2009 Amelia Island Open Water Challenge

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The 9 th Annual Ed Gaw AMELIA ISLAND OPEN WATER CHALLENGE

Scheduled Race Date: 23 May 2009 (Postponed: poor weather and dangerous surf)
Actual Race Date: 18 July 2009
Race Start Time: 8:30 am

What had been a drought suddenly turned into a week of rain and wind. Not-so-perfect timing for the 2009 Ed Gaw AMELIA ISLAND OPEN WATER CHALLENGE (AIOWC) scheduled race date on Saturday, the 23rd of May. In concert with the weather, the seas followed suit and stayed large and formidable. By Thursday, the 21st of May the seas were 10+ feet and were punishing the shore at Main Beach. Race organizers (the City of Fernandina Beach Parks and Recreation Department) made the call to postpone the swim. It was inevitable. The weather and sea projections called for no abatement of the conditions making it untenable for the Coast Guard Auxiliary boats and race safety crews (lifeguards and kayakers) come race day. The race was rescheduled for Saturday, the 18th of July.

On the 18th, 0500 came early for the set-up crew, … very early. By 0630 the chairs, tables, food, and race finish cones were in place and the volunteer registration crews began to appear. The swimmers began to show and the big top began to hum with the pre-race energy of an open water event. The swimmers mingled, were processed, and numbered amidst the delicious bakery goods donated by Publix. A pod of dolphins appeared between the easy southeast swells and the wind blew lightly from the southwest as the sun appeared on the horizon. The conditions were close to perfect for the ninth annual running of the 2009 Ed Gaw AIOWC.

The big, yellow, school bus – led by the Fernandina Beach Police Auxiliary - grumbled to its stops at the 1-Mile (Jasmine Road) and 5K (Simmons Road) beach access points and the swimmers ambled to the beach starting areas. Around 0830 all systems were go and the start horn was sounded. The competitors charged their way into the surf and began the long ebb-tide swim around the start buoys for the 1-Mile and the 5K swims.

At the Main Beach finish area all eyes were peeled for sight of the swimmers. As the first 1-Mile swimmers rounded the buoy, it was
evident that there was a race on. Diego Rios (Jacksonville, FL; 27) exited the water first followed closely by Lucky Messienheimer
(Orlando, FL; 50). Due to the ebb tide the finish line was high on the beach and in a photo finish, Mr. Messienheimer's (26:09) strong run was enough to barely eclipse a diving Mr. Rios (26:10) across the finish line. Definitely one of the most exciting finishes ever for the AIOWC! Lance Croft (Fernandina Beach, FL; 21) was a close third in the men's race arriving at the finish line in 26:25. Amy Yeager (Fernandina
Beach, FL; 26) was first across the finish in the ladies 1-Mile in a fast 29:12.

(IMAGE: Mr. Rios (l) and Mr. Meissenheimer (right) sprinting to the 1-Mile finish.)

Within an hour the lead 5K swimmers began to appear between the swells. Exiting the water first was Stuart Duff (Jacksonville, FL; 25) who made a strong run across the finish line to win the men's overall event with a scorching 1:06:48. The women's 5K finish was exciting as Caroline Bevillard (Statesboro, GA; 19) exited the water with a slight lead over Mallory Deighan (Jacksonville, FL; 22). Ms Bevillard maintained that lead and finished first in 1:11:01 just ahead of Ms. Deighan (1:11:15) – both excellent swims. The next three 5K swimmers to arrive at the finish line were Graham Hawkes (Tallahassee, FL; 18) at 1:16:45, Rachael Sale (Atlantic Beach, FL; 21) at 1:16:49, and Walter Steele (Jacksonville, FL; 1:16:57). Great racing!

(IMAGE: Mr. Ed Gaw Jr. racing to the 1-mile finish line of his ninth AIOWC finish.)

Congratulations go out to all those who swam. It was a great day for an open water event and the competitors made the most of it. There were lots of great swims and for some it was a day of huge personal accomplishments. The old man would have loved it.

Next year will be the 10th annual Ed Gaw AIOWC. The 2010 Ed Gaw AIOWC is again planned for the Memorial Day weekend (Saturday, 29 May 2010). Bad
weather and nasty sea conditions will be strictly verboten. Stay tuned for calendar postings on the USMS website and Active.com.

It is hard to believe that this thing has been going on for almost a decade. It seems like magic, but really it is due to the hard work and dedication of the City of Fernandina Beach Parks and Recreation Department and a slew of volunteers including – lifeguards, fire department, police, police auxiliary, and Coast Guard auxiliary. Not to mention the support provided by the event sponsors: Hi-Liner Fishing Gear and Tackle, the Scuba Station, Coca-Cola, First Community Bank, Magna Full Body Salon, P5 Productions, the First Coast YMCA, and Publix.

The City of Fernandina Beach and the AIOWC volunteers look forward to hosting you in 2010.

See you at Main Beach!