

Sent 4/9/72

PROFESSIONAL MARATHON SWIMMING

By Joe Grossman, Secretary, WPMSF

World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation

Where are they now? Not the great swimmers of yesteryear, but rather the great water courses over which they swam.

Water pollution is shrinking the world of long-distance swimming by eliminating -- year by year -- the bodies of ~~water~~ water which swimmers may safely navigate.

Oil pollution has closed the English Channel, the "Mount Everest" of marathon swimming, for weeks at a time to swimming hopefuls.

The Hudson River, which in the 1920s and '30s saw numerous natators plying the 153-mile course from Albany to Manhattan, is no longer safe for swimming -- and the waters of New York Harbor even less so.

12-mile
Boston Harbor, the site of annual races from Charlestown Bridge to Graves Light, ^{from 1905 through the 1940s,} is on the pollution hit parade.

The Nile River, where races drew international fields of distance swimmers through the 1950s, has become infested with ~~Bilharzia~~ bilharzia since the High Dam at Aswan made it a breeding ground for disease-carrying flukes.

The Chicago River, once the site of yearly 3-mile events, was closed to swimmers several decades ago -- and the Lake Michigan area from Chicago south and east, where races of from 37 to 50 miles were held in the '50s, has been shut out as a water course by the increase of industrial effluviants.

and back
Lake Erie, where swimmers stroked from the American to Canadian shores as late as the 1950s, is now so polluted at its eastern end as to have become wastes on a fire hazard -- and, in fact, near Cleveland, the water actually caught fire several years ago.

And the list of one-time swimmers' courses now on the "danger" list

includes the Gibraltar Strait, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, all threatened by pollution from oil wastes and other polluting agents from shipping.

With world-wide attention being focused by governmental and private agencies and organizations on saving the ~~envir~~ environment, sportsmen -- and among them, certainly devotees of swimming -- are beginning to make their pleas heard. But more voices are needed -- and louder ones!

In an age which has seen television make most of the civilized world keenly sports-minded, the athlete can exert an influence which will strike more chords than will the reports of international bodies and governmental officials warning of the dangers of DDT-spraying or soap factory wastes.

In 1970, the World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation, taking the lead from International Commissioner of Marathon Swimming Johnny Weissmuller, embarked on a world-wide program to bring to the attention of sports devotees the increasing urgency of the problem of water pollution.

In a letter to President Nixon, Weissmuller said "we feel we have already been given a grim insight into what lies ahead for all people if we don't do something soon about our waterways, our atmosphere, our soil and the beauties of nature." He added:

"Our swimmers are concerned citizens of the world as well as athletes. Many of them are fathers and mothers of children who have the same right to breathe clean air, swim in unpolluted waters, eat pure food and enjoy the beaches, fields and forests as we had when we were young."

Taking Weissmuller's lead, the WPMSF members have embarked on a program carrying the message of the urgency of a crusade against continued poisoning of the environment. Each WPMSF member has pledged to "make a pitch" for action against pollution in every interview or speech ~~in which~~ and by whatever other means present themselves.

Typical of the new concern of marathon swimmers with this over-riding problem is James J. Doty of Boston. Doty, a former Harvard University athlete who was a ~~marathon~~ Boston Marathon participant before he turned to long-distance swimming, has been braving the polluted waters in the New England area, particularly those around Boston, in attempts to keep the problem before the public -- at the risk of his own health.

A strong advocate of pollution control, Doty has "dedicated" his solo swims in recent summers to the crusade against water pollution. The publicity given his swims in the Boston and Gloucester vicinities has enabled him to press his ~~plea~~ plea for more public concern. When out of the water -- and away from his insurance business -- ~~WCF~~ WPMSF member Doty serves on a number of anti-pollution committees.

But the battle has hardly been joined. Swimmers and swimming ~~fan~~ fans can ~~help~~ help increase the intensity of public concern over water ~~pollution~~ and other types of pollution. *(The public ignores)* If ~~they ignore~~ the evidences of the increase in these dangers, the world of swimming may soon be reduced to the size of a swimming pool!

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SWIMMING WORLD

May, 1972