

# **NORTH TO THE BOSTON LIGHT**

**(A 2009 Marathon Swim)**

**By John DaPrato**

The Coney Island Cyclone was to my left and the Pier was behind me, it was just another sunny July day in New York. I guess I was swimming about an eighth of a mile out. My plan was to develop a pace that I could hold for eight miles. Why eight miles? That is the exact distance of the Boston Light swim (less than thirty days away). The current shifted and my landmarks seemed much closer even though I was slowly drifting out to sea. I kept stroking on an angle that brought me closer to shore. I was alone and almost a quarter of a mile out at this point yet I was comfortable and relaxed -- my concentration was getting stronger -- the ocean water at Brighton is my water and my home away from home. About a half-hour later, I touched ground at Grimaldo's lifeguard chair. One more training swim under my belt.

I walked out of 70 degree waist-deep water onto warm summer sand. There were about a dozen CIBBOWS (Coney Island Brighton Beach Open Water Swimmers) hanging out behind the chair. I walked over to Abe right away. Abe was talking with a few people but he stopped and greeted me with his usual warm smile. He is about sixty but he could easily pass for forty five. He has a stylish goatee and interesting tatoos that cover his legs and arms. He asked, "good swim?" Yea, not bad, I found a good pace coming back with the current --you know" I responded. "Yea, I know, where I'm going in three weeks there are no friendly currents, I guess that is one of the things that makes the English Channel the English Channel," he said seriously. I paused and asked, "Are you ready to go, Abe?" He waited a split second and said. "I think I am. I have paid my dues in cold water, brother. I believe a swimmer has to handle the cold water issue first. Look at it this way, if you can't hack ten hours in water that is in the low-sixties, it doesn't matter how good of a swimmer you are, as for me, I plan on swimming eighteen, maybe twenty hours at my own pace -- slow and steady. I'll be heading up to Boston again this Thursday to get some more cold water swims in. Aren't you heading up there soon for the Boston swim?" "I am. How are you getting up there?" I asked quickly. "Fung Wah bus in Chinatown -- twelve bucks, it's not too bad, really... It's only fair that I let you know that there was a time when the driver turned on to a side-road at about eighty miles an hour though --quite memorable." We both laughed loudly like we usually do together.. Then, Abe picked up his goggles and headed for shore but shouted "Revere Beach is your best bet in Boston." I walked over to my blanket to talk with other swimmers.

There was a swimmer talking to my friend, Sil, at the blanket next to mine. She looked like a real cold-water swimmer to me-- big and solid. I quickly introduced myself. She then said, "I'm Julie Sheldon, hi." She recognized my name as one of the swimmers on the Boston Light entrant list right away, and, yes, I recognized her name. She was a serious swimmer alright. Not only was she on the Boston Light swimmer list, but she was training for the NYC to Sandy Hook, N.J. 17.5 mile Ederle swim in October. She came from the midwest and she impressed me as being very independent-minded. She seemed to have an individual plan for everything she did when it came to training. She also drove from New Jersey to Brighton Beach to put in her ocean swimming time. Most of the swimmers left the beach at noon that day. Sil, Julie and I spent three or four hours just sitting on our blankets taking in the bright sunshine, telling stories and laughing at our crazy experiences out in the open water. It was all good fun. In-between the stories, she gave us some valuable open-water tips... We walked off the beach when it was time to go home for dinner! To close, Julie eventually pulled herself from the Boston Light because she was

focusing on the great Ederle swim in October.

A few days later, I took my usual twelve mile bike ride out to Riis Park Beach in Rockaway. I used to do a lot of triathlons, so Riis Park has long been one of my favorite places to train because of the long bike ride and rough surf. I locked the bike in the usual spot near the boardwalk then I walked to the lifeguard chair straight ahead. Cindy, the lifeguard greeted me: "Hey, John, the sweep is this way (she pointed east)." All good for me since I always liked to go east because I had much better on-shore sightings. I also wanted to swim with the current because the Boston Light is current assisted. I always feel more comfortable in the water with a current --I'm much more patient. I wait for my stroke to develop, therefore, my extension is better - thus my stroke is longer. Solid distance swimmers will tell you that efficiency is the name of the game when swimming a marathon (over 6 miles). This would be my focus from here on in (till the Boston Light) --a long and efficient stroke with a lot of roll. Anyway, I turned to Cindy and shouted, "later." Then I walked into the ocean until I waist deep, waited a moment, then I dove into the rough surf. The good thing about Rockaway is that there is usually a sand-bar seventy or eighty yards out and the ocean gets smoother if one goes out far enough. I did. I swam for two hours. I just swam directly east and ended up in the next town over. I body surfed a few waves into shore, slipped my goggles in my swimsuit, then I jogged back to pick -up my clothes before the lifeguards went off-duty. I rode my bike the same twelve miles back to my apartment near Prospect Park. To close, I swam about 4 miles (with a current assist), jogged 4 miles and rode a total of 25 miles on my nineteen year old Cannondale mountain bike. I have always felt best when doing the swim , bike & run thing. What I lacked in my preparation at this point were serious cold water training and speed -work (hitting tight pool intervals or doing open-water swims with faster swimmers).

I decided to follow up on Abe's Fung Wah bus lead to Boston in a hurry. I figured I needed some hard cold water time to help deal with the conditions I might face in the Boston Light swim. Why not train close to the event? That's what worked for me in the Pennock Island Challenge 8 mile swim in Alaska last year, right? I called up the Fung Wah Bus Company on Canal St and they told me that a bus leaves every hour on the hour and that all I had to do was come a half-hour early. So, that's exactly what I did. But before I bought my ticket, I stopped by Wo Hop restaurant at 17 Mott St. It was only 3 blocks away and it's absolutely one of favorite places to eat Chinese. I ordered a large bowl of Wonton Soup with plenty of egg noodles and spinach. After a great lunch at Wo Hop, I boarded the Fung Wah bus. I got a window seat about ten rows back. The seat itself didn't seem to be bolted all the way down, no complaints here though, there is nothing wrong with a little play in the seat for a \$12 fare to Boston -- agreed?

The driver couldn't speak English very well but he sure knew the quickest and easiest way out of New York City via the Brooklyn -Queens Expressway, and, yes, my friend was right; the drivers' had no problem applying heavy force on the gas pedal. I plugged in my old CDs headphones and began listening to Michael McDonald's "No Lookin' Back." There is something about being on the highway or on the road that makes me feel like I have no problems or no problems worth thinking about. I also believe the road helps me to stay in the moment. In other words, I was going to Boston to complete a task: to get at least 6 hours of cold-water swimming in and I would accept nothing less from myself. The "present" was the only thing that mattered. There is no auto-pilot mode when one travels to new places to do challenging tasks. One stays focused on the present moment or bad things happen -- fast! Back to the driver --he simply got down to the business of getting us to Boston pronto and passed slower vehicles in a no-nonsense fashion. Hey, all of a sudden, I found myself in downtown Boston boarding a train marked - Paul Revere Beach. About a half-hour later, I touched sand. I was 50 yards from shore - I felt at home. I always feel at home when I'm near the ocean, no matter what ocean.

It was close to 5PM and I had a slight issue: what do I do with my bag? Leave it on the beach while I swim? No, not a good idea. I asked the first lifeguard I saw: "Do you know a safe place that I could leave my bag for a few hours?" She responded quickly: "We get off in less than an hour, maybe you could leave it at the lifeguard station," she pointed to a building about a half of mile south. I walked into the station and asked for the chief or head lifeguard. Six or seven lifeguards were hanging out. One of the lifeguards asked me: "Can I help you with anything?" I responded by saying: I plan on swimming for a few hours, I need a safe place to leave my bag." He replied: "Two hours?" I figure I'd be up-front and said: "Yea, I just got off a bus from NYC - I'll be swimming from the the Boston Lighthouse to Boston Harbor in three weeks, so I need to get some cold -water time in." He responded: "You're kidding?" I said: "No, I'm serious -I just got here from NYC and I need some cold water time badly." He replied: "It's not too cold --mid sixties." I was surprised. Then the chief walked through the back door and said: "I overheard you - sorry, we can't be responsible for your bag, anyway, we leave here in a little over an hour, sorry." Just as I was about to say something, a lifeguard quickly stood -up and said: "It's okay, i'll be responsible for his bag, I have to stay late to workout anyway, I'll lock-up tonight." The chief's facial expression turned serious then he said: "Well okay then, we usually don't do this --just this once." I smiled and thanked him and the lifeguard: "I'll set my stop-watch -- I'll be back by 8pm," I said quickly. I took off my street clothes and got my goggles and cap and took to the Boston sea. Then I walked to the shore and quickly entered the surf and dove under the low waves. I spotted a bright pink house at the end of the 1.5 mile beach. The water was calm but there was a pretty strong sweep heading north. The temperature felt like upper-sixties to me. I started my stroke. I kept a solid or steady pace and swam the length of the beach in forty minutes. I jogged back to the lifeguard station and did the whole thing again. I was not cold in the least and felt comfortable and strong all the way. The water seemed saltier than New York water. I always swam well in salty water. My kick is not my strong-point to say the least, so the more buoyancy I have -the better-off I am. I finished the second trip, dolphin-kicked to shore and jogged back to the station, i walked in at 7:50 (ten minutes to spare). I hung-out with a few lifeguards for about fifteen minutes. They wished me luck and I walked out with my bag.

I walked along the shore for a few minutes and I looked out past the Harbor to see a huge lighthouse far out at sea in the twilight. I wondered, could it be the famous Boston Lighthouse? It must be. It looked to be about ten miles out. I stopped, sat on the beach and just kept looking. I asked myself, am I really going to swim from that lighthouse all the way to shore? Then I asked myself, "why?" After thinking it over, I had no real answer for either question in my conscious mind. I just knew deep down that the time was right for me to make the Boston Light attempt. I thought, if my life was the sum of all the decisions that I had ever made, then this one seemed to fit right in. After all, people asked me why I travelled to Alaska to do the Pennock Island Challenge in 2008. I had no real answer outside of, "why not." But it turned out to be the right move for me at that time - after Alaska, things seemed to change for me. It's hard for me to explain, but finishing that swim was like opening a door to a room with a key that I always had but had never used. I got the feeling that people viewed me and my feat in a very positive way, but, much more importantly, I viewed myself in a more athletic and positive way! For example, two guys that I didn't know tapped me on the shoulder before an MIF Hudson River race and asked: "Are you that dude that swam around an Alaskan Island?" I said with a slight smile: "Yea, it was a nice refreshing little swim." They both laughed and shook my hand. It was all fun and cool. It was like a brand new starting point for me at an age in life when many people are looking for finishing points. I was surprised to receive emails from readers (a few months after my Pennock story was picked-up) who wanted to share their views or interpretations. It was all good... The truth is that when I wrote about my experience of "finishing the race," I thought that touching the buoy (finish line) was major, but, in my mind, the story was more about "trying with all my might" to finish the race. I hadn't ever felt passionate enough about anything to surrender my "whole being" or my "life-force" to

it. Yes, after Alaska, things had changed for the better. I had completed an event that a good number of swimmers thought I could not do, but, again, more importantly, I had finished an event that "I, myself," wasn't sure I could finish. I remember boarding the small plane at Ketchikan Airport realizing that I wasn't quite the same. Something changed deep-down inside of me. I had more confidence in myself and my ability to follow -through in highly demanding circumstances.

To close, yes, my life's story has more than just begun, but I now had solid evidence that my path should go more in the direction of my own hopes and dreams, no more side-tracking, no more long "pit-stops." Yes, I was moving forward on a new and exciting journey with more challenges and more adventures ahead, and, yes, more decisions.

So, was the Boston Light the right marathon swim for me? Why I'll just "give it my best shot" once more - right? Wasn't my best usually good enough? I started asking myself more questions then I stopped for a moment. I sat alone on the beach listening to the soft sound of waves as I looked to the shining Lighthouse far out at sea. There was something very extraordinary about the whole scene. I couldn't help but ask myself one more question -- did I ever imagine or believe that I could be a distance swimmer capable of being dropped off eight miles out at sea in sixty degree water with the ability to make it to shore? Just the fact that I was in a prestigious marathon event for the second straight year made me proud. I then looked up over yellow Harbor lights to see bright stars appear over low sea clouds. I kept listening to the soft and soothing sound of low waves breaking close to shore. Then I thought of a poem that I wrote in New York City on a snowy January night:

## **Far Away Destinations**

**Snow falls past**

**midnight**

**as I walk alone**

**heading**

**for home**

**on a dimly lit**

**city side-street.**

**I think of days**

**when I'll find**

**the roads**

**that lead me to**

**the open sea**

**where I'll swim**

over the high waves

and dream of

far-away destinations...

~JD

I walked along the shore until I left the beach, then walked a block to the train, got on, switched once and checked into the Boston YMCA at 316 Huntington Ave for \$48. It's a great old pre-war YMCA with history. The next day the sun was shining so it was easy and fun to make it back to Revere Beach. After taking NYC subways my whole life, I appreciated the Boston train system. In short, much cleaner and friendlier than NYC but one major issue: the trains do not run twenty four hours! Anyway, back to swimming, I dove into the warm sea (still upper sixties) about 10AM and swam for about 2.5 hours. I thought the depth of the water had something to do with the temperature. Sometimes I would hit cold spots where I could not see the bottom, but, overall, I was swimming in water no more than 4 or 5 feet deep.

Time to catch the Fung Wah bus back to Chinatown, NYC. I found a window seat about fifteen rows back! As a matter of fact, the seat I was sitting in was bolted down a little tighter than the first one. A little less rocking this time out. But again, for a \$12 fare to NYC, I'll rock, or, heck, I'll even rock hard straight through the night! ...Ha.... That said, there was another no-nonsense driver behind the Fung Wah bus wheel with a strong urge to cut corners and keep a heavy foot on the gas pedal! --- All good.

It was time for me to finally get someone I knew and trusted to be my crew. I had asked two very experienced swimmers on my Chelsea Piers masters team, Lance Ogren and Kenn Lowy. I asked Lance first but he wasn't sure when he would be getting back from England. It just so happened that he was crewing for Abe's Channel swim. He also would be going back to England in late August for his own Channel attempt. Back in June, he swam solo around Manhattan Island. Needless to say, he was booked through the summer. To sum -up, Lance was my number one choice. I asked my longtime teammate, Kenn Lowy, also a MIMS soloist and an English Channel crew member, because he is an open-water veteran who knows swim marathon events inside and out. In addition, he knew Boston well and he seemed to have an interest in swimming the Boston Light himself, so I thought it could be a win-win situation. I was optimistic when Kenn gave me a maybe. After Lance, he would be the best guy I could get to be my crew. Besides that, I always thought he was fun guy to hang-out with. About a week later, his maybe turned into a no when he decided to enter Grimaldo's Mile race (the same day as the Boston Light). I was disappointed. Why not ask Lance again, I thought? After all, he said maybe too. So, I asked him again. I said this time I would need a "yes" or a "no" because time was running out. He responded enthusiastically: "We're on, JD!" I soon found out that there was room for one more on the boat, so Lance would be coming up with Carlie Brown, our very cool CP coach. Lance was the only swimmer to finish the great 2008 17.5 mile Ederle race (NYC to Sandy Hook, N.J) in sub-sixty degree rough water --no one questioned his determination or ability.. Oh, yea, some ocean swimmers were very talented, some talked a good game on our beach, but everyone knew that Lance had the best chance of a successful English Channel crossing, but, more than that, he was an inspirational guy with a real passion for the open-water. So, to wrap-up: I had a proven pilot in Bill, one of the best swimmers and motivators at Brighton Beach in Lance Ogren, and, to-boot, Carlie Brown, my coach, was on board. The universe seemed to be aligning itself up just for me!

I took a summer lecturing job near Jones Beach, Long Island. The upside was that I could

get some rough water ocean swims in --the downside was that it pulled me away from my Manhattan masters team. For my Alaska marathon race, I mainly trained in the ocean. Why not take the same approach for Boston? Very different environments, and, yes, the Inside Passage in Alaska is damn cold (mid-fifties) but the race is around an island -- I was never more than a few hundred yards off-shore. The Boston Light Swim is eight miles off-shore. Open water swimmers know all too well that things can change in a flash out at sea.

A few weeks passed. There were less than four days before the race. I hooked up with some of my swimming partners, Silverio and Patricia Sener. Sil was training hard for his upcoming 5K Coney Island race -- he simply has a great work ethic. I was concentrating more on my Total Immersion techniques. Only a few years ago, I swam flat (little roll). Along with rolling more, I now concentrate on distance per stroke while trying to maintain a good streamline position by keeping my weight on the top-half of my body. I am still working on a more efficient recovery (high elbows) while "skating" on my side. In my view, these skills are critical or crucial for older swimmers (40 or 45 and up). To close, I got some last minute feedback about rolling or connecting my upper body more during the pull from Patricia Sener, one of the CIBBOWS founders and a solid cold-water swimmer in her own right.

More good news -- a swimming partner of mine, Amy Wu, called me to tell me that she hooked -up with another swimmer for a relay attempt. It turned out that Boston Light relay slots were open late. She was going to connect with her her partner, Becky, at the pre-race meeting and swim the next day. This worked out well for both of us -- we could share travel costs and save energy by renting a car. We could now go to Boston in style and maybe even shop at a fancy designer outlet on the way up! Did I just say that? Okay, I admit it, I like to buy stuff at J CREW. Sure enough, somewhere in Connecticut we came across a huge outlet mall. Amy and I walked off in different directions but we wound up meeting in, you guessed it, J CREW. It turned out that J CREW was one of Amy's favorite stores too.. To close, we both bought a few things, stopped in at Starbucks and then continued on 95 North. When we opened the trunk, something smelled slightly sour or foul. I didn't pay too much attention to it, since the only thing I had back there was my gator-aid which was mixed with Twin Lab ultra-fuel powder. When we got to Boston, the trunk smelled pretty damn sour. I mean it really stunk! I had to throw -out eight pre-mixed energy-drink bottles.

We arrived in Boston with an hour to spare. The Boston pre-race meeting started on time at the Boston Yacht Club. This was the same place we would be meeting in the morning. There was a long dock where our pilots would be able to boat-in and pick us up to take us to the Boston Lighthouse. Greg O'Connor, the race director, introduced himself right away, gave me a number , a cap, race instructions and a cool Boston Light tee-shirt. Lance and Carlie called me to tell me that they were stuck in traffic on 95. Amy went her own way to look for her race partner. She soon found Becky and sat with her at Becky's table. I found a place at a table with other swimmers. Hearing their stories was all very interesting to me. I saw swimmers that I recognized, Willy Blumentals, who just finished a Manhattan Island solo swim and Sebastian N, who won the great Ederle swim going away in 5.5 hours. Willy and I talked, joked around a little and got some coffee and pasta at the table in the back of the room. Willy and I knew a lot of the same people from CIBBOWS. He also knew Amy Wu well since they recently swam The Tampa Bay Marathon as a team. The meeting progressed and Greg talked about the tricky parts of the course. I found out that currents sweep around some of the islands and can create some issues for swimmers. He also stressed that we would be getting a push or a current-assist most of the way. There was an absolute cut-off time of 5 hours due to safety and tide issues. Twenty minutes passed by and I turned to see Lance and Carlie (my all-star crew) behind me taking notes about the race. It was great to see them. I walked over to sit with them right away. We admired our official Boston Light Tee shirts. Then we took more notes, in between, we joked and laughed. The meeting progressed further, Greg went on to talk about the great

history of the Boston Light Swim. In short, the first documented swim was in 1907 - - it's the oldest marathon swim race in the USA! Each year it starts at the foot of the Boston Light on Little Brewster Island and runs through Harbor Islands to the finish at the L Street Bathhouse during a flood tide. Greg made it perfectly clear that sometimes wind and other issues could or would offset the push from the tide. One only has to look at the variation of the recorded winning times of the Boston swim to fully understand his point. Greg wrapped things up by wishing everyone luck, then we all headed for the door.

It was race day and race time. We were instructed to wait at the dock for our pilots to pick us up and take us out to sea. The sun was shining and there seemed to be a light wind coming out of the west. The water in the harbor seemed fairly calm -- all good. Bill sent his brother in a small boat and Carlie, Lance & I jumped in. It was important to look back and watch for landmarks because I would be swimming using the same route. We passed under a bridge where the Boston skyline appeared in full. Lance and Carlie seemed more excited than me as they looked out at the islands in the Harbor. About twenty minutes later, we connected with Bill and his huge 28 foot cabin -cruiser --a sweet ride indeed. We met Bill and his wife and started to get things together. I got my Aquasphere goggles out first and quickly used my Barracuda ant-fog liquid on the inside and outside. I then rubbed Bull Frog 30 gel sunblock all over my face and arms. I didn't have grease -- but I had pure vaseline- I put it on my chest and arms - After that, Carlie spread the Bull Frog gel all-over my back.. I pulled the cord on my Dolfin swimsuit tight and tied a tight knot, after that, I adjusted my goggles. My eyes then lit-up as I saw the great Boston Lighthouse under deep blue skies from a few hundred yards away!... The wind picked-up and the water started to get choppy very fast. All the boats were lined-up in a row. Our boat drifted back so I asked Bill to get me as close to the pack as possible. Bill knew that I wasn't going to be a frontrunner, but, hey, I didn't want to come in last place.. who does? He said, "sure, John, " then he quickly maneuvered the boat to get some great position to the far north of the Lighthouse.

All the swimmers were standing on the sides of their boats waiting for the horn to sound. I couldn't help but take one more long look at the Lighthouse -- I was told it was the oldest manned lighthouse in the USA -- simply a great scene. Lance and Carlie both gave me huge high -fives and then the horn sounded --long and loud! I jumped into the dark blue sea! I didn't really know what temperature to expect because New England waters can get cold fast from northern currents. I was told depth also has something to do temperature -- yes, I was in going into deep water alright! I hit the water leaning a little forward so that I would not sink too deep. The water felt like it was somewhere in the low-sixties to me - it actually felt good. I started stroking right away and looked ahead to the boat. the truth is that I never swam with a boat before. I swam with kayakers in the 2008 Alaska race and in the 2009 Manhattan Island relay race. In my judgement, swimming with a kayaker makes things much easier if one trusts the kayaker to do the right things, e.g., choose the best line, watch for tricky currents, etc --simply much less to think about when swimming with a solid kayaker, but, hey, I was lucky to have a boat with an experienced pilot -- many swimmers couldn't find one. A few swimmers had both, kayakers and pilots.

I was only a few minutes into the race, Bill was on my right, a little ahead. I could hear Lance and Carlie cheering me on. Now was the time I had to find a pace that I felt comfortable with and KEEP IT. I remember Erica, one of the English Channel CIBBOW swimmers, said these words to me when I asked her for some last-minute advice or tip: She said: "John, find a pace that you think you can hold all day!" It was her message that echoed in my mind. I tried to find my pace. The water got choppy and there were ocean swells I had to deal with. After all, I was eight miles out at sea so the conditions were not unusual in my opinion. I swam for fifteen minutes following Bill's lead but he was changing speeds to deal with the ocean conditions. I could clearly see the first two islands in front of me. I decided to look more ahead to my landmarks rather than look at the boat

for direction. I was starting to feel more comfortable.

I was about a half-hour into the race when I noticed two other swimmers climbing back into their boats. I later found out that three or four swimmers had abandoned their attempts due to the cold water. I began feeling temperature fluctuations but nothing major. I was now starting to swim more like a "Total Immersion" swimmer -- my weight was up-front, my head felt like it was in-line, my extension was good, my body was rolling freely -- hey, I even held my arm extended out there for a moment to glide or "skate" on my side --all-good! Could I keep it all day? Answer: Not sure. I was over a mile into the race and was closing in on the first island. I would only look at the boat every few minutes but I could hear Lance and Carlie shouting: "Go, JD, gooooooooooooo!" Something happened between the Lighthouse and the first island that was very special. I was completely aware that my energy and swimming ability was getting me closer and closer to Boston. I could actually see my progress early in the race. It felt absolutely wonderful to be moving forward so far out in the "open sea". It was me and the sea and a few islands in the distance, in other words, it was very liberating and even empowering to look up at the deep-blue sky one second and closer to my clear and real destination in the next second. I thought, why don't I just reach-up to touch the sky one of these times? I nixed the idea though - I would lose time in the process!... Ha... Reality soon set in as Lance shouted: "JD, GU break, come on over!" I took 3 or 4 sips of gator-aid and an orange-burst GU. Carlie asked: "How do you feel?" I said "good, very good." Everyone on the boat cheered me on. It was a good stop but time to move. The first island was less than a quarter mile away. Time to go -- straight ahead!

I passed the first island and was heading for the second. At this time I was using the boat more for direction because I wasn't too sure how to cut the island. The water got more choppy and I started to swallow more salt water than is usual --do I need to say --not good? I felt myself being pulled south of the island slightly, so I started to angle north. I would need to pass north of the island to continue on. I tried to maintain my rhythm and pace but I saw that Bill was maneuvering the boat to try to lead me out of the current.. He was far ahead of me but he got directly in front of me..Lance and Carlie started waving forcefully. For the first time in the race, I started to worry... I picked up my turnover rate -- time to get into a semi-sprint mode. I now realized that I needed to turn the corner or I was done --adrenaline started to flow. I picked up my pace to ninety percent following Bill's lead. I was starting to taste the boat's gasoline. Ten minutes later, I finally turned the corner of the second island. I was back on course but not without a price -- a heavy price. Obviously, the whole thing caught me by surprise. My arms felt tired and my breathing was irregular, but, hey, I had plenty of time to recover, right? It's a long race. Whoever said open water water swimming was highly predictable? I would need to settle down fast. I slowed down. I heard Carlie and Lance scream: "Pick it up, JD." The cold spots started to feel colder and my arms felt heavier. The truth is that I was breathing much heavier than I should have at this point. I was only about 3 miles into the race but it felt like I was 6 miles into it, but, hey, all was not lost, I could see the half-way point (the old bridge) about a mile away. To sum-up, I needed to get things together aerobically after my early sprint. I also needed to find my form again - fast!...

I passed under the bridge on the right side as Greg instructed. I looked up at the bridge to notice I was getting a push from the current. I was starting to feel a little colder. My form still wasn't perfect but I was beginning to feel that I might make it to the finish if there were no more surprises.. Carlie and Lance screamed out again: Cooooomme oooonnn, JD" as I swam through the final Harbor islands -- there it was: -- THE BOSTON SKYLINE! I was about five miles into the race and getting a push from the current. Yes, I wasn't myself since the second island, and, yes, I never truly found my rhythm, but, hey, I was still in the race, other swimmers were not far away, and, most importantly, I had less than a mile to go before the turn for home -- the last two miles! Time to step up, I thought. Heck, I've been tired and cold before. I thought of the last mile in the great Pennock Island Challenge



race, then I thought of my last four miles gutting it out in the NYC Marathon. Yea, maybe a different time, and, yes, maybe a different place but I've been here before! Hey, time to suck-it-up and show some heart! Questions: Had I lost too much time along the way? Could I realistically make the cut-off time of 5 hours?

Lance signaled me over to the boat -- he looked much more serious this time. He's usually easy-going even in the midst of serious issues or competitions.. He shouted "drink - up, JD." Then he asked: "Are you okay?" He obviously saw that my stoke had slowed down. He looked at me deeply and said: "You have a little over two miles to go, you have only an hour and ten minutes left --do you want it? ..you can do it!" Carlie screamed "You can make it!" Bill and family shouted: "Go for it!" I tried to drink the gator-aid but I couldn't take it in -- I didn't want anything. At this time, I really had no choice but to cut the last island closer than Greg instructed. If I went wide, I would never have made the 5 hour cut-off time. The truth is that I would not have made the cutoff time even if I swam perfectly for the last 2 miles. I understood this perfectly well at the time--so did my crew. Nevertheless, a competition is a competition and the Boston Light is the Boston Light. So what if I would finish in 5 hours, 20 minutes? Anyway, we went for the most direct route to the finish by cutting the last island. It was really my only chance. I kept my head down and forged ahead. I saw the rocks on the tip of the Island get closer --than much closer. Lance yelled: Now JD, pick it up" I could see the Harbor and the straightaway to the Boston Light finish! I looked to the rocks and I was not moving forward --maybe a little, very little.. I kept swimming in place and picked up my turnover. I was tired and cold. I thought of some of the speed workouts that I missed at the CP club. I needed speed and power fast. Real fast. I looked to the rocks again --no progress. Everyone on the boat screamed -- goooooooo! But no matter how hard I tried - I couldn't move forward. I thought about quitting but something inside of me would not let me. I knew I was stuck in the same spot for over fifteen minutes, so the best I could hope for was a finishing time of 5.5 hours (30 minutes past the cut-off). I stopped -- I needed to catch my breath. I needed to get things together. I started to shiver.

I must try again, I thought --one last try to break free! By stopping, I had been pushed backwards by the current. I had to start again fast or lose more ground! I started my crawl stroke with the hope that I had regained some long-lost power. I heard Lance and everyone screaming from the boat -- I was making a little progress now -- just a little more, I thought --just a little longer! ... I swam as hard as I could for five more minutes -- still stuck... My tank was very close to empty -- I looked up at Lance and Carlie.. I said, "I don't know guys, I'm not moving, it's not happening." Lance shot back, "you're moving, JD." I started my stroke again. At that moment, Lance dove off the side of the boat! He swam along-side of me and quickly pulled ahead. I swam for a few more minutes but I could not keep-up. He came back and said: --"Just stay with me!" I could not. Lance was aware that I had zero left and that I had absolutely no chance of making the cut-off time, and, yes, sadly, I was aware of it too. He asked: "Do you want to stop, JD?" I said: "Yes, it's over." It was the right time to end the struggle. There will be more swims ahead. I picked myself up to the boat deck. I heard kind words and phrases by everyone on board like, "great job!" and "awesome try, John." Carlie wrapped towels around me in a hurry.

My stomach was queasy and I was cold. I went into the cabin below and felt my legs and arms getting warmer. Yes, I was disappointed but I had no regrets -I simply did not meet my goal of finishing the race. I found out that better swimmers than me did not finish the Boston Light on that day. No matter -- I will need to train harder to build needed speed for another attempt.

Bill dropped us off at the dock. As I was leaving the boat, he looked directly at me and said loudly: "See you next year!" I smiled and said: "Thanks, Bill, great job --yes, I'll see you." Bill waved goodbye as his big cabin-cruiser left the Harbor. Lance and Carlie went off to get lunch. We would all meet up with Amy later-on. It was mid-afternoon, the sun was

shining, the sky was bright-blue and the great Boston skyline was near...

**Note: Field of Dreams (Amy Wu and Becky relay team) finished the Boston Light in 4: 13: 00**

**Willy Blumentals finished the Boston Light in 4:15: 00**

**Lance Ogren successfully crossed the English Channel in 11.5 hours in September, 2009.**

**Carlie Brown crewed for Lance's Channel swim.**

**Julie Sheldon won the 2009 17.5 mile Ederle Race in 6:13:25 in sub- 60\* ocean temperature.**

**I went on to swim the Bridge to Bridge 10k (Golden Gate Bridge to Bay Bridge) in 2 hours in sub- 60\* - 10/ 09.**

**My marathon swim adventures live on ...**

**Ciao,**

**~john**

