



Mind over matter

Ultra-marathon swimmer Marcos Diaz suffered from chronic asthma as a child, but broke the Hong Kong record on a 15km sea swim

■ INSIGHT

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A 15-kilometre swim from Stanley to Deep Water Bay last Sunday was merely a dip in the surf for the Dominican Republic's Marcos Diaz, who relishes much bigger challenges.

"Usually I swim from point A to point B, but here I swam around two islands and I enjoyed the scenery very much. Hong Kong is a nice place, I would love to come back," says Diaz, relaxing in his hotel room after his three-hour, 21-minute jaunt set a new course record at the Clean Half Open Water Swim.

He admitted that he had hardly raised a sweat - figuratively, of course - and went on to explain why. It was exhausting just listening to him.



Stage 1

18km

Oceania to Asia
(Papua New Guinea to Indonesia)



Stage 3

14km

Africa to Europe
(Morocco to Spain)



Stage 2

26km

Asia to Africa
(Yemen to Djibouti)



Stage 4

85km

Europe to Americas
(Russia to Alaska, US)



Take these samples of his Herculean endeavours. Diaz has swum twice around Manhattan Island, non-stop, a distance of about 100km. That took him more than 22 hours. He crossed the English Channel in nine hours and 56 minutes and the Strait of Gibraltar, from Spain to Morocco and back again in eight hours and 34 minutes. Then while as sick as a dog, he swam an 81-kilometre stretch of the Bhagirathi River in Calcutta. That seemed an eternity.

He ticks off these marathon exploits, enjoying every time I wince at the thought of the distances, both in length and time, and wonder what spurs him on these masochistic thrills.

"It is simple. I'm a specialist in ultra-marathon swimming, which is events of 25 kilometres or more," Diaz says.

"I take part in about five or six events around the world every year, but I came to Hong Kong to support Project Kaisei, an environmental scheme to help battle plastic waste in the ocean."

Diaz, 34, began swimming at the age of six, but took up ultra-swimming only 10 years ago.

"Since I was small I have suffered badly from chronic asthma. My parents looked at various ways how to treat me and help me, before someone told them the best way would be for me to develop my lungs. So they put me into swimming," Diaz recalls.

"I started swimming in pools and then got hooked on triathlon. I soon realised the best part of my triathlon was the swimming discipline. I would do well in swimming, but then lag behind in the bike and running elements. This soon made up my mind that I should drop triathlon completely and just concentrate on swimming - but longer distances."

He grimaces as he remembers his first ultra-marathon swim - in a pool in his hometown in Santo Domingo back in 1999 - and the pain of making a turn every 25 metres.

"I swam 52 kilometres in a pool. It was the hardest swim ever, not because it was the first one, but because I had to keep turning every 25 metres. I think I made more than 1,000 turns. I can't remember how many. All I can remember is that I started at six in the evening and finished at nine the following morning."

Today, Diaz prefers swimming in the wide blue ocean. And he has set his sights on becoming the first swimmer to do a global swim for the United Nations, connecting five continents with his exploits.



Ultra-marathon swimmer Marcos Diaz (right) with chief Hong Kong organiser Doug Woodring

"I hope to do four solo crossings for the UN that will connect five continents. I hope by doing this, I will raise global awareness and help the United Nations in their efforts," Diaz says.

The first leg of his swim will be from Oceania to Asia - Papua New Guinea to Indonesia - a distance of 18 kilometres. Then Asia to Africa, from either Yemen to Djibouti, a distance of 26 kilometres, or the shorter route from Jordan to Egypt.

"That will depend on the political situation in Yemen. I would prefer swimming from there, but if I can't, then I will do the other route," Diaz says.

The Africa-to-Europe stint will be a doddle since Diaz has already swum the Strait of Gibraltar. The final continent is America. He will swim across the Bering Strait, from Russia in Europe to Alaska.

At least the English Channel will not come into the equation this time; Diaz believes that was one of the toughest stretches of open water to swim, simply because it was so cold.

"I made my first attempt in 2003, and unluckily, I didn't have a wet suit. I had to abort that time. I returned the next year, and knowing that I had failed the first time, made it mentally harder, too.

"That is one of the main things about this sport. You have to be tough mentally. You must have the confidence for the body will tell you after you are four hours in the water to stop and give up. The pain is immense and it is tempting to take the easy option and quit.

"But I somehow have found the mental strength to go on. I think of all the positive things, like how happy the people back home in my country will feel when I complete this feat," Diaz says.

Each feat has made Diaz a hero in the eyes of his countrymen who applaud him for proudly flying the Dominican Republic flag as he breaks world records and goes where no one else has gone.

The financial gains are limited. He, and wife Natalia, who is also his agent, rely on the goodwill of sponsors. "Ultra-swimming is not like football or baseball, which is the most popular, and national sport in my country.

"I could have made huge amounts of money if I had played those sports. Now, I have to get help from sponsors and the support from my government," says Diaz, who 14 months ago became a father.

Last year, for the first time, open water swimming became a medal sport at the Olympics, but Diaz was absent in Beijing. "It was a 10km race, which for me is too short. My speciality is ultra-races," he smiled.

So last Sunday's Hong Kong swim was a paddle in a pond for Diaz. He was in the company of 225 swimmers competing in an event listed as one of the world's top open-water swims. Chief organiser Doug Woodring says: "Diaz loved it. He is a great ambassador for the sport."

For Diaz, his deeds are simple. "I hope I can inspire others. I am an asthmatic. But that hasn't prevented me from achieving world records."