

## SYKESIES SOLO SWIM

I wake at 3am with a smile on my face. OMG the day has finally arrived. I write on FB "Today is the day I swim to Rottneest".

I put sunscreen all over myself and on the soles of my feet then have breakfast, drink lots of water, go to the toilet several times, check I've got all my gear. Time is now flying, I wake Luke, put more sunscreen on, get into my swimsuit and then the nerves start to kick in. I feel like I'm living somebody else's life right now. That feeling lasts all day.

Cottesloe is still dark when Luke and I get down there to put the paddle on the beach. The birds are still quite loud with the dawn light is creeping in, the atmosphere is building. I bump into Nicole, a gorgeous friend of mine whom I went to school with and is also doing her 1<sup>st</sup> solo. We give each other an excited hug and both let out a nervous squeal. I see some of my family, mum and my sisters (who are in a team together) and my son Ollie. He's gulping down a blue Gatorade, which I said he could have the day of the swim, but at 5am? Who cares, I'm thinking about other stuff. Once I have registered and bumped into a few of my swimming buddies (they seem to be everywhere), I ask mum to put the wool fat on me and that makes it all start feeling very very real. I have my white cap on, goggles around my head and I'm looking and feeling like a solo swimmer. I kiss and hug Luke who is my paddler goodbye with tears in our eyes, he's so proud, and then mum and my sisters, they are crying too. It's so overwhelming, I want to sob.

Shit, 10 minutes till the first wave, that's me! I calmly walk down to the start where I see Nicole again, we have journeyed so much together for this day that it is so fitting to be starting together. My world all of a sudden gets very solo indeed. There are hundreds of people cheering and waving but I don't hear it or see it. All I see is the dark water in front of me and I start my mantra, " you have trained so hard for this day, you can do it. See you at the finish!"

I am feeling pretty comfortable in the water, I am not racing, I just want to get there. I keep looking up for Luke, I know he is so nervous about this part of the race, I want to make sure he is okay and comfortable, if he's happy, I'm happy. We find each other very easily, I look up and say, "Hi Babe, here we go!". Our boat with Jeff (skipper), Luke O'D (#2 paddler) and Chris (Luke's girlfriend and #1 support helper) are found very quickly too. It doesn't seem crowded with too many boats, its great. I'm so happy to be there.

The training I have been doing is kicking in. I feel comfortable in the water and have my "rotto pace" on. I've chosen not to be told when I hit 5,10,15km or any other markers. I'm just going to swim it in my own time and hopefully that works out. My 20-minute drink/feed stops are working just fine and we have a good system very quickly. I try to keep track of the stops so I can secretly calculate out how far I've been swimming. I loose track at I think about 4hrs.

Conditions are not exactly what I thought. The weather has been perfect for a couple of weeks prior. Slight easterly sea breeze every single day. But not today. That's the rotto swim, you never know what you're going to get.

I've been thinking about what I'm going to think about on the swim. Family, friends, the amazing people who have sponsored me for Kidney Health Australia. Well they have all been thought about by I reckon 5km and now I'm really struggling to think about interesting things. I concentrate on my stroke, breath, rhythm and dodging stingurs. The breaks now start to mesh together and I can't remember if it's a drink or a carbo stop. This is good, I'm in the zone, I feel like I could swim all day. I'm still feeling strong and confident.

I get the feeling that we are drifting south, I can see lots of boats to the far right of me and think perhaps we should be up there with them. I haven't seen many other boats, and no sign of the large markers so I can't tell how far I've gone until I hear one of the very few boats near us say "13kms, only 7km to go"! What only 13km you have got to be joking me. I pick up the pace slightly, I don't want to be out here all day. I hear them again at 15km, I get pissed off and do one of my fastest 1kms.

Things start to get a bit tougher from here. The water became choppier again. With every stop I am taking in seawater, which makes me vomit and cough. I have not been expecting this at all. I heard it happens to a lot of people but I never vomited in any of my many ocean swims. It feels awful and I'm aware that it is slowing me down and I'm now starting to fatigue.

I close my eyes quite a lot, swing my arms over and open my eyes only slightly when I bilateral breath. It feels like I'm almost sleeping, if I close my eyes long enough will I get to the island faster? Oh no the voices start getting quite loud in my head. I try to quieten the negative ones and keep the positive ones up front and clear. I am getting very annoyed with

the ugly thoughts and now really focus on the simple message "just keep going, you have got all day".

The crew go suspiciously quiet for a while, my stops are not pleasant, I'm vomiting frequently and progress is becoming very slow indeed. Luke is wearing a GPS watch and tells me I've got 2km to go, can this be true, where is the rock? I ask him, he replies "what rock?". I say "it's 2km from Philip rock to shore, let me know when we are at Philip rock". Oh dear we are a long way south and the current is strong. There is nothing I can do but keep swimming. I say to myself "just be patient and it (the rock) will come, just be patient and it will come". A rescue boat has been circling our boat for a little while, asking my crew if I'm okay and making sense. They inform them that if they don't start heading north "she's not going to make it".

It sure as hell is not getting any easier, the coughing is getting worse and Luke notices blood in the water. He comments and I wash it away saying it must be the berry flavoured Gatorade. He keeps saying "are you okay babe", my response "yep, I'm fine". I keep swimming.

We have finally made progress and we reach the rock! The feeling of relief is enormous. The whole crew's energy lifts and huge smiles are on everyone's faces. Dig deep girl, keep going, you are so close. I know I'm nearly there. A team of women pass by and start screaming at me, calling me a legend, they give me the inspiration that I have needed. I get the goose bumps and think yes I'm a "white cap". My boat peels off and I wave and thank them all for their support, it's been a long day for all of them. Luke and I are on our own for a bit longer, it's time for him to peel off I tell him I love him and thank him for his unbelievable support, he's been amazing. He's crying.

I'm nearly there. I can hear the crowd, I can hear my name! I stop and there is my family at the end of the jetty screaming and waving. I wave back and then keep swimming. The sand is getting closer to my face. I have been visualising this moment for months and months. "Go Katrina" is all I hear as my head comes out of the water, my beautiful friends have made a huge banner and they are screaming at me too and I wave to them. I start running up the beach, with my hands high in the air and cross the finish line.

I DID IT!

10hrs 3min 48sec

Special thanks for the love and support from my husband Luke, my family, my swimming family (lane 5), the emails, txts, phone calls and encouraging words from friends and strangers, I now proudly call myself a Rottneest Channel Solo Swimmer.

I am also extremely proud of the fact that I raised over \$12k for Kidney Health Australia and I have a set of very fit and healthy kidneys ready to donate one of them to my brother.