

Katie Brooks, 2012 24 Mile Tampa Bay Swimmer

By Jen Baker



Imagine the heartbreak of training for months for a very challenging 24-mile ocean swim, only to have it be cancelled by the Coast Guard after 6 hours and 25 minutes due to lightening, about 7 miles from your goal! Earlier this year two Asheville Swimmers tackled the 2012 Tampa Bay Swim – Katie Brooks and Alan Barry. Here is the story of Katy Brooks, describing her background, training and race experience.

What is your swimming background? Have you done marathon swims before?

I started swimming competitively when I was 7 for the Jackson County Swim Team in Sylva North Carolina. When I was 13 I moved to Jackson, Michigan and swam on the club and highschool team until I was 18. I decided to focus on education during college and only swam a few practices to stay in shape. When I graduated and moved to Asheville, I began coaching for ASC and I became invested in the world of swimming again. Before the Tampa Bay swim, I had only raced in a 5k swim in Clemson, SC when I was 12. During the summers in Michigan, I was always swimming in a lake so I felt comfortable in that environment. My only experience with

swimming in the ocean was from summer vacations at the beach.

You tackled one of the longest organized open water swim races in the US/world - why?

When I started coaching swimming, a new world of competition opened up for me. I started meeting adults who continued to race in masters swimming and triathlons. Frank Kriegler, the parent of one of my swimmers, started getting into the pool during practice to train for the Tampa Bay Swim Marathon. I was very impressed by the distance he swam and how many hours he spent in the water. He swam the race last year and came back to tell us all about it. He was humble, but I could tell how much of a feat it really was.

I started thinking about swimming in the ocean and then crossing the finish line but I thought I didn't have the time or the need to race again. About a half a year later I started dating Austin. He is a runner and always active outdoors. He told me that he wanted to do a marathon this year. I told him about Mr. Kriegler's swim and Austin said that he thought I could swim that marathon. It would be fun for us to both have something to work towards together. As soon as he said it, I wanted to do it.

I told Alan, the Asheville Swim Club head coach, about it and he said he would swim the marathon with me. I wanted to get back in shape and have a goal that I could work towards. I knew I had people supporting me and that I could share the adventure with Austin. He volunteered to kayak right beside me the whole race so that he could give me nourishment and words of encouragement. I wanted to compete again but this time I would not be challenging someone in the lane next to me. Every day I challenged myself to push harder in practice to become stronger. Right before the gun went off for the race, I was challenged to put my trust in others. During the last hours of the swim, I had to challenge my mind and body to go past a point of exhaustion it has never gone before.

What kind of mental/physical training took place? What was your hardest and longest practice? How did you prepare for the open water challenges (water temp, current, sharks)?

I knew I needed to have someone to train with and I was excited that Alan would swim the race with me. He is a great coach and he wrote the workouts for us. Because I knew Alan was going to be there, it was easier to get up in the morning and head to the pool. We shared the pool with a swimmer who was swimming to stay in shape. Most days it was just three of us in the pool. I trained for 4 months before the race. I swam 2-3 hours during the morning for 5 days a week. At each practice I swam from 6,000-10,000 yards. The longest workout was 5 hours long and we swam a little over 10 miles. I think the hardest part was getting used to swimming similar long workouts every practice. For instance we did 72 x 100s freestyle on 1:35. It was exciting to see how quickly I got in shape and swam at a faster pace each week.

Previously, I had raced only a few times in open water. The longest time I swam before this race was 10 miles in a pool so I didn't know how I was going to handle the bay. I knew the water temperature would be warm enough and when it was within the week of the race I checked water temperatures online. To prepare for what I had not experienced before, I

spoke with some coaches and people who have raced the marathon in Tampa before. Even though I had not swam far off shore before, I looked at it as an adventure, and was excited to see something new. There were times when I would dream about shark attacks but people reassured me that there was nothing to worry about. At the end of the four months I felt ready to swim the race. I figured the race would take about 10 hours and if it took the first 2 hours to figure out how to swim in open water than that was fine with me. My goal was not to get the fastest time, but to swim all 24 miles.

Please describe the race.

As soon as Austin and I arrived at our hotel in Tampa, Alan knocked on the door with his goggles in hand and invited me to go practice in the bay. The butterflies about the race were starting to build so I thought I could swim and feel better. We met at the small beach in front of the hotel where the starting line would be the next day. It was about 5 o'clock so I wasn't surprised to see that no one was on the beach or swimming. We swam out about half a mile, and then I started to feel so uneasy about the open water, and not being able to see the bottom, that I felt like I couldn't breathe. I told Alan I wanted to go back because I didn't feel well about the open water. He responded, "I don't think you have anything to worry about; there is nothing dangerous in these waters." Not ten seconds later, a boat rode up next to us and the captain said, "I don't want to ruin your workout but someone just spotted an 8 foot bull shark about a 100 yards away."

I immediately asked him if I could come on board because I was so scared of sharks. He was surprised but luckily he let us aboard and drove us back to the docks. I was shaking about how close I was to a shark and I couldn't imagine getting back in the water. After talking to the locals, I found out that it was just a bad time to get in the water. Sharks are out hunting and feeding that late in the day. They told me I should be fine during the race. During the meeting about the race, they mentioned that there might be a storm and to not be surprised if they pulled the plug during the race. I did not sleep well because of the shark, the butterflies, and the storm, however, when I woke up that Saturday morning I didn't have any worries and I was excited to swim.

For the race I was required to have a motor boat and a support crew. They had a radio and stayed in touch with the race coordinator throughout the day. Max was my captain and I met him at his boat at 6:30 to give him all of my food, camera, and towels. Then I went to the beach to meet Alan to put on our 100+ SPF sun block. We were solid white from head to toe. Austin went off about a 100 yards in his kayak and I saw Max about half a mile out from the beach. The other swimmers were older than I was and they had a lot of encouraging words. I trusted them because of their experience and I was in awe of how calm they were.

I waded out in the water with Alan and the countdown began. I made sure to wipe off my goggles because they were foggy with sunscreen. When the gun went off my heart was racing but I was focused. The sun started to come up and I could see how choppy the water was but I knew I couldn't control the water so I just surged forward. Austin and my boat were having a hard time staying next to me because of the waves and current. I knew that for two miles I would have to swim against the current but at the point I would do a 180 and

swim with the current. My first goal was to get around the point. I thought I could do it in about an hour but the waves were only growing. I stayed with Alan because I felt more comfortable having someone in the water with me. He was having trouble with his goggles because of the sunscreen. I tried to take my time and not worry about the other swimmers but my anxiety grew as their boats became smaller and smaller.

After about 2 hours of fighting the waves, Max shouted that we were almost around the corner. I was disappointed that it had taken that long and I thought that there was a chance that I would not finish the race in time. We were only given 13 hours to finish the race. I was really discouraged and already tired but then the waves started to feel calmer and I found a rhythm that allowed me to swim faster.

There were times I was swimming in only 3 feet of water and I combed through seaweed and itched from sea lice. My neck and shoulders hurt from trying to look where I was going. I wish I had felt comfortable swimming with my head down for miles and miles, but I stopped a lot to check where I was. I should have trusted Austin and Max more and let them guide me, but I couldn't resist checking my location. Finally I forced myself to keep my head down for at least 500 strokes at a time. I stopped to take a drink of Gatorade or eat some snickers every half hour. Austin was always cheerful and encouraging even when he was tired and freezing from the wind and water. One time I was almost crying because I was combing through seaweed and I was scared about what was underneath me when a fish jumped and hit me in the head and tumbled back into the water in front of me. I was startled and then realized I must have scared him and the realization of how big and scary I was to the fish made Austin and I laugh. He reminded me that I wanted to do this adventure and it didn't matter how long it took. I was going to finish.

The waves started pushing me forward so that I was making up time. The best part of the race was when Max shouted to me that I had swum over 12 miles and it only had taken about 4.5 hours. I was elated to have swum half of the marathon and the image of crossing the finish line became clearer in my head. The only issue was my shoulder. I felt in shape enough to finish. However, I could barely take a stroke because of the pain in my shoulder. Around hour 6 I started only swimming with my right arm. The left shoulder felt like it was swollen and there were shooting pains throughout the whole arm. It was frustrating because I knew I was in shape to swim that far but my shoulder was slowing me down. It was becoming harder and harder to handle the idea that I could be in the water for another 5 hours.

I started to make smaller goals. I knew that I was at the end of the pack so I decided to focus on racing. I passed a couple of swimmers but it turns out that they had to quit because their boat ran aground. Alan was about a mile ahead so I tried to put my head down and catch up. It was a pain I had never felt before in my shoulder but I tried to see the success in how far I was swimming. I had studied the map of the bay the night before and I was happy to see that I was passing some landmarks. If I could make it to the bridge then I would be home free. Just as I was building myself up to get ready to swim hard until I made it to Alan or the bridge, Austin paddled over to me and simply said, "It's over. They called the race. We need to get in the boat and head for shore." I instantly felt relief. Then as I grabbed on to the boat I could

barely pull myself on board and I was overcome with disappointment that it was over. I wish I had sped up to try to cover more distance but the sky was only grey with no sign of threat. As soon as I was on the boat I could see the storm in the distance. Max was all business as we quickly headed to shore. I'm glad that it was a big storm and not just a few claps of thunder that ended the race. I understood as the winds were howling that we needed to be on land.

I was disappointed that the race was over and I would not cross the finish line but I tried to not let it ruin my day and I wanted Austin and the crew to know how appreciative I was for their help. They told me how much of accomplishment 17 miles is but I couldn't feel proud of myself at that moment because I had not accomplished my goal. The storm kept us from going to the after race party and even after talking about the race with Alan and the other swimmers; I never felt a sense of closure. I remember a towel wrapped around me, sitting still on the boat and looking across the bay. I couldn't see the finish line at all. Even though I had worked for months and the day was finally there, the finish line seemed so far away. Now I try to look at the marathon as an experience and not a race. I tried something totally new and out of my comfort zone and I did not give up.

What's next?

I don't regret swimming the race because I started a new life with that race. I have entered in a few more races since and have sprinted across the finish line. They are all much shorter and mostly running. I started running because I am interested in doing some triathlons. My friend, Austin, and I were part of a relay for a triathlon at Lake James. I swam the 750 Meter swim. I knew that my marathon experience helped me because even though I had not swam there before, I had the confidence to dive in and take on whatever laid beyond those buoys.

Our relay came in first and we had a lot of fun, but as I saw the first woman cross the finish line, I started to dream about doing a triathlon on my own. Of course, Austin is encouraging me to try the Ironman. One day I may try the world-renowned race because over the last year I have realized that you shouldn't limit yourself. Even if you haven't pictured it all of your life, a dream can pop out of nowhere and through the marathon swim I came to believe that I can try anything.

Austin and I just bought our first road bikes and I hope to enter a triathlon soon. I'm not sure if I will do another long distance swim again. I hope I can finally find closure with my marathon but I may not find closure until I try that race again. I'm happy to be working towards a new goal. Through training for the marathon, I realized that to be my happiest and healthiest, I need to work out and stay active. I'm excited with all of the possibilities of these races. They take me to places I have never been before.