

Swim The September Ocean Safely

by George S. Nammack

A local Long Island newspaper recently offered an article titled "Advice For Ocean Swimming" which, as a lifelong ocean swimmer, body surfer, underwater diver and eight-season ocean lifeguard, I read with interest. I found the article to be sound, educational and quite comprehensive, but because we are now in September, a month traditionally identified with strong undertows, dangerous rip currents, and so-called "hurricane surf," I felt compelled to add and emphasize a point or two.

The article advised initially to check with the lifeguard when you get to the beach to determine just how strong the waves and currents are, what the tide is doing, and to learn the current water temperature. Many beaches fly color-coded pennants (green = go on in), (yellow = caution...be careful), (one red = dangerous conditions; two reds = no swimming). Other beaches display specific conditions on large blackboards using actual numbers to define details. And don't be hesitant to tell the lifeguard about any personal physical limitations that could hamper you, a family member or a guest in the surf. But do resist any temptation to engage him/her in lengthy conversation when he's watching people in the water.

Ocean swimming is unpredictable whether swimmers, waders, dippers or bathers are tossing about in breaking surf or floating like croutons in a plate of soup. Things happen fast. Also, if you see only one lifeguard on duty, wait with your talk. The guard may be splitting his glimpses among 50 swimmers or between the "channel swimmer" way out past the last ropes and the tot looking for shells in the shallows.

More of the article's advice included plenty of common sense. Never swim alone. Always swim where a lifeguard can see you and in "OK TO SWIM" areas. Don't swim out too far ("channel swimmer"), which is selfish and likely to monopolize the guard's attention. Speaking of that, never, never be tempted to pretend that you are drowning. It is not only stupidly dangerous, but the height of selfishness if you have the guard(s) going in to rescue you for a situation you are faking, while someone else in the ocean may actually be in trouble. This happens every season, a thoughtless act usually perpetrated by teenagers, and it is my belief that it should be punishable by a hefty fine, if not some time in a place where you cannot drown because there are plenty of steel bars to hang on. Fakers who enact a drowning should be banned from that beach permanently.

The article cautions beachgoers to wear protective footwear if surfaces are rough or rocky. Good idea. Ocean-bound people here on Long Island must usually traverse splintery boardwalks to get onto the beach. I'd really like to have a quarter in my pocket for every large, small and painful splinter I removed at the lifeguard stand where my kit contained rubbing alcohol, mercurochrome, Band-Aids and two



pair of tweezers. I became quite deft at the process, but while performing it had to tell the other guards to keep their eyes on the water to sub for me. My worst case occurred in 1951, at a club in Atlantic Beach when an extremely attractive woman in her early thirties was demonstrating the Charleston to her niece on a section of boardwalk. She did all the slides and pivots and during one major kick managed to drive a 13-inch-long wooden splinter as thick as a pencil through her arch and out the ball of her foot. She lost consciousness. I asked the police to speed us over the Atlantic Beach Bridge to my surgeon-father's office where he removed the grotesque javelin, did some repair work and informed the lady that one does the Charleston wearing leather-soled shoes. I recall looking at her bulging eyes and saying to my father, "C'mon Dad!!" He replied, "It's true, George, isn't that right, Miss?" The gal nodded numbly in assent.

Another caution in the article has to do with foot injuries, in the main. Use plastic drink and food containers...no shards of broken glass out beneath the masking sand.

Don't swim or wade near piers, breakwaters, rock or wooden piling jetties that jut out into the ocean. Their intent is to minimize the waves coming into the swimming beach, but each season a number of swimmers, particularly youngsters body-surfing, who are side-swiped by a cross-wave, get swept into these usually barnacle-encrusted barriers.

If, perchance, you get stuck in a powerful rip current that pulls you out off the beach and maddeningly prevents you from turning around to swim directly back, just go with the flow. That is, don't be thick and exhaust yourself. The rip wins those battles. Swim with the current parallel to the beach, gradually working inward to the beach.

The article concludes with advice to always face the incoming waves, instead of turning your back to them. "Then you'll know what's coming." I have seen quite a variety of "what's coming" in my time. Particularly after a major storm, it can be a rooted-up telephone

pole coming in a large, powerful wave like a gigantic torpedo, packed or empty crates, furniture, doors, oars, large and small boats. If you see anything like this on incoming waves, do get out of the water immediately and warn all fellow swimmers. Please don't ever go in to try to retrieve these things. Severe injury or worse can result.

Here's another word or two about "hurricane surf." You may find yourself one day standing waist-deep in the low-tide waters with an outgoing current urging your body toward the towering, foam-crested September-October breakers. It happens frequently when lifeguards go into the autumn surf during hurricane season to get a potential victim, a.k.a. "a case," and are facing a 15-footer looming in front of them just yards away. It's going to break on you. Do nothing and you'll be struck down, rough-and-tumbled underwater head over heels on the hard, often shell-packed sandy bottoms. You're trapped in no man's land...it's too late to retreat to the beach!

What you do is to porpoise toward the huge breaker and at the last possible opportunity dive beneath it and "grab sand." That's a literal instruction that will save you a lot of grief. You actually grab the sandy bottom with both hands and anchor yourself as the wave passes over. Pop up on the other side and continue your swimming, being careful of the monster wave's backwash, which can be a problem. Share this with your family — especially the children — and friends.

Finally, if you are swimming with young children or have some as passengers on your boat, do not rely on toy plastic inflatable Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse, etc. flotation devices as bona fide life preservers. The kids slip through them, waves dislodge them and you've got a problem. Use U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets sized appropriately and have the children wear them from the moment they exit your car until when they get back in to go home. Okay, they can take off the jacket when having a burger in the diner!