

Encountering Lion's Mane jellyfish whilst attempting to swim the North Channel was not a surprise to me. The swim is regarded as one of the toughest in the world on account of its fickle weather, cold water temperatures... And its marine life. What I did find disconcerting was the extraordinary abundance of these creatures which floated gracefully into my path.

My swim started at 0600 – a very respectable hour – and the day looked set to provide reasonable conditions despite the sun having yet to break through the clouds. Jumping off the boat to swim to my start point I was acutely aware of the temperature of the water. I was fairly certain it felt colder than it had done the previous few days when I went in at Ballyholme for micro-swims as preparation and acclimatisation. The temperature of the water was not something high on my list of concerns though; I knew that once my body had got used to the shock and with regular hot feeds I would be fine. I had been sea swimming throughout the winter and had been forced to embrace not only the tempestuous Cornish swells but also snow, gale force winds and hail, not to mention having to walk down the beach to the ocean over frost-covered sand! Experiencing these adverse conditions served me well and after just a few strokes I felt more than comfortable in the water.

It was not long before I spotted my first Lion's Mane jelly lurking in the depths below where I swam. During my training I was exposed to an excess of jellyfish of various breeds, the most notable of which was the Barrel jellyfish which, on some occasions caused significant disruption to my sessions. For those of you who are wondering how a jellyfish could possibly be considered an interruption, let me explain. I was heading out for a sprint session so I swam to the buoys which are a good distance apart and they don't move so it's a good way of measuring consistency in performance. I was heading along to the 2nd buoy when I spotted, looming out of the algae-ridden waters, a Barrel jellyfish. My irrational, uncontrolled childhood fear of jellyfish having dissipated a few years ago I was unconcerned... Until I saw another one... And another one. It soon became apparent that I had strayed into a social gathering of jellies and that each member of the congregation was almost as big as me.

Sprint days are never my favourite and subsequently it doesn't take a lot to deter me from them but this time I felt that heading for shore was entirely justified. Being completely surrounded by a pulsating mass of man-sized blobs it seemed entirely reasonable to do some shoreline distances instead of bouncing like a pinball off the bell-shaped gelatine as I tried to beat sprint times. Having marvelled at these strange creatures for what I felt was quite long enough I turned to leave but upon doing so I found myself confronted by a jellyfish so enormous that, had I felt inclined to do so, I would not have been able to put my arms around to hug. Apparently, someone had invited granddad jelly to the gathering.

I wasn't entirely sure what to do - knowing that (allegedly) these jellyfish don't sting and that they're not exactly known for sudden, speedy attacks I didn't feel like I had to swim away as fast as I possibly could, and they are fascinating to watch. Equally I did feel rather intimidated and therefore knew I needed to leave... Particularly as this crowd was recruiting larger and larger participants! It was while I was considering my options face-to-face with the colossal glob, both of us floating in the great ocean, kind of comfortable but apparently unable to make decisions regarding our destination, that I realised it could look to a 3rd party that my affinity with these creatures stems from neither of us having a brain. This situation did mean that I was subsequently undeterred by this new species – although I was conscious of the fact that these ones could hurt.

Unfortunately, in a similar fashion to the scenario outlined above, the further I swam, the more intense the concentration of jellyfish. The stings themselves weren't awful – sure they were uncomfortable, and I definitely noticed them, (after all, who doesn't notice that their arms and legs are burning?!) but had it not been for what happened next I would have carried on being stung for as long as it took for me to reach Scotland. So I swam on, but the longer I swam the more jellies I saw, and the more I saw the more I was stung until I was unable to identify any part of my anatomy which had not been caressed by poisoned threads of marine matter. The first adverse effect I noticed was my left leg shaking uncontrollably. I thought I was cold although I didn't feel hypothermic. I remembered having been in a significantly hypothermic state on one or two occasions through the winter, but this didn't feel like that. My core didn't feel cold and I had not yet developed claw hands, there was no dizziness and I was not feeling nauseous; I was just shanking. However, so unaware was I that it could be anything other than cold I just carried on. I could feel my leg intermittently spasming and in my head it looked really obvious – kind of like a fish floundering in a shallow pool. I waited for one of the crew to ask what on earth I was doing impersonating an eel having a seizure at such a time as this but alas I guess it wasn't as obvious as I thought. As I swam on my boat support crew occasionally grinned enthusiastically down at me apparently oblivious to my misfortune!

After some time of this I began to actually feel cold. Again, not to the extent of hypothermia but cold nonetheless. By this point my mind was racing – why was I so cold?! I had swum for longer in much colder conditions and had been absolutely fine. I had been in Northern Ireland for several days and had been really comfortable in the water, I was taking regular hot feeds and the water wasn't even cold (not remarkably so at any rate) so why was I feeling a chill?! Getting more and more irritated I spent some time wondering whether I would make it to the next feed before changing to half hourly – a tactic I had not expected to have to employ before 6 hours. It was at this point that I felt pain. It started in my hips and then radiated down my legs. It felt like a mixture of severe fatigue and that cramping of muscles and biting pain which comes with the cold. Attributing this new symptom to the cold I shouted up to Andrea, my exceptional friend and support from home, to switch to half hourly feeds.

I should take this opportunity to break my story to emphasise how vital it is to have a good team for these swims. It has been said so many times before by people significantly more successful than myself that distance swimming, solo or otherwise, is anything but an individual challenge. Being a shift worker and trying to fit training around days/nights meant that a lot of my training had to be done alone – not everyone is up for a 0355 wake-up call and swim session before 12hrs of captivity in work. Throughout it all though, Andrea had been checking my progress. During stormy winter sessions she stood on the beach facing all sorts of weathers – often wrapped in more layers than anyone imagined possible for one person to wear – watching to make sure I didn't drown or succumb to hypothermia. And for this swim it wasn't just her. I don't pride myself on making many great decisions – after all attempting to swim channels is fundamentally ludicrous. But one decision I do claim as being exceptional was that which I made to go with Mr Nelson and his team for my support boat. They were utterly flawless from start to finish... But more on that later.

True to form Andrea sprang into action stumbling along the deck of the pitching boat to make me a drink. By this point most of my body was shaking and the pain in my legs was excruciating. Downing my feed I swam on waiting for the heat to take over but I found no reprieve. As fast as my physical state was deteriorating so was I becoming increasingly angry at myself.

What on earth was wrong with me?!

Why was I being so completely pathetic?!

Why now, of all days, was I suddenly so susceptible to the cold?!

After another 10 minutes of swimming I stopped and shouted up that I couldn't do it. At this point it wasn't so much that I physically couldn't continue, it was more the knowledge that I was *already* so significantly affected and I was aware that I had potentially another 10 hours to go so I was never going to make it. However, little did I know that I had not dropped any speed and my stroke remained comfortable and consistent. The reply shouted back to me was, therefore, entirely unsympathetic and basically was just telling me to get on with it. To be fair it was an encouraging sort of shout I think – I vaguely remember something along the lines of "come on, you're still on course". As further jellyfish reached out to hug me I gave myself an underwater pep-talk: I was just being ridiculous, it was all in my head, I just needed to suck it up and get on with it.

I was now unable to effectively move my legs as the muscles were in spasm – another feature I was connecting to the cold. A short while later I was called over for another feed and now I couldn't really speak, my hands and arms were shaking as well as my legs and I was about 70% certain my feet were no longer attached to my ankles. I could hear mutterings from the boat that I needed to get out and I was shouted out of the water. I climbed the ladder (partially distracted by the fact that the rungs were covered with carpet) and was assisted in dressing by Andrea.

After a short time I was no longer feeling cold but I could not stop shaking and my legs felt like I had run 7 marathons. My joints were so painful and my feet were in agony. Being an Emergency Department nurse, I sat in the boat angry and frustrated and tried to diagnose myself – the best I could come up with was that it felt like compartment syndrome (the death of muscles and tissues caused by a build up of pressure under the skin).

My lack of improvement despite no longer being in the cold highlighted to Mark and Quinton that actually this whole scenario might be jellyfish related. Having been stung an excessive amount of times by these spineless lifeforms with their spider's web silken tentacles that rationale did actually make sense. Declining the ambulance which was suggested by the more sane people on the boat we got back to the harbour and I was bundled into the back of my own car and, with my sister (AKA land support), Anna, and Andrea, commenced the most uncomfortable trip of my entire life so far.

The journey to the hospital felt long, not helped by the fact that my sister's SatNav intermittently interjected directions in measurements of feet. Curled up on the back seat of my own car feeling exceptionally sub-optimal with my mate driving for the first time, the least comforting thing to hear is the voice from Anna's phone stating "In 2000 feet, turn left". This is only made worse when the next audible sound is emitted from the driver saying "Does she mean here??? I don't know how far feet are apart!".

Fascinatingly we did make it to the hospital and I was triaged swiftly and moved to resus to receive emergency treatment. As expected my temperature was fine but the shaking and the pain were persistent and intense. I.V steroids, morphine and fluids were administered and I began to feel like attending the local Emergency Department was the right call. So there I was, lying on the hospital trolley recognising that my profusely sweating toxins out of my skin was something else to add to the list of reasons I might be single, whilst simultaneously crying over my failed swim. I was kept for the rest of the day and was discharged later in the evening with a course of medication for the next few days.

I mentioned before that having a good support crew is vital for this kind of task and that I was phenomenally grateful to be accompanied by the team I had. My own character meant that I did, and still do, feel like I failed that swim. I am angry and disappointed and frustrated and I remain unsure as to whether its worse that I didn't make it due to something out of my control or not. What I cannot fault is the conduct of that crew. Beforehand: with Mark being so patient with my computer illiteracy and complete failure to understand how to use emails, and Quinton's superb day selection (he couldn't have foreseen the jelly invasion). During my short time in the water: with Mark's encouragement and chilled demeanour, and Ross's thumbs up while I was in somewhat significant pain (which was more appreciated than anyone might imagine). And afterwards – not just regarding Quinton's speedy return to shore, and Matthew's ability to deftly carry out instructions, but the positivity, care and concern from everyone. By the time I had recovered the use of my hands and was able to use my phone again I

already had a message from Mark asking how I was doing. After updating them I received a speedy reply encouraging a swift recovery. The next day I had to visit the boatyard to retrieve some of my belongings which had been deserted due to at least 50% of the people present the day before thinking that I might be dying. When I got there I was kindly greeted by Quinton, who's entire character is just so heart-warming, and an expression of general relief that I was not, in fact dead. I was also treated to a hug from Ross who then went on to gather my abandoned belongings from wherever they had been stashed, and who proved his worth as a human as he patiently and attentively listened while I rambled on from my place of painful anger at my incomplete swim and jellyfish encounter. In all communication since I have heard nothing to suggest that I should feel anything less than proud of what I attempted – all I have seen was relief that I was alright, positivity, and their reassurance that the channel isn't going anywhere.