Watermen in the Open Sea by Original Watermen

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The idea of open water swimming is perhaps as old as mankind, but the modern age of this sport could possibly be pinpointed to the year 1810 when poet Lord Byron swam Hellespontâ€”known today as the Dardanellesâ€”the strait separating Eastern Europe and the Turkish coast of Asia. When one thinks of classic Watermen, Lord Byron seems an odd choice, but his notable swim began a tradition that slowly spread around the world and after 200 years came back around to Hellespont. For the past 25 years the Byron Hellespont Swim has brought open water swimmers from around Turkey and abroad. Last year the event drew more than 450 watermenâ€”or aspiring watermanâ€”from around the world.

There is something uniquely compelling about swimming in open water. There are no boundaries. The water is under the control of the natural elements. It is a more direct and challenging connection to the larger world. Swimming in the ocean, one can appreciate that the expanse covers the vast majority of the globe. The straight traversed by Lord Byron is the same water filling and touching every ocean in the world. True watermen recognize the fluidity of the currents around the world, the continuity of the flow.

In the first modern Olympic Games in Athens, Greece in 1896, competitions in swimming were held in open water. In 2008, the Olympics included a 10km open water swim. In recent years the popularity of open water swimming has risen with the publication of best-selling books on what has come to be called wild swimming.

In addition to competitions specifically for open swimming, triathlons have also gained popularity in recent years with an open water component as a part of the program. The Iron Man competition in Hawaii began in 1978 and made watermen out of people who might otherwise have stuck to land-based competition. Though most triathlons are a combination of running, biking and swimming, many triathletes consider the swimming portion the most difficult.

Unlike air, water is a medium that demands effort and respect simply to exist within it. It takes effort just to remain still. Water rewards discipline and control, but even then allows only so much freedom. Watermen know this. They know that water is a difficult partner, but that difficulty is the means of greater accomplishment. Swimming is not an easy thing to do. It takes a great deal of energy to overcome the relentless pull of the water against you. And when the finish line may be several miles away that pull requires the greatest training and focus to overcome.

We at Original Watermen salute those who rise to the challenge of the open water and earn their salt in that challenging environment. There is little more satisfying than outlasting the forces of nature in a difficult dance to reach the finish line.

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