



Sweaty She Monday (8-10-09): Good Friends and Strong Currents

By Susan Farago

Weekly Sweaty She postings can be found on "Sweaty She" on Facebook.com or at www.susanfarago.com.

Sometimes it's good to just have the bajeezus scared out of you. As my Mom would say, "it builds character". So whenever I'm feeling low on character and a little too comfortable in my own skin, I think up something goofy to do. And of course it's more fun with friends! I am grateful for having good friends who are usually up for joining me in these screwy activities. The latest escapade? Night swimming in Lake Austin.

I decided the safest place from a "no boats" perspective would be the low water crossing immediately below Mansfield Dam. This meant the water would be cooler (68+ degrees) but a great excuse to wear a wetsuit for extra buoyancy and a barrier from weeds and who knows what else would be in the water. In addition to the wetsuits, a few of us discussed "gear" before the swim, including using glow sticks for lights and general navigation, and perhaps buying clear swim goggles to see better in the dark, which upon further thought I realized didn't make sense.

My friend Laura said she was going to bring swim fins in case she has to "get away in a hurry". Get away from what? I didn't want to think about it. But unfortunately my overactive imagination kicked in and the list suddenly seemed endless: Freddy Krueger (Nightmare on Elm Street movie), Jason (Friday the 13th movie), the Lochness Monster, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, snakes, sharks, piranhas, giant squid, the Texas Chainsaw Massacre guy, Jaws, giant human-eating seaweed, the thing lives under your bed, the Blairwitch witch, the Swamp Thing creature, barracudas, zombies, vampires, and did I mention Freddy and Jason?

With all these things in the lake, it was going to be a crowded swim!

A few days before the swim, Leary and I drove down to the low water crossing at 10:30pm, on our way home from a night trail run of course, to check things out. Virtually no current, water temps were fine, and surprisingly there was enough ambient light from nearby docks and the dam itself that we could make out the shapes and shadows of trees the shoreline, and the narrow channel that was the start of Lake Austin. Plus we didn't think we would be in any "park rules violation" since this was just a small dirt parking area with a neglected path by the side of the bridge leading to the water. This was going to work. The prior week we scouted out another place to swim but a few days after we were there a woman accidentally drove her car into the lake at that very spot and drown. They recovered her body but I was NOT taking any chances. I knew foreshadowing when I saw it (smile).

The night of the swim, the small group met for dinner beforehand and at one point we ran through some “worse case scenarios”: What if the dam flood gates open? What if we get lost? What if we freak out? What if ... what if....what if...The answer was always the same – head for the shore!!

At 8:30pm we were in the small dirt parking lot near the low water bridge. It was dusk and the lights of Mansfield Dam loomed above us – the fearless five: Laura, Mike, Laurie, Leary, and myself. We were nearly ready to go when a park ranger vehicle drove past us and onto the bridge which was a dead end so we knew he’d be back in a few minutes. We all looked at each other. In an attempt to corroborate our story (just in case) I said, “OK, we just finished our swim and are getting ready to leave, right?” Right.

Sure enough, on his return the park ranger pulled into the parking lot. All I heard was, “Park’s closed!” and before I could turn around and say anything Mike said, “We just finished our swim and are getting ready to leave.” With that, the park ranger pulled out of the lot and left. Luckily the park ranger failed to notice the glow sticks strapped to Laura’s and my head AND the fact that none of us were even wet. A somewhat panicked discussion ensued about parking tickets, getting into trouble, and other scenarios leading to fines or incarceration. Mike said, “I have a bad feeling we’re going to end up on the nightly news after this.” We decided to hurry up and get in so we could get out.



Pre-swim photo with Lake Austin and Mansfield Dam lights behind us.

A quick photo to commemorate the event at the edge of the water (of course), and then SPLASH - Leary was the first one in. The water reeked of mud and dead fish. With the low water crossing and the Dam to our right, we immediately turned left and started to swim towards the third dock light approximately 400 meters down the narrow channel. We agreed that at that point we would turn around and head back.

Swimming in the dark was wonderful! And oddly enough it didn’t feel creepy at all. After about a minute I popped my head up to make sure everyone was OK. I counted five sets of glow sticks. Good. But I noticed we were all making good progress. In fact, too much progress. I looked at the shore line. I was making progress and I wasn’t even swimming! One word flew through my brain – CURRENT!!! I hollered for Mike to look at the shore line – it was moving past us pretty quickly. Leary made this realization at about the same time too. Laura and Laurie were ahead of us so I yelled to get their attention. All I saw were two sets of glow sticks jerk upwards so I knew their heads were

out of the water. I yelled “CURRENT” and they understood. We all started swimming back towards the bridge where we got in just a few minutes ago.

Remembering our “worst case scenarios” solution (head for the shore), I saw Leary make his way to the bank so I swam cross current and headed in that direction – aiming for the green glow stick that was bobbing along the shoreline. The current was definitely strong. There was a big dead tree branch half in the water and with every breath and stroke I took, I could see the same branch. I wasn’t making any progress. So I angled my body cross current to get closer to the shore and I kicked and pulled a little harder. I felt the current subside and as I neared the swim exit, I felt something on my foot. Freddie? Jason? No. It was Mike.

What took three minutes in swimming out with the current required about ten minutes of swimming back before we finally got to our swim exit.

Shortly afterwards, we were out of our wetsuits and back up to the cars, laughing and marveling about the whole thing. We took a few more photos and I brought some small mementos for everyone to commemorate the event. Just as we were getting into our cars, we saw the familiar headlights of the park ranger’s vehicle. He drove past us just as we were pulling out of the lot. Whew! THAT was close!!

Mission accomplished. We all tried something new and as a result...we each have a little more “character” than when we started. Were we ever really in danger? I don’t think so. But my years of growing up on the St.Croix River and life guarding have taught me one thing – it is always good to have a healthy respect for water.

On my way home, I sent everyone a quick text to say “thank you”. Laurie responded with, “We left just in time! That was a hoot!” And Laura responded with, “We need to do that again!” Did I mention I am grateful for good friends?



Post-swim in the parking lot with “night swim mascots”.

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