**Savaii Swim - Jekyll and Hyde of a Swim to Savaii**

*Photo 1: Good friends Rosie and Mike at Swim 3 of the Samoa Swim Series at Sinalei last week. They swam to Savaii on Wednesday.*

*Photo 2 & 3: Mike and Rosie on the Savaii crossing on Wednesday.*

*Photo 4: Mike and Rosie’s swim paths, Mike is the red and Rosie the green line.*

It was the perfect day for a swim and the worst day for a swim. On Wednesday Aug 12th I guided three friends in a swim from Upolu to Savaii. We started off at 5.23am from the ferry terminal at Mulfanua. The aim was to swim to Salelologa 22.3kms away. In the swim were Kane Orr, 42 yrs from Canberra and two NZers Mike Cochrane, 33yrs from Auckland and Rosie Sharman 31yrs, formerly of the UK and now a resident of Auckland. Mike and Kane are regulars at the Samoa Swim Series and this was Rosie’s first time here. She swam the three SSS swims as well plus the long distance 10km and 5km races before SSS.

We were 20mins late with the start of the swim. Kane and Mike stuck together for the first hour until daylight and Rosie had a boat to herself. Each had kayak support and I was on the kayak for Mike. Kane had a boat to himself too, and Mike was a floater - actually he shared a boat with Rosie but you cannot contain Mike. On Kane's boat was his wife Narelle and Pauline English who swam to Apolima Island the day before from the mainland. That in itself is a huge feat. Dave Champion, Pauline's husband, was on the kayak. On Rosie's boat was Scotty Rowlands from Adelaide and the two boatmen with Shane Taivai Paulo on the kayak for her. He was Amazing!! Mike and I were on our own. The two Alia’s are from Manono, our regular supply of boats for the long swims we have been doing around the western side of Upolu.

The idea for the swim came from Kane, and I wanted to help him achieve his goal of swimming to Savaii, but I then realised my timing was all wrong. The last thing I wanted to do after two weeks of a busy Swim Series and Warrior Race was to spend a full day on the water on an island-to-island 22km swim. The other big reason for doing this swim from my perspective was to test it out for the first race across the Apolima Strait from Mulifanua to Salelologa in April 2016. That will be an annual event bringing more new people into the country that would not otherwise visit Samoa.

The swim was meant for Monday 10th August, but the bad weather meant it was delayed. Mind you, after a torrid week of SSS events a full cancellation would be a welcome relief. But I had made a commitment to Kane and I was going to see it through. It was good Mike and Rosie joined the swim.

Finally, the weather forecast looked good for Wednesday. Light winds was on the forecast all day and right through the day. But until Wednesday, the coastal forecast was less than marginal - I even posited an alternative coastal 22km swim in the event of a full cancellation. But with the good weather forecast for Wednesday, I made the call for the full swim starting at 5am.

I was up at 2am getting things ready and was at the swim site in Mulifanua by 3.30am. The two boats arrived at the Airport Lodge in Mulifanua where Kane and Mike and crew were staying, those were loaded with supplies. Still we were a bit late, starting 20mins behind schedule at 5.23am.

The morning was perfect, the sea was flat and a perfect day for a swim. The surprising thing was, Rosie led for the first 8kms of the race. Mike and Kane exited the Mulifanua channel quite wide and lost ground from the start. Soon after daylight when I became useful Mike and I took off. Kane by that stage very early on in the swim had had several jelly fish attacks. He was in some discomfort. Mike also sustained some stinger attacks and felt numb around his face. Rosie seemed to have escaped it all. Kane fell back as Mike and I surged forward to catch Rosie. I had transferred all of Mike’s nutrition from one of the boats to the kayak. We were now self-sufficient. Mike's feeding schedule was every 20mins or at about 1.5kms intervals.

From the kayak I directed the swim, and often called on Rosie's boat to ferry messages between the three groups. Soon after the start Rosie's boat veered right and was about a good 1km away and heading toward Russia. Several times I signalled over the boat, by raising the paddle high in the air, to give instructions to pull Rosie to the left of the Ferry line - they were well to the right of that line. We kept to the left of the ferry line and kept to that until we caught up with Rosie and her crew two hours later. She was amazing and was going strong, as was Mike. Several reports back from Kane's boat indicated he too was going ok after the stinger attacks.

At the 8kms mark we caught up to Rosie and passed her. By then too she was finally well left of the ferry line and in line with us. Mike and I pushed on. Conditions were perfect! The sun was already up and to our left was first the island of Manono then Apolima seemed to have awoken from a long night's sleep as the sun's rays touched her Cone peaks. We were in swim heaven.

Mike reported fantastic underwater scenery of schools of Tuna darting here and there, stacked several levels high in the water all the way to the surface. There was a lot of surface breaking by the fish and it made for interesting viewing from the kayak - but Mike had the better view. Mike also reported a huge coral shoot and could see the bottom. Later Rosie reported seeing tuna also, and a school of fantastic mantra rays way down underneath her. There were no signs of sharks.

At 16.5kms and 6kms to go for Mike - 5hrs into the swim - we had well passed Apolima Island to our left. Salelologa our destination was clearly visible and it looked like we would finish at around midday. Rosie was swimming strongly and still veering to the right but the message was loud and clear from me that she was to keep to the left of the ferry line. To help that I called over the boat again and insisted on Scotty Rowlands making the calls on the swim and not the boat captain. Whilst the boat captains are very capable with their crafts they do not know how to guide swimmers. I impressed on Scotty that he was to make the calls on the swim navigation and not the boat skipper. He did that well to the end! Kane's boat by this stage was a dot on the horizon behind us.

Savaii ahead was a dark grey landmass with Mt Silisili way in the distance. From the 10km mark parallel with Apolima that was an important landmark - we were to stay left of that, at about 11 o'clock from the top of Silisili. Then soon after the two prominent churches on the Salelologa side of the island were also great landmarks, we were to stay well left of those as well. The direct route was to aim for the headland at Tafua and just west of Apolima that should get us to within the narrow Salelologa ferry channel for the final finish at the terminal.

We powered on. Mike was a machine, and I could see Rosie to my right and rear also going strong.

Then 5kms to go, and four, we were doing well. The finish was an hour and a bit away. My backside was absolutely sore by this stage 6hrs into the swim. I signalled over Rosie's boat again and asked the crewman to take over on the kayak. I had wiggled on my seat for the last two hours and I was in danger of falling in the drink. I crawled onto Rosie's boat with some relief and then powered back to join her and Shane. They had drifted right again. The sea was amazingly flat and I took a video of Rosie and a nice photo too - and promptly posted them on Facebook to satisfy the curiosity of friends following the swim from around the world. My rest was brief however, we looked over and the crewman had led Mike to the right and wider than Rosie, all in a short time. So we shot over and swapped again, this time with the life jacket as seat cushion - I was vulnerable now with no life jacket but my backside needed the cushion more.

Soon after I got back in the kayak and with Salelologa wharf clearly visible, I could see the channel markers too - then the heavens opened and the rain came down. The wind beat up and the waves rose all around us. I could see Rosie's boat behind us about 2kms away but the land ahead disappeared in a whiteout in the rain cloud and we lost all landing reference. Salelologa was there one minute, in the next it was gone. Mike and I were now close to the breakers and even from that distance we could not see land. I was a bit nervous. The narrow ferry channel was nowhere to be seen. This turn of bad weather was not in the forecast, and it came as a total surprise to Mike and I, we both had the same weather readings for the day.

The sea was now rough and the 5kms per hour winds became 25-30kms per hour. As many know the sea outside the ferry terminal channel is ferocious - it was more so now. But where was the channel, I kept Mike on sight and paddled left to look for the channel. None! Finally I went back to Mike who was swimming amazingly in the swell and he and I had a meeting - we will wait for the 12pm ferry to go by to see which way it entered the channel. Fortunately we only waited about 10minutes floating like corks in the heave-ho sea. We heard it first, then the ferry came streaming through from Mulifanua to Salelologa. It lined up for its approach to Salelologa. To our surprise we were a good 1.5km away from the channel. How quickly we had drifted. I then paddled, and Mike swam behind me parallel to the breakers for 20mins to reach the channel. The sea was a mess. Land could not be sighted still but least we had an idea where the channel was - we got there and I took a wrong turn thinking this was the channel. Instead I paddled right through the heaviest of swells and breaking blue waves. I had my iPone in my shirt, my camera around my neck and I was totally soaked. No life jacket and here I was going through huge breakers. How I did not fall in can only be put down to divine intervention. Earlier I had remembered my mother, and sang one of her favourite hymns - Iesu e, Tautai lo'u Va'a - Lord, You be the Pilot! I made it through the breakers. Thank you Lord!

Once through the breakers I looked behind me and Mike had made it through as well. Only Mike can swim those swells without fear. Only then did I realise that the channel was further to the left about another 200m. Never mind! We are almost there. The rain now also dissipating and the bright orange ferry building is only 500m away. There was a reef to negotiate and still rough seas and strong cross winds between us and the ferry. I couldn't see the other two boats behind us - but not for long. To our left and in the channel Kane's boat came through and quickly, meaning he was not swimming. Then Rosie's boat came into view, she was 30mins back but least she also had made it through the channel. Kane's boat came alongside just before we got to the ferry landing anchored to our left - it was hard paddling that last 200 or so yards. Mike was just behind me. The 2pm ferry was loading as we made our approach - finally we were there. Mike touched ground, got out of the water and looked very pleased with himself. And so he should. He had swum 24kms in just over 8 hours. Epic stuff!!

Sure enough Rosie was 30minutes exactly behind us and she powered to the finish. Her total was 26kms distance covered, that's because she was wide early on in the swim. Rosie however had the faster swim rate to Mike but Mike and I covered less ground/water to Rosie. This girl is amazing!! She touched ground and exited the water to give MC a big celebratory hug. By then Kane, Narelle, Pauline and Dave had scrambled ashore to purchase tickets to catch the 2pm ferry back to Upolu. The three of us and our crew meanwhile were celebrating Rosie's achievement with howls of our own to add to the howling wind and rain. This was a Life moment. She had only just swum her longest swim a week before in the 10km swim. This achievement is amazing and she deserves every accolade. Is she the first woman to swim to Savai'i? We're trying to find out, but likely she will have that honour of being the first woman to make the crossing and fittingly so.

I was gutted for Kane, his next goal is to swim the English Channel in Aug 2016. This is how these things pan out, it is not all going to go your way all the time. As for Superman Mike, the guy is a Swim god. He has been to my events five times. When things got rough and we were lost, there was no better person to be in the water with than Mike.

After our celebrations I asked the boats to drop us off at Lusia's where only a week ago we had had 60 people for lunch after SSS 2. We were back there, soaking wet, but happy and high in our own euphoria. We had beaten the elements.

After our lunch of fish and chips we then taxied over to catch the 4pm ferry back to the mainland. The ride back was interesting. It was rocking and rolling most of the way - This was a truly Jekyll and Hyde swim experience - and we survived to tell the tale.

The next time we swim this will be the race in April 2016. This had been an invaluable experience in preparation for the inaugural race.

**END**