



A Brief Event History

1916 - 2010

The idea came to life in the last peaceful days before World War I, when San Diego was home for the World's Fair Pan American Exposition of 1916. Pride in America, pride in Southern California and civic pride in San Diego was the tone of the World's Fair. The World's Fair Committee challenged each community to showcase the city by hosting a special event. La Jollans asked "What better way to share our beautiful seaside community than by hosting an ocean swim?"

The World's Fair Committee sponsored the event officially known as the *La Jolla Rough Water Race*, also known as the *Biological Pier Swim* by many locals. On a chilly day for summer, seven men entered the water on the north side of the recently constructed Biological Pier (Scripps Institute) and finished, approximately one and seven-tenths (1.7) miles to the south, at La Jolla Cove. Charles "Chubby" Shields was the winner in the first swim with a time of forty-eight minutes. Al Iller set his own record in 1916 as the "Official Last" in a time of one hour and fifty-four minutes. Years later Max Miller, author of *I Cover the Water Front*, brought national fame to the Swim with his famous "Official Last" races against Iller. Miller competed for over thirty years, each of which he successfully finished last.

That first Rough Water Swim was such a great success that the organizers thought this Race should become an annual summer event. But this was not yet the case . . . World War I intervened.

The second Swim took place in 1923 with Eddie Herzog the winner in a time of forty-five minutes, three minutes faster than the winner of the first Swim. In 1924 the Committee failed to obtain a chairman and sponsor but rallied in 1925, under the guidance of Al Iller and the American Legion, with a race and a star. Olympic swimmer Florence Chambers entered and bested men and women alike.



The La Jolla Rough Water Swim became a truly annual event in 1931 being held every year thereafter except in 1935, when sponsorship supported the San Diego Exposition of that year, and in 1948 when concerns of Polio forced cancellation. The last cancellation was in 1959 when unusual shark sightings were reported by the News Media. Unofficially one of the Swim organizers, local businessman Douglas McKellar, in a display of confidence entered the water at the appointed time and swam the course. No sharks were sighted.

Over the Swim's 94 year history the course has changed several times. The first Swims were from the Scripps Institute pier to the Cove (1.7 miles). In 1941, after complaints that the course was unnecessarily grueling, officials made the first course change, starting at the recently completed La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club and finishing, as before, at the Cove (2/3 of a mile). In 1946 the original pier to Cove course was tried one last time after which, in 1947, the current one mile triangular course originated. In 1952 a Junior course (150 yards) was added to give younger swimmers a chance to compete. Later, in 1982, the Junior course was lengthened to its present distance of two hundred and fifty yards. Most recently, in 1993, the challenging Gatorman® 3 Mile Championship was added to accommodate the numerous requests by elite swimmers. Coincidentally, the Gatorman® course is similar to the "grueling" original 1916 route, with one exception, today's elite Gatorman® men and women now swim the original course twice, from the Cove to the pier *and* back.

Today's triangular courses and the natural arena like characteristics of the La Jolla Cove offer spectators an exceptional view of the entire Rough Water Swim. Spectators of the early Swims, for the most part, had to make a choice of watching either the start or the finish. This was indeed a difficult choice as an uncredited journalist wrote "One of the greatest thrills in water sports is to watch the hundreds of contestants strike the Pacific at the start of the La Jolla Rough Water Swim." The finish, of course, has obvious appeal.



While the course has undergone few changes, there has been a remarkable expansion in the number of swimmers. Seven men entered the first Swim in 1916. The 1925 event hosted eight men and eleven woman. Later in 1938 eighty-two swimmers participated. By 1950 entries had increased to one hundred five, and in 1970 entries broke through the three hundred level. The one thousand swimmer mark was shattered in 1984, followed in 1996 by the first two thousand swimmer event. Currently the Swim averages over two thousand competitors, which has earned this annual summer classic the national ranking of #1 (America's Premier Rough Water SwimSM) and one of the reasons the event has been affectionately nicknamed *The Big Wet One*SM (2392 swimmers participated in 2009). The Swim, however, will unlikely grow much larger in the future. In 1999 a limit was placed on the number of competitors to preserve the high standards established by the early Rough Water Swim Committees.

The World's Fair Committee sponsored the first Rough Water Swim followed by the American Legion, Mrs. Morrison Hopkins of the Casa de Mañana, the La Jolla Chamber of Commerce, La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club, the AAU and the La Jolla Town Council.

Over the past 94 years the sponsorship has changed, the course has been altered slightly and the number of participants has increased. However the original goals, ". . . to establish a nonprofit traditional swimming event with no motive other than to provide a first class aquatic event for swimmers" remain the same today (Quote source: 1925 LJRWS Bylaws).

Our community has a great deal to be proud of. Through the financial support and efforts of many local businesses, residents and swimmers, this event has withstood the test of time. In an era when everything seems to be changing around us, it is reassuring to know that near the end of each summer, down at the La Jolla Cove, history does indeed repeat itself.