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Greg Hansen Arizona Daily Star Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, October 12, 2010 12:00 am | Comments

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN CARL BECKER In addition to competing in Maui this summer, John Carl Becker swam two events in La Jolla, up the coast from San Diego; and one at Lake Tahoe.

The Maui Channel Swim, from Lanai to Kaanapali Beach, is a 10-mile Hawaiian odyssey through choppy waters, jellyfish, marlins and tiger sharks.

It's not a race for sissies. Those bold enough to compete usually swallow enough seawater to open a small aquarium.

Each September, about 100 six-person teams, each followed by an escort boat, pays \$720 to enter the race. In recent years, race organizers have created a handful of exemptions for what they call "solo swimmers," those daring enough to swim five to seven hours mano a manta ray.

Tucson electrical engineer and nuclear energy specialist John Carl Becker was granted one of this year's 17 solo berths, paid \$140, jumped in and swam and swam and swam.

What was he thinking?

"I got Tasered by jellyfish twice on my arms and shoulders," he says. "But I just kept swimming. What else can you do? The pain goes away in about 10 minutes.

"The swells were so rough, and I ingested so much saltwater that my lips were numb, my tongue was swollen and the back of my throat was raw. You get little tears in your skin that start to bleed."

Becker saw sting rays, leopard sharks and venomous Portuguese Man o' Wars. Three relay teams withdrew when they spotted a tiger shark.

Nothing stopped Becker. After 5hours 36minutes, he climbed out of the water, exhilarated. He finished fifth among the solo swimmers.

Two days later, thinking clearly - he is, after all, a rocket scientist - Becker completed the 2.4-mile Maui Aumakua Swim, finishing 17th in a field of 106 distance swimmers.

It's almost like hiking to Mount Lemmon one day and to Mount Wrightson two days later.

"John is a swimmer's Pam Reed," said UA communications professor and Tucson Ford Aquatics masters swimmer Dale Kunkel, comparing Becker to the Tucson ultramarathon runner who routinely completes 100-mile road races.

Reed once ran a 300-mile endurance test near Picacho Peak, but she did not dodge rattlesnakes or coyotes. Becker's ocean swims are as fascinating for the inherent danger as for the requisite strength and stamina.

You don't do it for the money because there is no prize money available.

"He is very competitive in these races because he trains relentlessly," Kunkel says. "He is motivated solely by the pleasure of training and competition, and a love for swimming and the ocean."

This is a distance swimmer's pleasure: When the 46-year-old Becker was employed as a Raytheon Missile Systems engineer, he arranged his work week into four, 10-hour days. That enabled him to train with the Ford Masters group on Thursday nights, Friday mornings, Friday at noon, Friday evening and Saturday morning.

"I started doing this as a form of stress reduction," he says. "And then it just kept growing; one summer I did 11 ocean swims."

Becker's 2010 late-summer schedule was imposing: He swam across Lake Tahoe (part of a six-person relay event), completed the 5-mile, La Jolla Cove Swim Club Tour of Buoys, and was third in the 3-mile La Jolla Roughwater Gatorman.

Do you realize how cold the water in Lake Tahoe is? No wet suits allowed. Or that, at 6,200 feet, it might be difficult to summon enough oxygen to swim across that magnificent lake?

"Determination trumps cold water," Becker says. "It's funny, but in high school (at Springfield, Ill.) I was a sprinter, swimming the 50- and 100-yard freestyle. Now I swim five and 10 miles. Go figure."

Since he moved to Tucson three years ago, Becker has become something of a legend within the nationally respected Ford Aquatics masters program. He trains six days a week, and three days puts in double sessions, at 6 a.m. and 6:30 p.m.

"I'm here a lot," he says.

Distance swimming has its "majors" the same way golf does. The Grand Slam of Open Water would be to swim the English Channel (19 miles), the Catalina Island Channel of Southern California (22 miles) and the Manhattan Island Marathon (28.5 miles).

Becker has not participated in any of those and has no plans to do so. He used to swim in Lake Michigan ("too cold," he remembers), and he hasn't been tempted to swim the English Channel because it's in a shipping channel and it must be done, partly, in the dead of night.

"I think 10 miles is enough for me; that's long enough," he says. "I'm planning to keep this up until I'm 70 or 80. I don't want to wear myself out."

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