Not Your Typical Morning Dip

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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 kayak.
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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 the cold, most swimmers wear a wetsuit. The organizers of the Alcatraz Sharkfest Swim do permit non-wetsuit entrants, but the cold, most swimmers wear a wetsuit. The organizers of the Alcatraz Sharkfest Swim do permit non-wetsuit entrants, but the cold, most swimmers wear a wetsuit. The organizers of the Alcatraz Sharkfest Swim do permit non-wetsuit entrants, but the cold, most swimmers wear a wetsuit.

I was in the middle of a lake. It was an amazing feeling of freedom. I swam back to shore, took a quick 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 swimrun only.

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 are getting married; in the wetsuit, it’s because your chest is being compressed and you can’t breathe. Oh, but you look great! You are getting married; in the wetsuit, it’s because your chest is being compressed and you can’t breathe. Oh, but you look great! You are getting married; in the wetsuit, it’s because your chest is being compressed and you can’t breathe. Oh, but you look great!

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 wetsuit users, and they welcome the extra buoyancy of the wetsuit. (I, on the other hand, was 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 reading water and looking at the golden clouds, I realized that I was uncatchable. 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.
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The author has been an English professor at Furman since 1996.

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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 to 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 to help you. Meanwhile, the salesperson manages to zip you in. You feel a little light-headed. In the wedding dress, 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!