

The 2008 Pennock Island Challenge 8.2 Mile Swim in Alaska (Luck Included)

By John DaPrato

My long New York training swims seemed like long ago as I boarded my Alaska Airlines plane heading north (way north) from Seattle. After only 45 minutes over British Columbia, I could see white capped mountains high and clear from my window seat. I wondered --where are the towns? - What about the houses? - Where are the roads? I commented to the woman sitting next to me: "Hey, are we that far out into the wilderness already?" She said with a surprised smile, "where are you from?" I said: "I live in New York." She smiled again and asked, "are you on vacation." "I figured I'd be upfront and said: "I'm not sure it's a vacation --I'm going to try to swim 8.2 miles around Pennock Island this Sunday." She said with a slight expression: "Oh, you're kidding -- you're one of them?... So, do you think you can do it? I mean to say, are you ready for it?" I smiled, waited a second and asked, do you want the short answer or the long answer?" "I want the long answer!" she said emphatically. I paused again, then responded, "alright, here it is: yes, I think i can do it -I trained six months, I like the open water and I do better in distance events. I think once the race starts, I'll be very determined to finish. It will take some very serious issues for me to throw in the towel, but, hey, let's face it, there are a whole-lot of variables. Guess I'll need a little luck. Who knows what can happen? currents, wave action, high chop, nasty wind, water temperature changes, a kayaker from hell, weird fish or maybe even some eye-to-eye contact with a killer whale." She smiled and said, "killer whales! Ha! --You will do it!" I smiled, then nodded and turned away to look for signs of life out the window --nothing ...For the next half -hour, we talked about small town living vs. city living, winters in Ketchikan, Seattle in the summer and the now infamous "Bridge To Nowhere" (before the national exposure). Then, suddenly, I saw an island up ahead with a narrow, single runway. Yes, it was Ketchikan airport. After the plane landed smoothly, I quickly headed down the aisle for the exit & walked down the ramp into what has to be one of the smallest commercial airports anywhere. I walked away with two carry-on bags filled with clothes for a week, a laptop, my sports gear consisting of power bars, a sleeveless wetsuit, plenty of GU gel (energy gel packs), two pairs of goggles, anti fog liquid and some other necessary swimming gear.

I then walked to the small ferry that would take me to the southernmost Inside Passage town. Like always, my attention was drawn to moving water. It looked grayish and cold, but, be that as it may, I had five days until the big day and I had a race plan, and, yes, I knew I had to stick with it in order to have a chance to finish. In addition, I needed to keep a positive frame of mind, and, again, hope for a little "luck." Truth be known, I guess I tried to appear confident and cocky with my swimming partners and friends in New York about my chances of finishing, but deep down I knew that this event would push me and my swimming skills to the limit. I believe that "luck" has to be thrown into the equation in an event like the Pennock Challenge. I reflected on a swimmer's short story that I read a few weeks ago: it was all about what could go wrong in a marathon swimming event, and, believe me, he made his point about "luck." In short, he wound up rescuing his kayaker after the kayak sunk before lightning canceled the event. End of story.

It was now 2PM and I waited for a bus to take me a few miles south to a swimming area. The race director, Willie Schulz, recommended Buggy Beach as a good training spot. He was the one who advised me to pack my wetsuit before I left New York since the water temperature was hovering around 55 degrees through August. As I entered the bus, I figured the air temperature was in the upper sixties but the sun was shining in the bright blue Alaskan sky, so I thought it was definitely the right time to start my Alaska cold water acclimation. As we passed Ketchikan (approximately one mile from the airport), I could not help but notice plenty of snow on the mountain tops that surround the town --do I need to say "not good." After 15 or 20 minutes, I found myself lugging my gear to a 40 or 50 yard beach with rocks and 5 to 10 feet of sand. There may have been 30 people on the shore and a half a dozen kids playing in the water close to shore.

I found a young woman who appeared to have a kind and friendly face. I asked: "Do you mind if I leave my suitcases near you while I take a swim." She smiled, "not at all, I'm here all day and two of my kids will be in the water for another few hours." I quickly took off my clothes, slipped on my tight speedo, spit in my goggles, inserted my ear plugs and buckled up my neoprene cap. No time to waste, I thought...I walked out on the rocks to get to deep water and jumped.. "Whoa."

Yes, it was cold, damned cold at that, but I've been in colder water --try Brighton Beach in April or

Montauk in May for starters. I started doing breast stroke and figured I would do breast stroke to keep my head out of the water for a minute or two. I then got my crawl stroke going and took it nice and easy. I was concentrating on stroke form and enjoying the wild, interesting environment simultaneously. It was all very new and exciting to me --I was able to see interesting rock formations 35 feet straight down with bright colors and cool reflections. At one point, I actually saw the outline of my body off a transparent rock 15 or 20 feet below! What really looked strange to me (which I could never quite figure out) were kelp branches that seemed suspended 5 or 10 feet underwater. Anyway, I stayed focused and set my watch to 45 minutes. Then I spotted some cool, old cabins with faded pastel paint as landmarks or direction points. In short, and in my view, one of the hard parts about cold water swimming is dealing with the first 10 or 15 minutes of tingling all over the body with varying degrees of numbness. So, to sum up, 45 minutes of cold water swimming in the bank...

I was heading back to my suitcases on the beach when a guy walked over to me and said: "I like your stroke." I stepped back a little. He said, "you look surprised." I said "Yea, I guess I am, the truth is that I don't hear that too often. I guess swimmers just swim, anyways, it's nice to hear, thanks, I guess distance swimming isn't much of a spectator sport." He responded, "Sure, but are you kidding? Most people on the beach were watching you. People around here usually don't go out that far --you were "way" out there! By any chance, are you a swimmer in our big event this Sunday?" I said, "Yea, I am - guess I'll see what I have." He responded: "My name is Steve and it's great to meet you, and, you know what? I have 2 kayaks on the top of my jeep in the lot, why don't we meet later -- we could kayak around the island, you want to see the course, don't you?" I said "I'm John, and, sure, it would be great to see the course. We exchanged cell phone numbers and set up a 6:30 meeting at the marina. I then boarded a bus back to town, needless to say, happy and surprised (remember: I'm a New Yorker, and, generally, friendly offers don't come from strangers -- I'm used to all kinds of "other" offers though).

As I sat on the bus looking at the Inside Passage from my window, I got a call on my cell phone from a guy named Randy, a Pennock race kayaker. He asked, "John, we heard you were coming to town and we're having a party, more like a barbecue, later, can you make it?" I wanted to say "yes" right away, but I already had plans to kayak and I still needed to check into my \$14 a night hostel (important note: one with a 10PM curfew). Hey, guess that didn't leave much time for partying --not to mention the slight issue that I didn't have a car. Could I have said, "Sorry guys, I have to be home by 10PM, otherwise I will be locked out of my room?" So, to sum up, I had to say no to the party, but, I ask you, the reader, could I have been more "lucky" on my first few hours in Ketchikan?

Anyway, we had a great kayak trip around the Island and now it's the second day. I had to find my way back to the Inside Passage for another hour plus of swimming. It was another rare, warm, sunny, beautiful day (more luck?). My plan was Buggy Beach again. My cell phone went off again. This time it was a guy named Bruckner. "I'll be swimming in the race this Sunday too. Just wanted to know if you would join us for a swim at Settler's Cove, John? We got your number from another swimmer." I said, "well I'm already at Buggy." He responded, "Okay let's do it tomorrow." "No problem here, all good with me," I said quickly.

The next day, Thursday, I found a diner without "too many cruise-ship tourists" and started loading up on protein (3 eggs over medium). After that, I met Bruckner and Michelle (his wife) at a cool, little Red Bridge (I stopped at this bridge the day before to watch kids reel-in salmon every other minute) -I've never seen anything like it. Anyway, we forgot to tell each other what we looked like, ha! "Luckily," we were both holding sports bags, so it wasn't too hard to make a connection. Bruckner & Michelle are from the east coast and it turned out that we knew some of the same distance swimmers. I was beginning to feel more comfortable and "at home" by the minute.

After a 10 mile drive north parallel to the Inside Passage filled with little green islands backed by deep blue skies, all three of us hiked down to the water and got ready to jump in at the Settler's Cove shoreline. We did it! Surprisingly, the water at Settler's Cove felt about 5 to 7 degrees warmer than Buggy Beach. We started swimming north out towards some small, uninhabited Alaskan islands. Bruckner pulled ahead right away and I just did my best to follow his lead. As it turned out, Bruckner was not just a fast swimmer, he was the swimmer who won the Pennock Challenge in 2007. Michelle was also a great swimmer, so I found myself falling behind but stayed "within myself," and, therefore, comfortable with my pace. We swam for about an hour and headed back towards the great snow-capped mountains of Ketchikan.

Bruckner asked, "would you like to do a radio interview with us at a local Ketchikan radio station that is covering the Pennock Challenge - it's tomorrow, can you fit it in?" I think I wanted to wait a moment and shoot for a low key response, maybe something like "I'll check my schedule" but I guess I waited all of a split second and said loudly and emphatically: "Yes, count me in." The fact of the matter is that the Pennock Challenge USMS race is not only on the calendar of events in Ketchikan and talked about with frequency around town, it attracts some of the most-serious cold water distance swimmers out there. It is also a MAJOR fundraising event for diabetes. The director, Willie Schulz, founded the race five years ago and swims around Pennock Island each year. Willie has also successfully completed a Catalina Island swim, so he knows first-hand what serious cold-water swimming is all about.

Anyway, back to my race preparation plan and to sum up, on my third day in Alaska, I had three cold-water swims under my belt, met some first-rate swimmers and very interesting people, and, to top it all off, I had plans to do a radio interview!

On Friday, I did the high protein (again, 3 eggs over medium) breakfast thing again. After that, Bruckner, Michelle and I met at the 'Little Red Bridge' then we took a two minute walk to do the fun radio interview with Willie and his family. At this time, I think I was starting to feel like a rock star. After the radio interview, I made it a point to let people know I was one of the swimmers in the Pennock Challenge. By taking this approach, I was able to get free organic popcorn, discounted prices on health food, free tasty granola bars with almonds, some extra time at the offbeat Alaska Internet Café, and, lastly, some non-filtered ego gratification. Ha, people I didn't know started introducing me to other people I didn't know! Go figure? Hey, now all I had to do was handle the slight issue of swimming around Pennock Island on Sunday!

A few hours after the radio interview, I met Bruckner and Michelle at the Little Red Bridge and we drove north again to Settler's Cove. We stopped along the way to pick up Claudia Rose (a California swimmer & Catalina Island finisher) and a friend of hers. Fifteen minutes later all five of us were back in Alaskan water! Claudia and I were swimming side by side for 20 minutes when she shouted, "John, there is a sea otter right behind you." I turned around and did not see anything but crystal-clear, blue-green water. Later on, she told me the huge sea otter was trailing me for about 10 minutes. Be that as it may, all of us headed back but Claudia and I tried to take a shortcut by turning into a cove. Bad move: it took us 10 minutes to find our way out and another 10 minutes to swim out. We finally made it back to the starting point safe and sound. No sea creatures to be found. Did I/we get "lucky" again? To close: add another hour of seriously cold water swimming to the race preparation log!

After the swim, we all met Willie Schulz, the race director, and Michelle Macy at the local Ketchikan diner for a nice pre-race get-together. Michelle swam the English Channel in 10 hours (very fast) a few years ago and did the Pennock Challenge in 2007. In 2008, she did the great Boston Light swim. Needless to say, she is one of the top cold water distance swimmers on the circuit. She showed us all a neat trick at the dinner table --she had a way of placing a spoon on her nose so that the spoon would not come off no matter which way she moved...She seemed to be having a lot of fun with it. After the trick, she gave me a few cold water tips. She seemed to know exactly what happens to a swimmer's body at varying temperatures. Did she think 55 or 56 degree water was cold? Yes... Like other elite swimmers that I have met or known, she seemed unpretentious and simply "fun to be around."

After dinner we all met at the airport hotel for a race briefing. The chairs were marked with swimmers' names. In the chair next to mine was a friendly young woman. She said, "John? Hi, I'm your kayaker, Amanda." I smiled and said, "Hey, thanks for being part of this. So, ready, Amanda?" I guess I had five important questions (maybe more) on my mind but I quickly posed the most basic one. So, I guess you are very familiar with Pennock, Amanda, right? "Not really, I've never been out that way," she said quickly and firmly. Guess my follow-up questions wouldn't work well at this point." She read my surprised facial expression immediately. "It shouldn't be too much of a problem, I know people that do it all the time," she said as a matter of fact. "Alright, do you kayak a lot?" I responded. "Not really, I wish I could get out a lot more, the weather is not that great up here," she said as she shook her head from side to side. At this point, I tried to analyze things or put things in perspective. The first and only phrase that came to mind was "not good." I tried to get beyond that but when I tried to take a different perspective about the situation, the same thought kept popping up in my mind - not good... not good... not good...not good... not good...

The meeting progressed and we were all given maps of the course while Willie walked us through the

tricky parts of the course. Amanda and I took notes about eddies, kelp, point to point direction, currents, possible wind action, waves on the south end, etc. We talked about GU, Gatorade and back up equipment (spare goggles, ear plugs, etc). As the meeting progressed, Amanda looked involved and seemed to have a very quick and sure grasp of the information given. She then turned to me and said, "Oh I forgot to tell you, I used to kayak a lot as a summer camp instructor a number of years ago. The Pennock will be fun for me too -- I haven't gone longer than 2 hours though." Anyway, Willie then ended the pre-race meeting and we all parted.

The next time we would all see each other was on Sunday morning at 9AM at Thomas Basin (right next to the "Little Red Bridge"). So, in short, I walked away feeling good about the race and Amanda. She was honest, smart, had kayak experience, and, more than that, she seemed to be very intuitive and task oriented. I also sensed that she had a no-nonsense side to her. If I needed a push or to hear the words "Get moving or no slacking off, John," she would say them with no second-thoughts. I was also sure she would take care of the feeding part without issues, and, yes, I was "lucky" to have Amanda as my kayaker. To sum up succinctly, things seemed in order, the rest would be up to me and me alone. It was almost time. One day left.

Some people made plans to meet up pre-race day and some made plans to party right after our meeting, but me, I wanted to be on my own at this time. I headed towards home (my hostel bed) , but, on my way, I stopped off at the Sourdough Bar in town. After all, I was a tourist too. The Sourdough bar had dozens of interesting, huge photos of Alaskan shipwrecks on the walls. Truth be known, I guess I just wanted to connect with average Alaskans for awhile. I ordered a Heineken (carbohydrates?) and talked about Alaskan bears, camping, Jon Krakauer, Robert Service, Jack London and The Bridge To Nowhere (pre Palin) with a few people next to me. Have to admit, I drank my second Heineken (more carbohydrates?) when me and this Seattle guy exchanged ideas about Krakauer's INTO THE WILD book. Oh, by the way, population statistics show that there are ten guys to one woman in Alaska , and, yes, the population in the bar seemed to reflect those numbers exactly (counting the woman bartender). Oh well...

On Saturday morning (pre-race day), my plan was to play tourist. I took cool photos of white capped mountains outside my door and hung around with some cool Australian guests at the hostel, in short: I just wanted to relax and build up my strength, which brings me to my last race preparation issue besides getting a good sleep: eating a damn good meal filled with carbohydrates. As you probably guessed, I was on a tight budget (no car rental, hostel sleeping arrangement). I just remembered my long-time swimming partner, Tom Blatt, gave me the phone number of a family relative that owned a Chinese/American restaurant in Ketchikan. So I called Rudy & Clara (the owners) and they gave me directions. As it turned out, their cool Diaz Café was only 2 blocks away from the "Little Red Bridge." More "luck?" I walked in and sat at the counter with mostly locals and fisherman. Rudy & Clara and the Diaz Café are an interesting success story. They came to Alaska from the Philippines and made the Diaz Café into a popular, first class café.

Both Rudy and Clara were as nice as could be to me. We talked about the race, New York, Tom's family and Ketchikan. Since I have a true and real weakness for Chinese food , it wasn't hard for me to order. I saw some orders (huge bowls) coming out of the kitchen. I said to Rudy, "that big bowl of soup over there is what I want , what is it?" "Chinese noodle soup with vegetables - trust me, it's good -real good," he said. I looked it up on the menu --it was 9 dollars. "Okay, let's do it," I said. Soon after, Rudy brought the huge noodle dish out from the kitchen himself. He smiled and said , "we made it especially for you, John." I saw 3 or 4 boiled eggs right on top with all sorts of Chinese vegetables hanging from the sides. It seemed to me that the bowl Rudy was carrying was truly heavy. Anyway, I ate it all! (I didn't even have to pace myself). I wanted to stop at the health food store before it closed , so it was time to go. I asked for a check, and Rudy said "No check, John, don't even think about paying." "Are you sure? Well, thanks. That's awfully nice," was all I could think of saying. I think they both sensed that I really appreciated their kindness, and, again, I was on a tight budget. We said goodbye and I got halfway up the block when I realized I had my camera with me. I rushed back to the Diaz Café, then we all posed for some great photos. In parting the second time, Rudy and Clara told me they would be rooting for me to finish with all their might. As I walked away down the street (a block short of the "Little Red Bridge"), I smiled and asked myself: more "luck?" Hey, I then made my way up a steep hill on an old side street to the cool, little Alaska Internet Café. To close, it was late in the afternoon on the day before the race , and, to sum up, my stomach was full, my body felt fine and my mind was free of issues. Nothing else but the race mattered to me at this point...

After emailing friends and swimmers, handling some business issues and surfing the internet, I left the Alaska Internet café. I walked 4 or 5 blocks to the hostel. It was 9PM. I got my race supplies together and I planned to get a full 8 hours of sleep. There were only 2 other people in the hostel room and both were already asleep so the lights were out. I pulled my sleeping bag over me and looked up through my window to the bright Alaskan stars. The next thing I heard was my alarm clock - it was 6AM. Eight full hours of sleep -perfect!...I got up, took a warm shower, put on comfortable clothes, then I picked up my race bag... Hey, time to go...

I stopped by the same diner (the one without tourists) and ordered a lightly buttered roll with a large cup of coffee to go. The waitress recognized me, and, yes, she knew where I was headed. "Hey, good luck, big guy," she said with a warm smile. "Thanks, I'll do okay," I smiled back. I walked out the door then over the the "Little Red Bridge" to Thomas Basin. The air was damp and cold (50 degrees), the sky was grey, but the wind was still. I entered the marina an hour early. I looked out at the marina as the rugged and weathered Alaskan fishing boats headed out to sea one by one.

Sue Free, a San Francisco swimmer, waved to me and I walked over to be with her and the group. We all talked and bonded for a little while and then we walked to our assigned boats. I rolled on globs of Body-Glove all over my neck before slipping into my four year old sleeveless Orca wetsuit then I jumped into the 32 foot boat with nine or ten other swimmers. Soon after, the boat was at a red buoy (starting and finishing point). The kayaks were already lined up and ready to go. I saw Amanda and she waved to me with a big smile. I tossed my race bag to her with all I needed packed inside. The wind started to pick up and the cold, grey water got choppy fast. The conditions didn't matter to me at this point, I just wanted to go.

It was time to jump. I pushed off from the boat with a slight sigh. Somehow, the water seemed to be colder than before. I met Amanda behind the red buoy near all the other swimmers. The gun went off! Finally! Amanda was on my right side paddling away and I tried to follow her lead. That was our plan, she was to lead the way, going from point to point. For the first 15 minutes I tried to find my pace and rhythm. I was holding back knowing that my adrenaline would speed up my stroke count naturally. I saw a few swimmers pass but I was fully aware that I was in it for the long haul and I had to be focused and stay "within myself." At this point, I wanted to use my body for power. I rolled from side to side while extending my arms fully and holding my glide a little longer than usual (Stefan -Total Immersion coach) "You're doing great," Amanda shouted.

Time for my first GU break. Amanda was only a few feet away and passed me the wild berry GU. "I'm so impressed with you," she said. The words were nice to hear -the break was fast and smooth. I couldn't help but notice dark grey clouds coming down upon us. The water was also dark and the wind seemed to pick up. I quickly started my stroke. I felt myself on top of the chop and below the chop. I was starting to swallow saltwater so I changed to left-side breathing. Things started to get interesting. I was now into the second hour of the swim and I tried looking ahead for the southernmost tip of Pennock. All I saw were trees, dark seas and dark skies. Better to look into the mysterious Alaskan salty sea depths below, I thought. Some time passed and now I was at the south end of the island. Amanda was right beside me as usual. Time for more caffeinated GU and more orange Gatoraid. Done. Amanda and I knew this part would be tricky (heavy kelp, eddies and wave action). We planned right from the get-go to cut the island as close to shore as possible even if there were heavy kelp issues. After a few minutes of knocking into kelp branches and ducking under waves, I decided to go with my breast stroke. Guess things couldn't have gotten too much worse, right? Wrong: now add-on an eddy from hell. I turned my crawl stroke up to ninety percent and ten minutes later I finally broke free. Amanda was getting closer now (she circled the island about 20 yards wider than me to stay clear of the heavy kelp). We were now heading north and past the half-way point, from a swimmer's point of view that meant that I was "heading home."

The water got smooth which enabled me to get my body into a much more streamline position. From that point on, I would be swallowing a lot less saltwater due to the changed swimming conditions. Amanda was now by my side in perfect position. The wind disappeared and the sky seemed brighter. Time for another GU. "John: look, look, a huge cruise ship, we're almost there!" Amanda said excitedly. Sure

enough , it looked no more than a mile away to me. Yet, I knew that it was over 3 miles away according to the charts. “Are we getting a push,” I asked. “We could be,” Amanda said. It felt like we were, and, at that time, I thought I had a good hour of swimming left in me. I decided to pick up the pace.

I kept swimming for another half hour at a faster pace but I noticed that the cruise ship wasn’t getting much closer. Could it be that I was in denial from the first sighting of the cruise ship? Answer: yes. After all, I knew the distance of the race and the length of the island. I found out later that there was no assist on the way back - it was simply dead water. Back to the race, I swam on as hard as I could and tried not to look at the cruise-ship. For the first time I “needed” to stop. I was over 4 hours into the race. At this point, my arms were very sore- I was having trouble lifing them out of the water. My face was starting to feel very numb and my stomach was queasy. I think Amanda knew I didn’t have much left but she didn’t let on. “Not far now, John,” she said firmly. “I’m damn tired, Amanda, I don’t know.” “Look, the red buoy (finish line) is right around the corner,” she said as she pointed north. As I turned to look, I started to throw-up. All that was coming out of my mouth was warm liquid, and lots of it. When I turned back to Amanda, she turned away quickly (pretending not to see what just happened). She waited a moment or two, her facial expression turned very serious as she looked deeply into my eyes, then she just pointed her finger forward toward the finish without saying a word... Yes, you bet I was very “lucky” to have her as my kayaker. The water seemed to turn colder -it started to feel like ice. I started shivering. I was also getting a nasty cramp in my right thigh that seemed to spread through my entire body when I moved it (I have never felt anything quite like it). Obviously, things were not good: I was starting to doubt myself, I was damn cold and my body had lost a lot of power, but, that being said, I had the feeling that my kayaker thought I might be able to make it to the finish.

Deep down, I knew I had a little something left but I still wasn’t sure if what I had was enough. I turned on my back and did backstroke for twenty or thirty yards. I flipped over to begin my very slow crawl stroke. Now I would have to use everything I was taught to make it to the red buoy. I thought of my coaches at the CP club. What could I use now? Could I swim using less breaths like Lauren taught? What about Rod’s focus on straight leg kicking? How about Brian’s body rotation points? Could I get my elbows high like Cami wanted? The truth is that I was swimming on instinct now. The real question was, “how much did I want to finish?” I guess I knew all along that it would be my heart that would ultimately determine my fate. Back to the race: I continued on. My concentration was slipping away. I was weak, very weak.

At this point, I wasn’t sure if my arms were clearing the water. “John, look, there’s the buoy, you’re almost home,” Amanda shouted. Yes, there it was! She was not kidding this time. It was maybe 200 yards away! I put my head down and just kept my very slow pace consistent. I started counting strokes to myself: one, two, three... I knew that I would be a Pennock Challenge finisher before I got to one hundred fifty! Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... I heard Bruckner Chase and other swimmers cheering me from two boats just south of the red buoy. I felt like it was all a dream. I was now within five yards of the red buoy. I held my breath and didn’t pick my head up until I touched it or hugged it. I was now at the center of Alaska’s Inside Passage-- it felt like I was at the center of the universe. I then turned to Amanda-- she winked and I smiled. People were still clapping. I made a fist and lifted my arm as high as I could!

