

I woke on the overcast morning of Sunday 16th September feeling rested and ready for the big day ahead. After a big bowl of muesli and some stretching, I set off with my 3 pals Ruth, Margie and Harry to Totnes where it all started. The starting area was a green next to the river packed with humans who hadn't managed to leave their fish ancestry behind in wetsuits and swimming hats, some even donning their goggles on shore eager to get going! At this point I began to feel nervous and in denial about what I was about to do. After the weeks of working towards it, was this really it?! Bit by bit and faff by faff, I became one of the fish people, ready with all of my gear. The yellow hatted 'fast wave' meanwhile were having their safety briefing and were led to the water to start their journey. My red hatted 'medium wave' group then assembled for our briefing...always swim to the right of the river or you'll be hit by a boat, wave with one hand if you're in distress, if you're floating on your back they'll assume you're dead! All stuff to ease the nerves that were causing my dry throat and low level panic! With nervous chatter all around we shuffled down to the river and with a short count down, in we splashed. "It's f***ing freezing!" I shouted with a mixture of exhilaration and dread at the thought of being in it for the next few hours. The start off was a little challenging with swimmers all around trying to find their own space and pace...it took a fair bit of looking up and concentration to make my way. Despite this I managed to find time to wave at my loyal swim supporters on the river bank until I realised it looked like I was calling in distress so got my head down.

It took a while to get into a rhythm, getting to know the river and slowly feeling at ease. The scenery was beautiful and intermittently I slowed to do some breast stroke and back crawl to take it all in- big trees, upturned roots coming out of the water, green luscious fields. The twists and turns of the river meant there was always something new to see around the corner. After sometime I rested upright for a moment and put my foot down only to feel something squidgy which my brain immediately interpreted as

a river monster- naturally- but was actually mud on which I could stand. This shallow section was very pleasing and I made the most of the opportunity to have a 2 minute back stretch, freeing up my lower back which becomes over arched because of the buoyancy of the wetsuit.

It was a little odd not knowing how much distance I had travelled, unlike training where I knew exactly how far I'd swum. However this brought a pleasant surprise when I saw the first feeding station emerging round the corner, a sign that I had done 4km.

The feeding station was marked with a sense of urgency. Swimmers had to grab onto a rope on the side or the back of the pontoon which was a little tricky with a constant flow of swimmers. "Don't hold onto the front of the station swimmers, jelly babies, bananas, water, well done you're doing great, if you've finished please move on" shouted the volunteers. With some flailing to get there I found my place and like a little fledgling hungry for their share shouted for 'jelly babies please!' In the excitement I drank a bottle of water very quickly and may have gobbled a few more jelly babies than I needed in about 30 seconds, meaning the next section of the swim was characterised by some jelly baby/salt water/fresh water drank too quickly burping issues.

At least it was something to think about. An endurance swim does get rather repetitive and my mind went between being occupied by big life ponderings to not much at all. Three musical notes joined me for a little time which went in rhythm with my strokes, rather nice really! Without swimming alongside someone, it can be a solitary affair too, which is partly what I love about it, but I did reach out for some human connection at times - waving to the tourists cruising along aboard the Dartmouth Daily Express, looking all cosy and wrapped up in their dry fabric garments. I also chatted to certain people looking out for our safety on paddle boards along the way; they all seemed to be having a nice day out and were very caring. One chap informed and he said he'd never seen someone look so happy at being



told there was a feeding station ahead! It made me realise I was actually getting tired now, and cold, and was in need of a drink and energy gel (nb no jelly babies this time), but also very pleased that I had managed 7km.

The start after the second stop wasn't easy and the last 3 km were tough. The sense we were in a wider section of the river and with swimmers being more spread out, and feeling like I wanted to get it over with made it psychologically more difficult. It being choppy meaning it was physically more arduous and a muscle twinge that had been causing some problems in training caught my attention in pain in varying levels of intensity. I made sure I had some time doing some gentle back strokes and stretching and continued to appreciate the beauty including a flock of 10 geese flying overhead, noisily discussing their formation and destination. My inner dialogue became more conflicted in this section..."This is ridiculous, I'm tired" to "It's ok, just get on with it, you won't always feel like this, think of all of those amazing supporters and women this is for", and I didn't know one could half laugh/half cry underwater in delirium.

We went round a corner, then another, and another, until I heard a rumour from a swimmer nearby that The End was finally round the next corner. I decided that if this was true, it was time to go for it. Finding strength from somewhere, I got faster and saw the big "10km" finish sign in view offering what I can only imagine an oasis offers a thirsty woman in the desert!



I imagined so many Mo Farah type endings, but the real one wasn't quite as heroic since to get out involved squidging and slipping on thick mud with very tired limbs! The lovely volunteers congratulated me as I stumbled ashore, grinning like a Cheshire cat until I found Harry who accepted a soaking river hug. We made our way to the celebration area where there was a bar, food and music and most importantly, a hot tub! With my last ounce of strength I fought off my wetsuit and hopped into the tub, which was heavenly.

Feeling slightly deranged, I sat sipping my complimentary hot chocolate sharing experiences with other swimmers, some having done it before and some the first time. "Would you do it again?" someone asked. I pondered thinking about what a well organised event it had been, the massive sense of accomplishment, and all that money raised through kind donations, and thought you know what, I just might!

