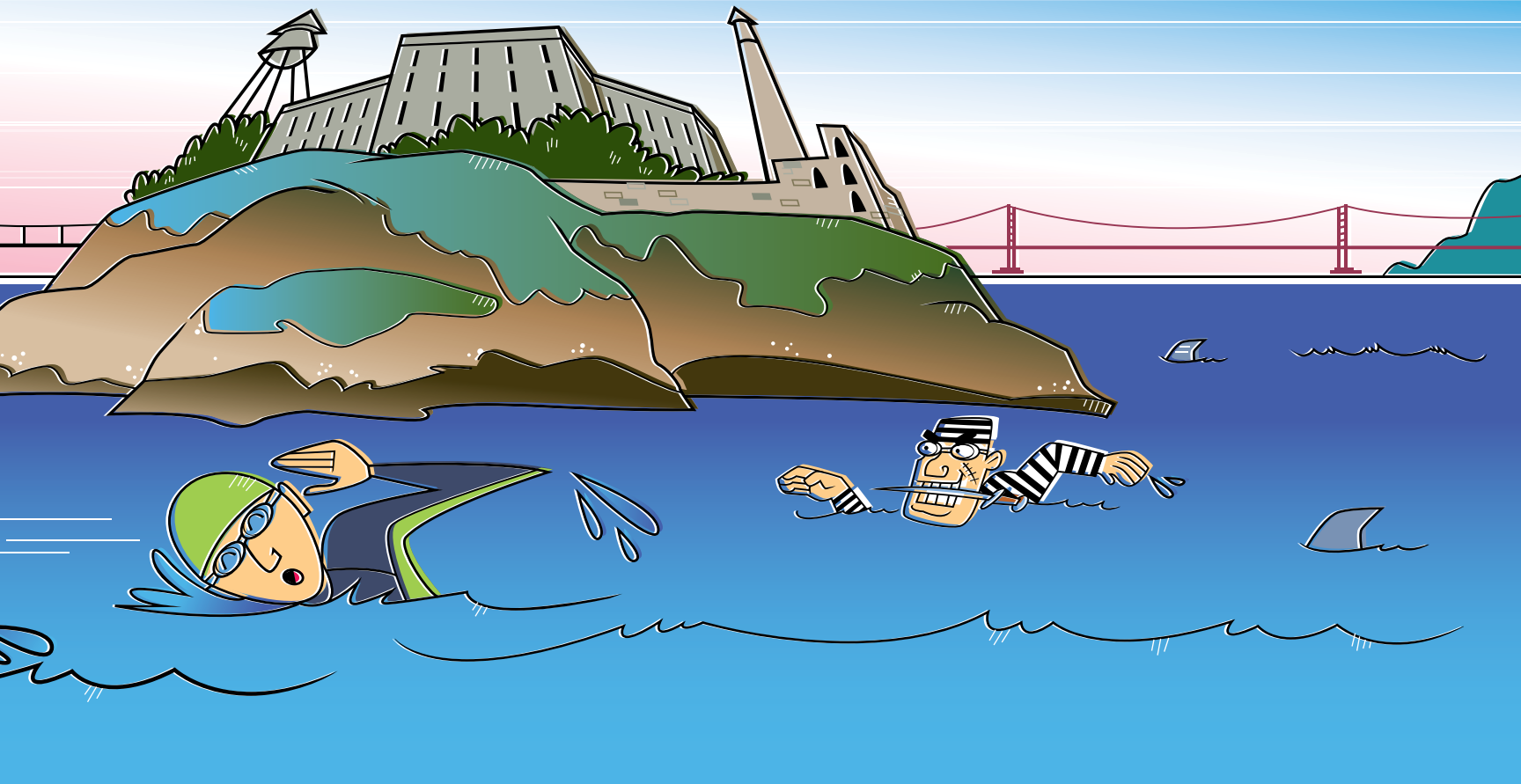


Not Your Typical Morning Dip

On June 12, 1962, three men engineered a notorious escape from Alcatraz, San Francisco's island prison. Almost 50 years later, a Furman professor takes on the challenge of the Alcatraz swim.

By **Melinda Menzer**

Illustrations by **Julie Speer**



When the word got out around Furman that I was preparing to do the Alcatraz Sharkfest Swim, people began to ask me, “Why?” Students asked, colleagues asked, people I didn’t even know would stop and ask me, “Why are you doing the Alcatraz swim?”

Why? I was stumped. And even though I got the same question over and over, I never became any better at answering it. Why eat ice cream? Why sing silly songs in the shower? Why do anything? My husband’s sister Allison asked if I wanted to swim the Alcatraz Sharkfest with her and their brother Michael, and I said yes.

I wouldn’t have wanted to swim Alcatraz if I thought I might drown. But even before I started training specifically for the event, I knew it was doable.

The distance from Alcatraz Island to shore is 1.5 miles, or 2,640 yards. During the school year, I swim 2,000 yards at lunch time, four or five days a week. In fact, I arrange my life so that I can swim 2,000 yards at lunch time, four or

five days a week. I have an inviolable appointment with the pool. I eat lunch at my desk while working, and sometimes I go to class with wet hair, but I make that swim. I am fortunate to be at Furman, where I have a beautiful pool on campus and an administration that encourages fitness for all members of the community.

So last fall when I signed up for the swim, I was confident that I could make the distance. The problem, however, is not the distance. Nor is it the sharks, popular myth aside — there are sharks in San Francisco Bay, but they stay to the bottom and aren’t interested in people.

The swim is difficult for two reasons: the current and the cold. If you are not strong enough (or not paying attention), you can be pushed off course, out toward the ocean, missing the entrance to Aquatic Park, where the swim ends. Someone would rescue you, of course, but no swimmer wants to be rescued; it’s not good for your ego to be towed to shore by a kayaker.

The second factor is the water temperature. The water in San Francisco Bay in June is around 60 degrees. To endure the cold, most swimmers wear a wetsuit. The organizers of the Alcatraz Sharkfest Swim do permit non-wetsuit entrants, but they discourage them, and I was willing to be discouraged. I am cold in my office in Furman Hall all year round.

I decided to buy a wetsuit, rather than rent, so I would have an opportunity to practice in it. I didn't know that trying on a wetsuit is a lot like trying on a wedding dress. First, you pick out some possibilities while a salesperson talks to you about fit and material, using words you do not understand. Then you go in a little room where you discover, in spite of carefully following the salesperson's instructions, that you can't get into the outfit by yourself.

You manage to get dressed enough that you will not be naked in public, then come out for help. The salesperson starts to adjust you. People you don't know come up and offer congratulations. They ask questions: When is the big day? Where will it be? Is this your first?

Meanwhile, the salesperson manages to zip you in. You feel a little light-headed. In the wedding dress, it's because you're getting married; in the wetsuit, it's because your chest is being compressed and you can't breathe. Oh, but you look great! You look fantastic! You have to buy it!

After buying the wetsuit, I needed to get used to swimming in open water. I had only a little open water experience, and I wasn't even sure I could swim in this very tight (though very attractive) wetsuit. I learned that the Upstate Triathlon Club swims at Lake Hartwell every Wednesday from spring to fall. The swims are open to everyone, and they have kayak support.

The first swim was in April. I was nervous. I wore my swimsuit out there and struggled into the wetsuit on the beach. Once I got in the water, though, I felt fine. Although my triathlete friends had told me that I would love the wetsuit, I didn't care for it much. I learned later that triathletes are not usually big swimmers, and they welcome the extra buoyancy of the wetsuit. I, on the other hand, swim all the time and didn't like the buoyancy; I felt like I was bouncing on the surface like a cork. Still, I was warm, and I could swim, and that is what I needed to know.

When I went back the next week, everything came together. It was beautiful on the lake. The sun was starting to set, with low clouds. I swam out to the buoys half a mile from shore and stopped in the water to look around.

As I was treading water and looking at the golden clouds, I realized that I was unreachable. Whatever disasters were occurring on land, whether at work or at home, they were not my problem. Other people would have to deal with them;



I was in the middle of a lake. It was an amazing feeling of freedom. I swam back to shore, took a brief look around, and went out for the one-mile loop again.

At this point, I was completely in love with open water swimming. I went every Wednesday I could, even after it got too warm to wear a wetsuit and I switched to swimsuit only.

Spring came and went. There was the usual end-of-the-year craziness, with exams and papers and a conference and graduation all on top of each other. Before long, I was flying out to San Francisco to meet Allison and Michael.

On Saturday morning, June 25, we all woke up well before our 5:30 alarm. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep. We packed our stuff and headed for Aquatic Park, where we checked in and put on our wetsuits.

I felt good about everything until we got on the boat to head for Alcatraz Island. It was very cold on the deck. I was shivering, and my teeth were chattering. It hurt, and I was afraid I would grit my teeth so hard that I would have a headache before I even started swimming. I was worried. If I was that cold on the boat, how cold would I be in the water?

But as we got to the island we went below, where it was plenty warm. There is no way for everyone in the race to leave from the island — there is no beach — so the first hurdle is to jump from the boat into the water. The mass of people started to move to the doorway. Michael was in front of me. He jumped; I jumped. As soon as I hit the water, I knew everything was going to be all right.

The main challenge in the race was disorientation. In the chaos, we missed the official starting horn. I was slowly swimming with Allison and Michael toward what we thought was the starting line when a person in a pink cap came barreling by, socking me in the jaw. That seemed to be a sign that the race had started, so I picked up the pace and headed toward land.

Every time I came near a kayaker, he or she would yell at me, “Go left! Go left!” So I went left. You don’t argue with the kayakers, who are volunteering their Saturday morning to save your useless butt. I must have been close to the right of the pack the whole way, which is not a bad strategy, since it was the straightest line toward shore and the shortest course. But I risked missing the entrance to Aquatic Park and being swept toward the ocean.

And frankly, I had no idea where the entrance was for most of the race. I just kept swimming, enjoying every minute of it. The water was cool and surprisingly green, a gray-green. There were waves — not choppy little lake waves that slap you in the face, but big waves that lift you up and give you a view of



where you are. And where I was was amazing. It was cloudy, but I could see the buildings of San Francisco sparkling ahead of me. There were other heads bobbing in the water, no one too close. I followed the pack toward the shore.

But as I got to Aquatic Park, time began to speed up. The entrance is made by two curved concrete barriers which form a circle with a gap to swim through. People on top of the barriers were cheering for the swimmers. Suddenly the water was crowded as we were funneled into the park. I felt some urgency; I couldn’t let all these people beat me. At the same time, my neck began to sting, and I realized that I had burns from my wetsuit. I swam the last yards as hard as I could, hitting people and being hit, until my feet touched land and I could stand and run onto shore.

And that was it. I found my relatives. I drank hot chocolate. I struggled out of my wetsuit. We put on clothes and went for lunch.

I had a respectable time: 42 minutes, 25 seconds. That placed me sixth of 41 in my age group, 49th of 241 female finishers, and 217th of 669 finishers. This is all good, and I am content.

But the joy of swimming is in the swimming, not the finishing time. When I close my eyes, I can see that color, the surprising gray-green of the water. And I can feel the coolness of the water and the waves.

Why do the Alcatraz swim? Perhaps the answer is that there is something very satisfying about being in the middle of the water, far from land, and making it to shore again. [F]

The author has been an English professor at Furman since 1996.