

Swimmer Profile – Courtney Hoffman

By Elaine Krugman



After having a baby, Courtney Hoffman took up running to lose the weight she had gained during her pregnancy. That led to entering road races, and then running a half-marathon, followed by a full marathon. Looking for a new challenge, the runner decided to give triathlons a go. The year was 2013, and she hasn't looked back since.

Although Courtney didn't have any competitive swimming experience (aside from one summer league stint as a child), she entered her first triathlon. It didn't go so well for her in the water. As Courtney described the first leg of the competition, "I did miserably in the swim portion!" When she reflected back on the event with more experienced triathletes, they suggested she join U.S. Masters

Swimming and swim with a Masters group. Swim Atlanta, in Marietta, was the closest team to her home, so she joined Coach Pat Eddy's workouts.

Once she had some swim training logged, her coach made a recommendation. Pat is a distance swimmer and loves competing in open water races, so he encouraged Courtney to give it a try. Swim Across America (<https://www.swimacrossamerica.org>), an open water race event/fundraiser was her first one, and she got hooked. "I fell in love with it at that point," Courtney said. Ultimately, she progressed to doing two marathon open water swims.

The first marathon swim Courtney tackled was the 2019 Swim the Suck, a ten-mile race in the Tennessee River Gorge, in Chattanooga (<http://www.swimthesuck.org/>), which is Coach Pat's favorite swim. Even though she considered herself a "beginner" rather than an experienced swimmer, she was determined to give it a go. Pat, a bit hesitant but supportive, prepared her for the race. "Under [Pat's] direction, I trained for it, put all the distance in the water, and absolutely loved it!"

The night before the race at the athlete's dinner, Courtney's name was drawn for the raffle prize, a choice of marathon swims with a support boat and crew. Not knowing which swim to choose, she was asked if she wanted the coveted "Viking

Swim.” “I have no idea!” she replied. One of the other swimmers called out, “Take it!” so, she agreed to the swim, not knowing what she was getting herself into. After the dinner, she returned to her hotel room and looked it up on Google. As it turns out, the Viking Swim is a 10.6-mile swim in Lake Tahoe, California (<https://www.swimtahoe.com/tahoe-viking-swim/>). The water temperature for the swim is typically in the 60’s, and according to the website, it’s considered a “challenging training swim for the experienced marathon swimmer.”

“I had no idea what to expect, so I did some research.” Coach Pat had also researched the swim and learned there are three major hurdles to completing the swim: The distance (10.6 miles, but she had swum that distance before). “The second hurdle is that you start at 3 o’clock in the morning, so it’s practicing swimming in the dark. I have a friend who has a house at a lake, so we did a handful of practice swims. Once I got over what I call the ‘Yips.’ it was great! It’s peaceful, it’s quiet. The final hurdle is the cold. I did a bunch of research on that as well, and they said one of the biggest issues is your body’s shock reaction to the cold. One of the things to do is to try and dull that, so I took ice baths and cold showers for a couple of months leading up to the swim.”

Courtney headed out to California for the Viking Swim, which was scheduled on July 13, 2021. On the morning of the swim, she coated her body with zinc oxide to protect herself from the sun during the later parts of the swim. The air temperature that morning was 43 degrees, and the water was 68 degrees, which was considered warm. She took off for the swim with her best friend as her pilot and a guide boat with her family on board. (The swim is a sanctioned solo swim rather than a race against other swimmers.) “What I did not plan for, because I didn’t think through it, was that it was going to be in the middle of the lake, in the middle of the desert, at 3 o’clock in the morning. It was so dark that I looked up, and I saw millions of stars! I was speechless. The first hour and a half of that swim was the most relaxing, majestic, beautiful time ever. It was absolutely amazing, to a point when the sun started to crest and you could see the light, I was disappointed that the sunrise was imminent. It was beautiful. It was stunning. So, the sun came up about two hours into the swim, and I just lucked out. The temperature was great, the conditions were great. I had a little bit of current and chop, which kind of got me tired, of course; but, it went beautifully. I did my feeds exactly like I had planned. The swim took me 6 hours and 25 minutes, and I had planned for 6-1/2 hours. It was amazing, and the water was a color blue that I didn’t realize existed in nature. It was just gorgeous, and it was just so clean.”

Courtney's swim was a success. "I was as prepared as I could be, from beginning to end. I contribute my success to coach Pat. He put together a plan, the research, and all the work and time put into it." (Prior to preparing specifically for the Viking Swim, Courtney was swimming 3-4 days each week, 3-4,000 yards per session. She started adding more yardage to one of her swims each week, six months prior, to be prepared for the 10.6-mile swim.)

While Courtney had been training for the Viking Swim, she continued running 2-3 days per week and cycling 1-2 hours almost daily, because she had the goal of ultimately competing in a full ironman triathlon.

"My first half ironman was in 2013 in Augusta, Georgia. The swimming was my weakest discipline by far, but the good thing about the Augusta half ironman is that it's down river. A lot of times they'll throw in an empty chip bag to time how long it takes to get from the start to the finish. They say at the very least, you can float and finish before the 1:10 cut off for the 1.2-mile swim. It was a really good first half ironman. It was hard, but it was fun, and there is nothing like an ironman finish line. It's so rewarding. At some point halfway through the run, I say to myself every time, 'Why do I do this?' but then I round the corner to the finish line, and I say, 'That's why.' The finish line is so amazing."

Courtney kept up her rigorous training schedule over the next three years and competed in multiple half ironman races and open water swims. In 2016, she tackled Florida's ironman triathlon, which is a total of 140.6 miles. By then, she had been swimming in Masters for a couple of years and had hired a triathlon coach. "I just did the time. I'm not an amazing athlete, and I'm not super-fast. I am not podium-level material for any ironman races at all. I just do the work. I'm a 46-year-old mom of two, and I am not an elite athlete by any means at all. I just do the work. That's really neat, and it's something I really enjoy. I enjoy finding something that's a little bit outside of my comfort zone, getting that goal, and pushing through it to get that goal. I'm going to continue to do it until my body doesn't allow me to do it anymore."

Since completing the Florida Ironman, she has competed in one more full marathon and eight half marathons. Until her kids graduate from high school and leave home, Courtney doesn't plan to compete in ironman triathlons, due to the time commitment required to train at that level. Training and competing in half ironman triathlons fits the family schedule better. She swims for two hours on Fridays, cycles for four hours on Saturdays, and runs for two hours on Sundays,

which she considers “doable,” adding that you double that training for ironman triathlons.

Since Courtney started as a runner, but has fallen in love with swimming, I was curious to know which leg of an ironman race she enjoys the most (or despises the least). “For me, the race gets progressively harder, and it gets progressively worse. I start with the swim, and it’s freeing, and luckily, I don’t get too overwhelmed with the open water. I absolutely adore the swim portion. I hop on the bike, and it’s [also] freeing, it’s nice, but not quite as relaxing as the swim, and it’s a bit hard on the legs at the end; but, I enjoy it. Then I get off [the bike], and I have to run... The older I get the running hurts my knees and hips; and, swimming and cycling don’t do that.”

Regardless of the pain of the ironman run, Courtney always has another competition in sight. In 2019, she returned to California and competed in the Escape From Alcatraz triathlon, in San Francisco Bay (<https://www.escapealcatraztri.com/>). “The swim portion very hard, the views were beautiful, it was challenging and cold, but it was really neat.”

Next year, Courtney’s goal is to swim The Triple Crown of the Tennessee (https://www.openwaterpedia.com/wiki/Triple_Crown_of_the_Tennessee), three open water races along the Tennessee River that total 21.2 miles. (At least she won’t have to run in any of those!)

Asked what in particular she enjoys about swimming, Courtney replied, “I love to talk... and swimming forces me to be quiet. My brain still constantly spins, but when it gets to these really long open water distances, and I have to just settle in, it’s almost meditative; it’s almost like a meditation for me. I just listen to the splash, and I get lost in the quiet.”

Ironically, it’s the social aspects of swimming that the extrovert enjoys most about Masters, though. “Triathlons are weirdly lonely... Masters is social. Of the three disciplines that I do, it’s the only one that I can’t talk, because my head is down in the water; but, it’s the one where I interact with people the most. I love the people I swim with and share my swim lane... it’s fun!” Courtney explained.

The experience this triathlete has had with her Masters coach and teammates has been so beneficial that she highly recommends to other triathletes they join a Masters group, too. She said not to feel intimidated, because Masters groups are very welcoming and inclusive.

When Courtney travels, she also searches the USMS website database for Masters clubs in the area. She has trained with Masters groups in Las Vegas and Florida, but Nashville was her favorite. They had access to a water park wave pool on the day Courtney was joining the group, so they were coached on rough water swimming techniques and were able to practice for an hour in a simulated ocean!

Another recommendation Courtney had for new swimmers is to search “How to swim freestyle” on YouTube and watch several different swimming videos. “I did find that people do it very differently, which is interesting; but, I watched a couple of videos to really understand how to break down each part of the stroke. It matters how your hand enters the water, it matters where you catch, it matters how high your elbow is. All of those things matter and why; so, that was watching different videos and watching people break them down to understand there is a lot to it,” she said.

Courtney has had an amazing journey of running marathons, competing in marathon swims, and racing triathlons; and, she hopes to continue that journey for years to come. Before each of her past competitions, she has repeated a mantra that she hopes she will repeat many, many more times: “There will come a day when I can no longer do this. Today is not that day.”