

All About Postal Championships

By Andrea Packard

What are long-distance postal events?

USMS offers 5 official long-distance postal championships each year: 1 hour swim, 5km, 10km, 3000 yards and 6000 yards. The entrant must complete the event in a regulation size pool during a given range of dates, and have someone witness the swim to record and verify time and distance swum. A designated "host team" compiles all nationwide entries, and awards are given by gender and age group. Individuals may also combine their time with that of others from their team or LMSC to create relay entries. For more details on these events, go to <http://www.usms.org/longdist/ldnats11/#postals> and scroll down to the bottom of the page.

Why compete in a postal swim?

For those of you who have never competed in a Masters long-distance postal swim, you may ask, "Why in the world would I want to do that??" Having competed in more than 15 of these events over the past 10 years, and having discussed the merits of them with several other Masters swimmers, I can offer a few good reasons.

A new and different challenge

Because these postal events are significantly longer than the events offered at regular masters swim meets, they present an entirely different challenge. Depending on the event and your ability, you will be swimming non-stop (or with only brief breaks) for anywhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours or more. That poses a very different demand on your mind and body than even the most "grueling" traditional meet events. *Simply finishing a postal event*, regardless of your overall time, is a noteworthy accomplishment. Who can deny the positive vibe that comes from pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and doing something you've never done before? If you're a swimmer who is growing weary of always racing the clock, a distance postal event can give you the opportunity to "forget about time" and simply focus on finishing the event.

A confidence boost

With each distance postal event I complete, not only do I come away with that wonderful sense of accomplishment, I also get a confidence boost. I'm not alone in this thought. I know of at least one teammate who shares my sentiment. When you know you can give an all-out effort for an hour, or two, or three, you gain confidence in your overall ability as a swimmer. Many of your workouts and meet events seem less daunting by comparison. I often find myself standing behind the blocks before the mile thinking "This is a piece of cake compared to that 5K!"

An elite crowd

Most would agree that completing a marathon or Ironman triathlon is no easy feat, and those who can say they've done either are part of an elite crowd. But it doesn't take a math genius to deduce that the number of participants in all of the Masters distance postal events each year is far smaller than the number of finishers annually in all this country's Ironman triathlons and marathons. So if you can complete a postal event, you've certainly got bragging rights, since there really are few people who can say they've done the same!

The logistics

The logistics of postal events are what attracts many of the participants. Cost is certainly a factor. Although the entry fees for regular masters meets are typically very reasonable, costly travel is often involved, especially when going to National meets. Postal events, on the other hand, can usually be done

in the pool where a swimmer regularly trains, or a pool within short travel distance. Therefore, the time and money associated with travel is eliminated.

The other plus of postal events is the flexible schedule. The time-frame for these events is anywhere from one month to 4 months. Masters swimmers lead busy lives, and are often unable to attend meets because they conflict with family, work or other personal obligations. But with the postal events, you're not locked into a particular date: you (or your team) can plan the swim around your schedule(s). If by chance you get sick, or the weather doesn't cooperate, or something comes up, you may have the chance to re-schedule for another day.

The team element

Postal events, like swim meets, can be a fun experience for the whole team. And the bonus is that because of the logistics advantages I discussed above, it's not too much of a challenge to rally lots of teammates to participate. Thus for our masters team, for example, we usually have a higher participation rate in postal events than regular meets. We pick a Saturday morning that accommodates the most team members possible, and we pair up, taking turns swimming and counting/timing for each other. Afterward, we all head out to breakfast/brunch/lunch to celebrate. We have as much or more fun as we do going to a meet, but it only occupies a small part of our weekend.

Why not?

After all that, if I still haven't convinced you to try a long-distance postal swim, let me counter some of your possible excuses for not doing one:

"I don't know how to train for one": I can help you with that: in the next issue of this newsletter you'll find the second article in this series, which will focus on training strategies for these events. And I'm certainly not the only source for this information: the masters community is full of individuals like myself who have coaching experience and lots of personal experience competing in these events. So don't be shy: tell a coach or fellow swimmer you'd like to do a long-distance postal event and ask for guidance – people in the masters community are usually more than willing to help a fellow swimmer

"I don't have time to train for one": Many swimmers mistakenly think that they can't do a long-distance postal event unless they swim almost every day and do lots of yardage. Not true! We have many team members who swim 3 days a week, around 3000 yards each workout, and they have success in these events.

"I don't want to do long, boring workouts": You don't have to! In fact it's better NOT to do lots of long, continuous swimming. I'll discuss all that more in detail in the next segment of this article.

"I'm too old": We have a **90-year-old** on our team who just completed the 1-hour swim! Enough said.

"What if I can't swim for that long?": The good news about these events is that there is no rule against stopping. You can stop to drink, eat, fix your goggles, or just hang out on the wall as often and as long as you like. Sure, it will add to your total time (or in the case of the hour swim, reduce the distance you're able to swim), but if your goal is just to finish one, then stopping a few times won't hurt anything. Plus, there's no rule about what stroke you do, so if you get tired of doing freestyle, you can throw in a few lengths of some other stroke to give yourself a break.

"I'm a sprinter, and I'm not cut out for this distance stuff": OK, so maybe you're the star sprinter on your team and you're afraid you'll have the slowest time of anyone on a long-distance postal event. You need to realize that even if your time isn't "record breaking", you can still feel great about being tough enough to go the distance. And if your distance counter-parts tease you about your inability to do anything longer than 100 yards, this is your chance to prove them wrong!

I challenge you

If you have already competed in one or more long-distance postal events, I commend your effort and urge you to keep doing them. And if you haven't yet tried one, what are you waiting for? Challenge yourself and do one this year!