

Sharks: an onlooker's view

(from Shelley Clark)

I love swimming the Cole classic. For me it is the premier ocean swim on the NSW calendar. There is always tough competition and great racing. But more than anything it is just a really good day out.

Today was the day of not only the traditional 2km Cole classic swim but also the 2nd annual (well let's hope it will be annual) 10km rough water swim.

The race started in little Manly Cove and we completed a loop inside the harbour before starting our journey around and along the north headland. The water was very clear today and it felt like you could see for miles under the water. But the water was also very choppy and the swells were really picking up the farther you headed out.

But I'm not here to talk about the beauty of the sheer rock faces plunging deep into the water! I'm here to talk about the sharks.

Trudee (Hutchinson) and I were coming up to the end of North Head ready to turn up the coast towards Manly beach (about 4.5km into the race) when all of a sudden a boat came rushing towards me, stopped and started screaming 'Get in the boat. Get in the boat. There's a shark!'

So with my 2 hands in the air I got yanked from the water and thrown in the boat (and as it turns out I have a few bruised ribs from landing on the side of the boat. After a visit to physiotherapist Alicia Cleland, wife of Grant, I found out that the pains in my chest were not in fact heartburn but small nerves being pinched every time I decided to take a breath. But nothing a few quick manipulations could fix. Thanks Alicia).

To be honest, at this point I (and the other swimmers behind Josh and Deke) really didn't take the threat of there being a shark in the water very seriously. For all we knew it was a baby Port Jackson shark 5km away too busy feeding on prawns to even care that there were 21 tasty swimmers hanging around ready to provide a good feed.

The support crews, lifeguards and race officials moved quickly, efficiently and impressively, gathering up all 21 swimmers in a matter of minutes. Not an easy task since the distance between Josh (the leader) and the last placed swimmers was probably about 1-1.5km.

I have never seen such a professional rescue operation. The boys were absolute heroes today and all I can say is THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU.

Once everyone was pulled out (and Spot Anderson had finished his hoot on swimming a dash for cash from Fairy Bower ! to Manly beach), all the boats, skis, jet skis and paddlers gathered together for a head count. It wasn't until this point that I and the other swimmers really started to realise the magnitude of how serious it could have been.

The first report said shark - no big deal. It then went to 8 foot shark way out to sea. Scary but still no biggy. Then the serious reports started coming in.

As it turns out Josh Santacaterina (the lead swimmer and Australian champion) was swimming along strongly when one of the life guards on a jet ski spotted an 8 foot (to heighten the scary aspect of this story please insert here the scariest kind of shark you know, either great white, bull shark or tiger shark) just metres away and immediately acted. By the time the lifeguard reached Josh the shark was only 5m away. Josh was scooped up and rushed away looking behind to see a big grey fin cutting through the water.

The jet skis first stop after Josh was to Deke Zimmerman (the 2nd swimmer not far behind Josh who will be swimming 70km for charity in March-Manly Cove to Parramatta wharf and back). While both boys were on the boat watching the shark who had haunted Josh, they then spotted another (to heighten the scary aspect of this story please insert here the scariest kind of shark you know. either great white bull shark or tiger shark) shark much bigger than the first in the same area.

The first time I got to speak to Josh was at the head count for all the swimmers, him in one boat me in another. The reality of what could have happened really hit home when I yelled out 'hey Joshy did you see the shark?' and he answered with a 'yeah it was a few metres away!'

The thought of having one of your best friends coming so close to such a dangerous situation really hit home for me and I am very glad the race got called. In saying that if the Coles decided to re-run the same race the same course tomorrow I would do it in a second.

As an ocean swimmer you hear and you're interested in all the statistics. Statistics like -

- there are only 7 shark deaths around the world a year.
- no one has died of a shark attack in Sydney harbour since 1936
- all sharks are harmless, they are just curious at who you are and what you're doing
- you have! more chance of being killed by a hippopotamus than a shark.

But statistics aside how many people actually swim in an area like the Sydney head lands which is a known area for aggressive sharks? Not many. Am I scared of sharks? No, not really (I am more scared of blueys and jellyfish). Am I glad I was pulled from the water today? Absolutely.

It wasn't until well after the incident that we got to speak to the lifeguards and support crew about their thoughts on the day's events. My handler for the race, a young boy called John who did a great job, asked one of the rescuing life guards what kind of shark it was and his answer was 'a big angry one' a couple of the boys on jet skis had attempted to scare the shark off by circling it (a movement that will usually send the shark on its way) but the shark stood its ground, unfazed by the commotion. There was even a story of the shark getting agitated and attempting to whip the jet skis with its tail.

All in all it was a very exciting eventful day. Once again thanks to the Coles for putting on a great event. Big thanks to all the life guards for being so incredibly efficient in the rescue and finally to Josh 'glad you're still with us buddy' xx

Shelley (Clark)

More shark witnesses

(from Martin Palfrey)

Congratulations to Stephen Ford and his team for the well organised North Head swim last Sunday.

This year the swim was opened up to non- elite swimmers like myself who love to challenge themselves. After completing the South Head swim last year, I couldn't resist the double.

Stephen even phoned me twice in the lead up to the swim to keep me informed of proceedings. The low participation rate must have been down to the shark risk (around 15 guys and 10 girls).

The shortened race was fantastic, with five of us going hammer and tong in a group for around three k's before splitting up, myself and two others heading for the shallows and the others staying out wide.

I had a boat with my mate Chipper Bob driving and deck hand Scotty, whilst most swimmers either had a board or ski paddler with them.

There were about four jet skis, two rubber ducks, the coast guard and a couple of other boats when the race was stopped, after an hour and 4.5km, we were spread over several hundred metres with myself around midfield swimming beside a girl, and going well, I thought, for an old bloke.

I was in front of my friends Spotty and Devo, anyway! (sorry guys, I had to mention that).

My first thought was to keep swimming when they said a shark was in the area as you expect them out there. However, when I was told that the race was cancelled and saw other swimmers in Bob's boat, I looked down into the deep blue and back at my feet and thought 'bugger this!'

Bob's 16ft tinny was getting a bit crowded with 10 people and 2 boards aboard when Spotty Dog arrived and yelled 'What's going on!' Now Spotty knows his FINA rules and saw his disqualified rivals aboard the boat.

Thinking of a top 10 placing, he yelled out 'I'm going on!' 'You can't Spot' I said, 'It's cancelled!' With that he approached the boat yelling 'I want it recorded that I was reluctantly dragged out of the water by the leg!' Done, Spot.

Now news of sharks travels fast and by the time we got to Manly the beach was buzzing.

One random bloke told me that four of them were menacing the leader. Another said there was either one twelve metre shark or twelve one metre sharks Wow!

My three kids were entered with me in a family team for the Cole. When I met them on the beach they had terror in their eyes. 'I'm not going in there!' they all said. I finally convinced them that the shark was five k's away and we were lucky enough to win, just edging out Spotty's brothers who were all blaming each other. Thanks to ZIP for their generous prize -a \$2,500 hydrotap (filtered boiling & chilled water). It is now mounted on my sink and works like a charm.

We love the Cole plates as well.

The Cole Classic is a great community event and still the only swim which has a family team category.

Later at Bronte Surf Club I spoke to Rod Kerr, the ex-pro surfer turned life-guard about the shark. Turns out he was on his jet ski talking to Josh Santacaterina's paddler when they saw the shark only 15 metres from Josh heading towards him.

Rod drove his jet ski directly at the shark and spun around in front of it to divert it away. Rod then picked up the oblivious Josh and took him to a nearby boat. You owe Rod a beer, Josh.

The other jet skis tried to move the shark away but it wasn't in the mood, so the Race Director Stephen Ford promptly stopped the event and we were all out of the water in minutes. Rod informed me that I was mad for swimming out there and that the whole thing scared the bejesus out of him.

Why did I enter the race? I am asked. My training partner Murray Rose has a theory. On Tuesday morning at the pool, the guys were talking about the aborted race when Hubert asked Murray if he had swum in the race. 'I wouldn't be that stupid' came his reply.

A good little hitout in the lead up to my Rotto solo attempt Sat week.

Cheers