

Swimsuits or no Swimsuits

A Discussion Paper for the Rottnest Channel Swim Association

Currently the Rottnest Channel Swim Association's (RSCA) rules define which swimsuits are allowed to be worn by all competitors on Race Day and by solo swimmers undertaking their swim at a time other than Race Day.

Over the past several years, the RSCA Committee has seen fit to relax its interpretation/application of the definition of what constitutes an allowable swimsuit.

Given recent changes in the open water swimming environment, new swimsuit technologies and views of our members, the Committee considers that it is now an appropriate time to revisit the definition and, once determined, to strictly enforce whatever definition is decided. We are therefore seeking comments from interested members of the Association on their viewpoints in relation to an ongoing definition.

The purpose of this paper is to present to the members of the Association three options to consider for allowable swimsuits and the pros and cons of those options. Following a period of consultation with members of the Association, the Committee will put to the membership a motion to either ratify the existing rule or to adopt a new one.

In considering the options presented, members should consider what they believe the purpose of the swim/event is and whether it is feasible to have different rules for the different categories of swimmers?

For example is the purpose for fun, safety, performance, prestige/image or a combination of any of these. And can you have a rule that allows certain swimsuits for duos and teams but only bathers for solo swimmers (irrespective of whether they are swimming on Race Day or at another time)

Members should note that the options and supporting and non-supporting points presented in this Discussion Paper are not exhaustive but they have been presented to focus members' attention on what the Committee believes to be the most appropriate options and reasoning.

Further, assessment of the details presented should also take into consideration whether there can be a "hybrid" of any of these options based on specific categories of swimmers.

The following options are presented for the consideration of members:

1. To retain the existing rule.
2. To redraft the rule to reflect the swimsuits allowed for the 2010 race.
3. To delete from the rules all references to swimsuits and other equipment.

Option 1 – To retain the existing rule

By-law 1 of the RSCA's Constitution states:

"In any Rottnest Channel swim attempts, no swimmer shall use or be assisted by artificial aids of any manner. Swimmers are permitted to grease the body before a swim, use goggles, wear a maximum of two caps, nose clip and earplugs and one bathing suit in accordance

*with FINA's Rules for Open Water Swimming. The suit **may not** be made of neoprene or rubber or any other non porous material and may not be designed either to retain body heat or for aid in buoyancy, speed or endurance."*

In its purest sense in relation to the issue of swimsuit, this is saying that any swimmer who attempts a Rottneest Channel Swim is not able to wear any item of clothing that is made of neoprene or rubber or any other non-porous material and cannot be designed in a way that retains body heat or aids, buoyancy, speed or endurance – in essence a swimmer is only permitted to wear bathers.

When considering the arguments that support this option the following is provided:

- At present the swim is internationally recognised and revered. Allowing suits would likely diminish the prestige nature of the swim.
- Currently we follow English Channel specific race rules (and only generally follow FINA) and the English Channel Swim Association doesn't allow suits of any kind.
- Our by-laws state, as do the rules for the English Channel, that swimmers shall do the crossing without assistance. Bathers do not provide any assistance, whereas swim suits can.
- Bathers don't enhance performance (speed or warmth) whereas swim suits do, therefore bathers allow the swimmer to show off their skills, abilities and performance, and they do not rely on technology to make them warmer and faster.
- It can be said that the fun part of the swim is doing it without assistance, as our by-laws state. Then you can know for sure that it was YOU, not the suit that got you to Rottneest.
- Bathers showcase the skill of the swimmer, not the technology the swimmer uses.
- Sunburn is not an issue, as solo swimmers are probably the only swimmers that don't get burnt. Duos and teams get burnt when they dry themselves with towels when they get into the boat, thus wiping the sunscreen off. They then forget to reapply. Sunscreen lasts all day on a solo swimmer and those who use it don't get burnt.
- Cold – swimmers may get a little colder, especially those who take longer, but this rarely becomes hypothermia, which is what we are concerned about. Crews need to take responsibility and remove the swimmer if this issue arises (very, very rare).

So what then are the arguments that contradict the limiting of clothing to bathers only?

- A lack of protection from the sun and the temperature may increase the likelihood of incidents of sunburn and hypothermia. Experience has shown that crews don't take responsibility for their swimmers and remove them if the issue arises.
- Safety and fun should be the paramount considerations and limiting swimmers to only wearing bathers may seem to diminish the level of fun for some swimmers and negatively impact safety considerations.
- Is it reasonable to compare our swim with crossing the English Channel – whilst the environments aren't considered significantly different (a difference of about 4 degrees water temperature) some believe that swimming in bathers only in our climate is not reasonable?
- Technologies have changed and competitors should be able to harness the technologies available to them particularly if they are swimming for fun.

Option 2 - Redraft the rule to reflect the swimsuits allowed for the 2010 race

During the past few years, the RSCA committee has permitted swimsuits that don't strictly comply with the Association's by-laws. In particular, non textile suits such as the BlueSeventy's pointzero3 suits for example have been allowed. These suits have been allowed by FINA for open water swims and were considered to be acceptable for the Channel Swim.

Notwithstanding the RSCA's by-laws pertaining to swimsuits, the Committee published to the RSCA website its decision regarding suits for the 2010 swim. That decision read:

*"Swimmers are not allowed to wear wetsuits or anything made out of neoprene. However swimmers are **permitted** to wear **swim skins of any brand, rash vests, the pointzero3 and nero swim suits made by Blueseventy**".*

In essence this option proposes that the interpretation of the by-law for the 2010 swim be the basis of a new rule covering acceptable swimwear. That swimmers in the Channel Swim on Race Day and solo swimmers at other times be permitted to wear any swimsuit so long as it:

- Doesn't extend beyond the ankles, neck and wrists.
- Doesn't contain neoprene, or other buoyant materials.
- Is generally available to all competitors.

When considering the arguments that support this option the following is provided:

- Fastsuits provide protection against hypothermia caused by immersion during the swim. A significant number of solo swimmers become hypothermic during their swim.
- Fastsuits provide protection against hypothermia caused by wind-chill. Duo and team swimmers wait for their turn to swim wearing wet bathers and can struggle to regain body temperature – particularly if the day is windy and/or cloudy (where the sun's radiant heat effect is minimal)
- Fastsuits potentially provide significant protection against jelly fish stings.
- Fastsuits potentially provide significant protection against sunburn. Solo swimmers have no opportunity to reapply sunscreen and, on a day with high UV, are at risk of sunburn.
- The Rottneest Channel Swim has evolved over two decades to attract elite and not so elite swimmers. It has become a major community event with some 2,300 entrants. A significant factor in the attraction of this event is the achievement of a team, duo or solo crossing in a well-managed, safe and in many cases fun environment. Most swimmers just want to make it to the island. Protection from hypothermia, stingers and sunburn contribute greatly to the safety aspect for the majority of competitors who are considered non-elite swimmers.
- In the event of a serious incident relating to hypothermia, the RSCA will be subject to intense media scrutiny. Not allowing competitors to wear swimwear that protects them from this type of injury has the potential to bring the event adverse publicity. The lack of fairness of that publicity will be of little consolation to members should it occur.

So what then are the arguments that contradict allowing swimmers to compete in Fastsuits?

- Fastsuits allow a swimmer to swim faster. Fastsuits do feel faster. Research indicates, however, that Fastsuits make a measurable difference to pool swimming times but not to open water swimming performance. It is considered that there are far too many variables to be certain of any performance enhancement in an Open Water Swim (OWS).
- The use of Fastsuits is contrary to the spirit of the event. That is, the swim should be unassisted by equipment and a swimmer should wear swimming briefs for men or a "standard" swimsuit for women. The RSCA by-law currently provides that *"Swimmers are permitted to grease the body before a swim, use goggles, wear a maximum of two caps, nose clip and earplugs and one bathing suit."*

A question to consider is whether grease, goggles, two caps, and a nose clip already constitute significant assistance to a swimmer. Much of the benefit of allowing these items is to minimise the risk of hypothermia.

Grease is not practical for other than solo swimmers due to the difficulty of getting in and out of boats for the team/duo swimmers and the resulting mess in those support boats (which could also pose potential safety hazards). Therefore, wearing a Fastsuit does assist a swimmer in retaining body heat but is no different, in this regard, than grease.

- RCSA by-laws may be different from FINA open water swimsuit rules. FINA has now published a list of allowable suits for OWSs. At the time of writing we were unable to access this list. However, an option to consider is the creation of a special category of solo swimmers who wish to strictly follow FINA rules for OWSs.

Option 3 - Delete from the rules all references to swimsuits and other equipment

In essence, this option is considering an almost “no holds barred” scenario in relation to clothing and equipment used by swimmers in a Rottneest Channel attempt barring of course the use of wetsuits.

By opening up the by-law the focus of the swim shifts from one of performance to one of fun and safety. It also provides for an easier administration/application of the by-law.

When considering the arguments that support this option the following is provided:

- The opening up of previous restrictions provides for a fun event that encourages all swimmers of all abilities to participate.
- Longer suits allow for more protection of the body from both wind burn and sunburn that are conditions more prevalent for the Rottneest Channel Swim – as opposed to something like undertaking an English Channel crossing.
- The opening up of previous restrictions provide for a greater emphasis on the health and safety of competitors.
- There is an acceptance that technology will always keep developing and changing and we should continue to support this through our swim.
- The majority of Rottneest Channel swimmers are participating for the fun of the event, not to win.

So what then are the arguments that contradict allowing the opening up of previous restrictions?

- Given the different types of Fastsuits available on the market – placegetters may become upset where a person with one type of Fastsuit outperforms another swimmer with a not so Fastsuit.
- There is an increased potential for the “purity” of the race in terms of skills, abilities and performance of swimmers to be significantly reduced.

Summary

As indicated at the outset, the issue of permissible swimsuits elicits much debate and the range of options is likely to be greater than those provided in this paper. That said the Committee believes the options provided represent the most appropriate category of options for consideration by the members.

