

Pandamonium: Giant Pandas and Open Water Swimming

By Jon Blank

Inspiration for this month's article lumbered onto the page via a sidebar in this week's (January 18-24 2014) Economist. With a big splash, the National Zoo in Washington DC, just introduced giant panda cub Bao Bao to an adoring public. According to the article, giant pandas are big business. When their US zoo hosts feature the roly-poly bicolor bears, attendance and merchandising sales increase by nearly 20%. But, the furry ursine guests are quite costly to host and display. A giant panda's appetite is large and monotonous; 90% comprised of tender bamboo shoots. At the National Zoo, the bamboo budget alone is \$55,000 annually.

The Smithsonian's annual cost estimate for panda habitation at the National Zoo is over \$2.5 million. Furthermore, zoos outside of China don't actually own the pandas on display. The government of the People's Republic of China (which retains ownership of the animal ambassadors), charges up to \$1 million for a zoo's privilege of housing a mating pair, and even retains ownership of any panda cubs born during the giant pandas stay at the host institution. So far, US zoos are more than willing to shoulder substantial cost burden to improve attendance and support.

USMS supports open water swimming in the hopes of improving membership and participation. But an unfortunate event has led to problems for USMS presence as an open water sponsor. As you may remember, a swimmer lost a limb and suffered severe lacerations when he was run over by a pilot boat during an open water event sponsored by USMS. Subsequent insurance premiums for USMS open water events rose so substantially last year that some LMSCs voted to provide large subsidies to open water events sanctioned under their jurisdiction.

The North Carolina LMSC Board of Directors voted to subsidize insurance costs at three open water events in NC for 2013, so that those event sponsors would be able to keep entry fees in reasonable range. Your LMSC Board believed that open water events are likely to become more and more popular. For that reason, we allocated several thousand dollars to open water events in our state. Having said that, one of those sponsored events attracted fewer than a dozen USMS-registered swimmers. Thus, the subsidy per USMS-registered swimmer for that event neared \$100/swimmer.

Was this a good use of your LMSC funds? The Board is willing to continue to support open water events in North Carolina, but we want to ensure good stewardship of our members' monies. Open water events can be an attractive draw for swimmers, but USMS doesn't have a monopoly on sponsorship of these events. Other organizations can and do sponsor open water events, and as yet do not bear the burdensome costs of increased insurance. Are open water swimming events attractive enough to NC Masters Swimming despite the near-usurious cost of insurance? Or has your Board been bamboozled, with the open water insurance subsidy merely eating up our support opportunities? It is not a black and white issue. Let me know your thoughts on the LMSC subsidy for open water events in North Carolina –chair@ncmasters.org