

## **Back from the Bled!**

**What a setting for a swim, it sure beats the indoor pool! The World Winter Swimming Championships, the once every two year congregation of mad swimmers took place recently in beautiful Lake Bled, Slovenia.** Most people come here to admire from a safe distance the lake and famous medieval church that sits on an island in the middle. **But last weekend, the serene landscape was temporarily blotted with the unsightly image of 700 odd nervous looking men and women wobbling, shivering and shaking at the lakeside, dressed in bikinis, Speedo's and the odd funny hat.** There was even a giant polar bear wandering around. 'Wow, I didn't think global warming had got this bad!'

Two years ago the races took place in the relatively tropical Tooting Bec lido, but even then I found myself covered head to foot in goose bumps. **Would the last few months of cold showers and ridiculously insane training swims in the River Exe, repeatedly subjecting my fingers to the feeling of being hit with a sledgehammer, pay off for me and my partner, Sally? Would we return home world champions or a national disgrace?**

**We were both entering the 25 metre freestyle, with competitors split into age groups, from 12 year olds right up to those who should know better. Only the eight fastest times from the heats (should that be 'colds') would make each age group final. As I walked out, fully clothed, towards the pool, I soon felt at a gross disadvantage. The rest of the competitors in my heat were displaying a more suitable physique for the race - a motley crew of Slovenians and Estonians who had obviously trained for the race at the dinner table, sporting muscular beer bellies and tree trunks for thighs.** Hell, they probably sit in an icy bath for pleasure. My mop of long hair would offer little resistance compared with a decent layering of blubber for insulation. I had even resorted to shaving off my non-existence chest hair many months ago to stimulate chest hair growth, but that failed too. With nothing to protect me against the cold, it was going to become a mental game instead.

**Never has the command, 'Get your clothes off now', that was bellowed out on the loud speakers, been greeted with such trepidation! Standing at the side of Lake Bled in temperatures of minus five and eyeing up the freezing water, it was the last thing I wanted to hear. Right now the only thing on my mind was a hasty retreat to a hot bath.** Luckily, following some very useful advice, I made sure that I was the last competitor undressed and the last one in the water. In fact in many of the heats, getting undressed was a sport in itself as the competitors egged on each other to fling off their thermals first.

**After an agonising strip down to trunks and a swim cap, the official shouted a second command of 'Get in!' in the same manner a school teacher would yell to his kids to shut up. Despite my predilection for swimming in cold water and propensity for doing stupid sports, it still required strong will power and sheer determination to descend**

**the four steps into the water. As the freezing water lapped around my body, setting off a proliferation of goose bumps all over my arms and thighs, I clung to the side of the pool desperate for the race to start. False starts incur a two second penalty, which at the time seemed like a good deal to me, but thankfully any rashness was averted when the klaxon sounded and we were finally on our way.**

**I've never been known for swimming with style, but in those 25 metres I must have covered pretty much the whole gamut of front crawl. My plan was a hard and fast sprint to the end, hopefully before my head was hit by an 'ice-cream' feeling (because the freestyle involves a full immersion, it's considered a lot harder than the breast stroke, which requires the head to remain above water at all times). Unfortunately there was one near fatal flaw in this plan when I realised after 15 metres that I couldn't see a thing in the water, let alone fathom out where the end was. My front crawl was never much to admire in the first place, but had now mutated into a frantic doggy paddle for the remaining few metres, as I repeatedly looked up to see if the other end was any nearer, lest I plough head first into the pool side, like one unfortunate competitor managed to do earlier that day.**

**After several abortive finishes, I eventually touched the end, reckoning that my hesitation cost me several seconds and a place in the final (in fact I was only one place off the final) But at the time, I didn't really care I jumped out of the pool and after a few macho poses for the cameras and muttering something along the lines of, 'That was freeeeezing!', grabbed my complimentary glass of mulled wine before shuffling off to the sauna, to bring back some feeling to my fingers and toes and enjoy the rush of blood as the endorphins kicked in.**

**Sally didn't fare much better, in fact she managed to come last, quite comfortably but that didn't stop her from asking me at the end whether she did OK or not! 'You were last!' was my disheartening response, before comforting her with the thought that because she was the last one out, she must be tougher than the other swimmers. Despite the disappointment, Sally wasn't too bothered. After all, we came out here for the pleasure of taking part and will go home satisfied with our achievements and can now say that we participated in arguably the coldest sporting contest in the world, and lived to tell the tale. I have already committed myself to entering the 450 metre endurance race at the winter swimming championships in Finland in 2011. There is even talk of heading to Siberia for a race. Sally is not so sure and is already eyeing up the World Sauna Championships instead.**

Watching the rest of the championships was just as fun as taking part, with an array of woolly hats and comic trunks on display, not to mention some seriously competitive Russians, who arrived at Lake Bled determined to win everything. To add to the craziness, the organisers insisted on pumping out obscure Abba tracks and dodgy euro-pop as background music!! There were competitors of all ages, from teenagers to octogenarians, though I feared for a dead heat when the latter competed. The

championships was not without its 'funny' moments, including one swimmer who lost his over-sized trunks in the water and another competitor was so overcome by shock he forgot to turn around at halfway in his 50 metre race.