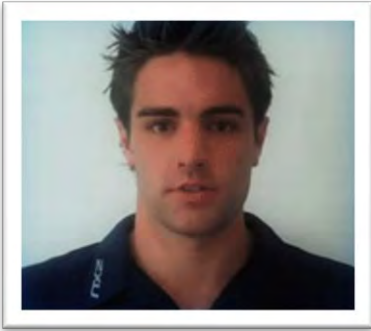




Open Water Domination (with Oliver Wilkinson)

Podcast 3

The Effortless Swimming Podcast



Welcome to the open water domination episode of the Effortless Swimming podcast. My name is Brenton Ford and today we have a very special guest who is the world record holder for the Manhattan Island Swim which is a 28.5 mile race, which is 45km if you're here in Australia, so a 28.5 mile race around Manhattan Island in New York. They hold this event each year but it is not open to anyone. You must be invited to compete and they invite only the very best marathon swimmers from around the world. The guest we have on today was invited to the world record attempt just a few months ago and he managed to sneak under that world record time to be the new world record holder. The guest we have on has also crossed the English Channel and has competed in a series of long distance open water events. He is one of the very best marathon swimmers going around today and we are very lucky to have him on. He is going to talk about fuelling your body for long distance races, finding your rhythm in open water; so if you're a tri-athlete or you do a lot of ocean swims it is important to find your rhythm during the race and he is going to talk about how you can do that quickly and settle into a good rhythm. He is also going to talk about the technique he uses for distance swimming; so it's not like a sprint technique where you have got a short fast stroke rate he is going to talk about what he does in training and in a race to get his technique right for the open swims.

Ollie Wilkinson has trained with my squad for just over a year. He has now moved to England where he is training and working, but when he was training with my squad in Melbourne he was one of the hardest trainers we had and he does some of the craziest sets I have ever seen. Some that I would never want to attempt myself by any means because they are very long sets, they are very difficult sets and you have to have a lot of persistence to be able to get through them. He is going to tell you about some of the sets he has done in our chat. So let's cut to the interview, he is world record holder for the Manhattan Island Swim, Ollie Wilkinson.



How did you get started as a swimmer?

Way back when I grew up in Liverpool in the UK, my mum took me to the local pool, I was one of four brothers, she took us all down to get us to learn the basics in swimming and we got spotted by a local club coach who talked mum into getting us into club swimming. That was at a fairly young age I think we were something like 5 or 6 or something like that so started doing club swimming in Liverpool and I guess that was the late 70's early 80's something like that, just went from there. We move to Australia in 1988 and joined Melbourne Vic Centre and swam with the Nicole Livingstone and Michael Klim and a few people around that sort of era and did a lot of club swimming and that was the main thing. I got into Masters swimming after University and it wasn't until then that I started doing a little bit of open water stuff. My first job was in Adelaide and they had a few ocean races in the summer and I started doing a few of those and quite enjoyed them. That was it really, that was it for ocean water swimming until 2009 when I started thinking I would like a bigger challenge and had been thinking about doing a half iron man or something along those lines. Then I sat down and thought if I am going to train and spend all this time doing something I might as well do something I am half decent at, I'll just swim and I won't worry about the running and the cycling. So that's when the idea of doing the English Channel came into my head.

So were you always a distance swimmer?

In the pool I was really, 400m's and 1500m's I was better at than the shorter stuff. Not too bad at 200m's, but tended to get better results; 400m's when I was swimming for Melbourne Vic Centre was probably my best, I just about got the national qualifying time just before I packed it all in. I wasn't tall enough probably to be a good sprinter.

What about your training schedule for when you have your big events like the Manhattan Island Swim and the Channel Crossing, what does your training schedule look like?

I try and do between 45-60km's a week. So I swim pretty much every day, maybe had one easy day or recovery day. I do a mix of pool swimming and open water swimming with most sessions during the week is pool swims with a reasonable intensity. Maybe 5km sessions a couple of times a day if I can and then the longer stuff, open water continuous stuff on the weekends just trying to get longer tempo work on the weekends



when I have a bit of time. So I will do 3-4-5 hour swims on the weekend, that sort of stuff.

What's the hardest set you have done?

I had a good set we used to do in Melbourne with Peter Thompson, we used to do 10 x 1km's. So it was a 10km and I did it with Peter and Chloe McCargill a few times and we used to do km straight, km straight, 10 x 100m's just to break it up, then a km straight, km straight, 10 x 100m's and so on and you do that until you have done 10km's. With people like Peter and Chloe you have got quite a bit of competition so that was tough because you were pushing yourself along for two and a half hours in the pool. The pool stuff always seems to be a bit more of a grind than the open water which is a bit easier.

That is a massive set, the biggest set I have done is 80 x 100m's and that seemed to take forever, it's alright when its broken into 100m's but doing 1km straight that has got to be a killer.

It was quite good mentally, because you are pushing yourself quite hard for a km and you're trying to hold the same times as the session wears on. Doing it with some good swimmers as well pushes you along a bit. I have six hour open water swims which are tough for the other sorts of reasons, in the Melbourne bay or in Dover harbour when I was training for the channel. You know when you are getting cold and getting bored and tired and Dover harbour it is dirty grotty water as well. Those are tough for different reasons.

How much preparation do you give yourself for the big swims, how many months ahead do you start to train for it?

It is varied a bit. I have had a reasonably big sort of build into most of the ones I have done so far. The channel was about nine months that was from a real base of not doing very much up to the English Channel. Since then I have sort of ticked over, I guess I like to have a six month build into the big ones that I have been doing. Some of the longer distance swimmers Johnnie Van Weiser he talks about having a 3 month build up to his big swims but he has been doing it a lot longer than I have. So probably six months. Most of my big swims next year are sort August, September, October time so I will start building up probably in February-March time.



What about when your racing, what goes through your mind for that six hours or twelve hours however long you're in the water for, what do you think about?

Mostly I think about how I would like to get out. It's a real sort of mental battle. I think some people talk about zoning out and being in some sort of meditative state, but I never managed to achieve that. You try and sort of stay in the moment a bit. I focus on my technique, just trying to make sure I am swimming efficiently. You do tend to go through all sorts of mental phases with feeling tired and your shoulders are twinging and your feet are cramping and you are struggling a bit and you just have to dig in and tell yourself it's not over until you're finished.

In training sessions I think about all sorts of random stuff just to try and keep the time ticking over but in a race or in a big swim you are pretty focused. You are trying to concentrate on the moment and what you're doing your technique and making sure you are keeping your tempo up and not sort of drifting off into losing your focus too much. I have to say it's not easy it is a bit of a mental game.

Yeah I bet. What about, when you're in the race you have obviously got to have a pretty decent technique to not be swimming with really sore shoulders. It's obviously going to get sore but you have got to have a good technique so you're not hurting after thirty minutes. So what sort of things do you focus on technique wise in training?

I think efficiency is one of the things that I have always tried to maintain when I am swimming and I think I have always had a pretty efficient stroke so a lot of it is being smooth through the water. Getting your rotation going. Making sure you are minimising your stroke count per lap. I have quite a big quick and do a lot of leg work which drives the momentum as well. A lot of it is maintaining an efficient stroke and trying to make sure that you are maximising that all the time. When you are doing a big open water race it's about getting into a rhythm so you need to replicate that in training, getting into a rhythm you can maintain at a tempo you can maintain hour after hour.

Even for the 400m or the 1500m if you are in the pool it helps so much if you can get into the rhythm because if you're not then you are just working an extra 10-20% harder and your times generally aren't going to be your best. Yeah that rhythm is important.



You are a vegetarian so how do you go about putting on weight for the colder swims?

Yeah it is a bit of challenge; in fact I am a vegan so I am even stricter than a vegetarian. I have struggled, the most I can generally get up to is about 82-83 kilos which I did for the channel and I did this year for the New York swims. It is eating a lot of high fat, high calorie **foods. I don't** even eat a lot of dairy products so I have a lot of soy ice creams and **crisps, good fats as well, nuts and avocado's, dark chocolate anything** that I can eat that are reasonably high calories. Pizzas but I try and have the healthy fats as much as I can to get the weight on a little bit. I have to admit I am not anywhere near as chunky as a lot of open swimmers get but it has just about got me through. The Channel was not comfortable but I managed to get there that was the main thing.

At about probably just the minimum heavy weight to get through it.

Yeah I think so and I did suffer, I wasn't heavy as a lot of people are and I got pretty hypothermic in the channel and that was pretty cold and that slows you down as well. It is a bit of a balance. You want to be able to maintain your core body temperature or your muscles start to stiffen up. I was probably a couple of hours slower in the Channel than I might have been otherwise, just because I did get pretty cold and had to guts through it. **There is also a vanity component to it; you don't want to get to fat.**

How much weight did you lose after doing the Channel or the Manhattan Swim?

I don't lose that much during the swim, I weighed myself after I did the English Channel. I know a lot of people talk about losing kilos and kilos of weight during these big swims and I weighed exactly the same after the swim as I did at the start. The funny thing was 3-4 days later I weighed myself again and I had dropped three kilos. Someone could probably **explain that I don't know whether it's an increased metabolism or fluid retention during the swim but I didn't lose anything actually during the swim.** I drink a lot of high energy drinks and I take a lot of high energy **gels on and if you get the balance right you shouldn't be losing too much** during a cold swim anyway. You are not losing a lot of fluids, maybe more in the warmer climates you might sweat a little bit more. I am not quite



sure of the physiology behind it; I think if you are getting your nutrition right you shouldn't be losing too much weight.

What about the night before a race, do you carbo load like a lot of people talk about?

Yeah a big carbo loading, lots of pasta. I try and eat that if I can 4-5 hours before a swim as well. Try and get as much carbs in before the race. **That's pretty important, you have to have good reserves there in place** and I think the nutrition during the swim is also really important getting the energy in early. I have sort of learnt through trial and error that in these long swims you need to be taking the food on fairly on in the race and getting it in and keeping it down otherwise at some point you will definitely run out.

How often do you stop for a gel or a drink to keep yourself going?

Every half an hour I will stop and have something. I usually start with a gel and a drink at the half hour then at the hour just a drink and then at the hour and a half a gel and a drink again. So I will sort of alternate the gels hourly but a drink every half an hour. Its high energy drinks, if I am **doing an ocean race I won't have electrolytes just because there is so much salt in the water anyway.** If I am doing a late swim or a fresh water swim I will generally have an electrolyte, high energy electrolyte drink.

Ok, I haven't heard that one before. That's a good tip for the people doing the big ocean swims.

I don't think it matters for shorter ocean swims. Even for Rottneest I generally have an electrolyte drink but certainly for really long ocean swims if you're in there for 7-8 hours you don't necessarily want lots of sodium in your electrolytes. There is the potential to get much salt in your system. They generally recommend for the long ocean swims, long sea swims to stick to pure carb drinks.

What is it that motivates you to do these big races? What is the draw card? Because it is obviously a lot of training and its hard work. I can imagine the reward is great once you're finished but why do you put yourself through so much pain?

I just enjoy doing different swims. I enjoy doing the challenge of doing something different and it is a bit sort of masochistic. I don't have any great plans to do some of the long ones that I have done before again. I



think the English Channel was definitely a once off. But doing a different swim in a different place is quite fun. New York is a spectacular swim to do; there is so much to see as you swim around. The Molokai Channel is a fairly famous long distance swim in Hawaii, 42km's so even a running marathon distance as well. It would be a fun one to do to finish up on the beach in Oahu would a good challenge. There is a sort of sense of pushing yourself and I guess you compare yourself to other swimmers as well and you see what other people are doing. There is a big open water swimming community out there. There are a lot of big races and its what's called the ocean seven and the triple crown which are a grouping of big long distance swims around the world and it's nice to tick a few of the big ones off.

I think a lot of people will be wondering how you fit this in around full time work. Because you can't just be a swimmer you have to earn a living to so how do you fit that in?

Sadly it's just a hobby really. It's a challenge with anything in life you have got to balance yourself haven't you. I fit in my swims before work, sometimes at lunch, sometimes after work as well and then get the long stuff done on the weekends. You have got to look after yourself, can't afford to get to tired or to run down because everything starts to suffer then. It is a bit of a balance trying to keep your priorities right and make sure that all aspects of your life don't start to suffer. You have to build these things up slowly so your fitness and your tolerance improves as you go along. I have a fairly busy full time job and at the end of the day it is a hobby, but if you enjoy it then it is not to sort of draining or tiresome. That's the aim of the aim.

I know you have to go soon to go to work, so thanks very much for joining me on the call. I have learnt a lot and it's good to catch up with you because I haven't seen you for a couple of months since you have moved back to England. Hopefully I will see you next time you're in Australia and good luck for your Hawaii swim if you can organise that.

Thanks Brenton, I am looking forward to being back in Eastern, getting a few Power Point swims in.

Yeah that would be great, we will talk to you soon and thanks very much.

Cheers mate.



This has been the open water domination episode of the Effortless Swimming podcast. If you have done some crazy sets in your time, go to the swimmingpodcast.com website and put it in the comments section. Click on episode three which is the open water domination episode and let us know any difficult sets that you have done. Whether they are sprint sets or long distance sets like Ollie has done, let us know and don't forget to rate the podcast in the iTunes store.

We have a new product out called the world's best swimmer where you can get some free training for that at worldbestswimmer.com where we talk about the technique used by elite swimmers and also some of the [strength training](#) that they do. So you can get that at worldbestswimmer.com.

Tune in next week for another interview with a very special guest. This time not talking about marathon swimming but something else, you will have to tune into find out who it is and what they are talking about but we will see you next week.

