

Flexibility, Flexibility, Flexibility: Swimming in the Rain

By Rob Pearlman



Waiting for the "Go" all photos by Manuel Vera

The recent "Swim For Life" distance swim event held in the Chester River was not only a successful event for the swimmers, but also a good learning experience for the kayakers who supported it. For those paddlers who have supported swim events, AND those of you who have organized these efforts, or are considering doing so, I'd like to share what we learned.

There were over 200 swimmers, 25 kayakers, and a variety of other folks assisting with support. The swim was a maximum of five miles, with five waves of swimmers. Each wave would swim either one, two, three, four or five miles. Everyone was prepared. Plans were set, buoys stationed, power boaters and kayakers at the ready. Swimmers, kayakers and boaters were briefed. We kayakers were scheduled to launch at 8:30 AM in order to station ourselves along the 2.5 mile "out and back" course before the swimmers started. The first wave of swimmers was to take off at 9 AM, followed by the subsequent four waves starting five minutes apart.

It was a dark and stormy morning. The weather forecast was threatening imminent thunderstorms. Organizers were watching the weather radar and listening to the VHF weather channels. The sky was getting darker and darker. A clap of thunder sounded the delay and kayakers were held at 8:30 AM. We waited, dubiously wondering whether or not the swim would take place. After about 20 minutes, the weather reports suggested a window of opportunity. Kayakers launched, yet the sky still threatened. Within five minutes thunder and lightening were sighted. Kayakers returned to shore. False start!

Now everyone more seriously doubted that the race could go forward. We remained in a holding pattern as the storms moved and conditions were evaluated. Months of work, preparation, fund raising, and hopes for a successful swim hung in the balance. What to do? As the kayak support coordinator, the Go-No-Go race decision was not mine, yet I felt responsible for the safety of our volunteer kayakers and, of course, if swimmers were in the water, theirs as well. We had a mixture of paddlers. Some were experienced as paddlers and swim supporters while others were relatively new to both. With everybody's primary objective, the safety of the swimmers and kayakers, launching the race in poor conditions could threaten the lives and safety of many and would not be worth the risk.

So an alternate plan was developed. If the conditions did not permit, it was clear that the race would not happen. But if a weather "window of opportunity" did present itself, what made sense? The five miler was scrapped. The race was reduced to a maximum of two miles for all swimmers, who would then choose to swim one, two or fewer miles. The shorter distance (one mile instead of 2.5 miles of open water) would better enable boaters and kayakers to patrol for safety and manage the large group of swimmers should we need to evacuate them from the water.



FALSE Start! Well, THAT was awkward!

We modified our kayak strategy to support this new approach and quickly developed very clear instructions for kayakers and swimmers, IF the swim were to go forward. If any kayaker heard or sighted thunder and lightning, they were to communicate immediately via other kayakers and radios. Swimmers would be instructed to swim immediately to the nearest river edge and wait to be picked up by a boater. Kayakers were instructed to herd all swimmers to shore and get themselves to shore as well. Communication would be key.

With all the swimmers and kayakers in a relatively small area, we announced the plan to everybody. After all their effort, everybody hoped we could make this work. And so we waited, monitoring the weather. Finally, there appeared to be enough of a break that Kathy, the race organizer, made the decision to GO!

Prepped with the revised plan, the kayakers launched again. A few were stationed at fixed points and the rest were instructed to rove along with the swimmers so we could cover as many swimmers as possible in case of emergency. The swimmers launched and the event was on in spite of the early threatening weather. Soon after the start, the heavens broke open and it rained, but thankfully there was no thunder or lightning.



Kathy says—GO!

(Continued on page 7)

*Flexibility (Continued
from page 6)*

The race continued under the intense gray down-pours. Swimmers swam. Kayakers paddled. Boaters patrolled. The rain fell. And the organizers sweat! Kayakers with radios maintained fairly constant communication so we could successfully cover the course.



Swimmers in the rain

While cruising the course myself, I came upon a couple of kayakers who liked sitting in place, when they really needed to be roving. I gave them direction and they resisted, telling me that they had been told to stay in place. When I asked who told them, they explained that those were their directions at the very beginning before the race began. I told them that the plan had changed. Clearly they had either not listened, or were uncomfortable changing their behavior mid-event. I would think about that later.



When a substantial majority of the 2 mile swimmers were more than half way, we received word that thunderstorm cells were approaching with a projected arrival about 20 minutes later. Quite a few swimmers had completed the race by now, but there were still people in the water. All remaining swimmers were directed to turn back immediately if they were still swimming out, and they did. Kayakers closely monitored the remaining swimmers, ready to direct them to shore if necessary. As it turned out, the threat never arrived and all swimmers and kayakers appeared to have returned safely.

Once we got on shore, race organizers were unable to identify the return of ONE swimmer! Our hearts were once again in our throats. Thunder and lightning threats are a bit scary. A "missing swimmer" is even scarier. The electronic tracker was frantically reviewing the ankle tracking chip records. Everyone on shore was scanning the water, wondering . . .

A lone swimmer was spotted not too far from shore. Several kayakers rushed out. As kayakers, we wondered how could we have missed this guy? The mystery was soon solved. This swimmer had not checked in when he hit the

Now it's REALLY raining

beach, and then decided to go for an independent swim without letting anyone know. Oops! We were happy he was alive and identified, but angry that he had not considered the consequences of his action.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ Flexibility is key. Change the plan if conditions change.
- ◆ Help educate the kayakers about being flexible. Newbies may not be comfortable changing their assignments, coach them on how to expect the unexpected.
- ◆ When selecting people for a kayak support event, be sure you have enough experienced folks along with people learning for the first time or with less experience.
- ◆ Don't follow the plan if it doesn't make sense.
- ◆ Communication is key, with a simple approach about what to say and what to do.
- ◆ For everybody's safety, be prepared to scrap the event if necessary.



Wet, but happy, kayak swim supporters