

LISA RATCLIFF

Ocean's thousands

Open-water swimming, while popular for many years, has caught a big swell of interest in recent times.

“SOMETIMES swimming in the ocean is like a 10-round fight with the elements – that’s part of the attraction for us crazy people,” says Brian Cook, CEO of the Geelong Cats AFL football club.

Australians have gone mad for ocean swimming with such an explosion in events and participation levels that the size and status of the blue-ribbon ocean swims has caught the attention of the global goggled community.

In Western Australia, the HBF Rottnest Channel Swim’s foundations date from 1956 – the most recent event attracted 2300 swimmers for the near-20km distance. Each year 4300 people dive into a sea of history for the 1.2km of the Lorne Pier to Pub swim in Victoria. *The Sydney Morning Herald* Cole Classic began in 1982 with 101 swimmers: this year 5000 stormed off Manly Beach for the event’s 30th anniversary.

Paul Ellercamp launched www.oceanswims.com in 1999 to offer a centralised Australian calendar. At the time 17 swims were registered. The 2011-12 season’s program covered 552 ocean swims and a circuit in every state, offering close to 45,000 swimmers the chance to compete.

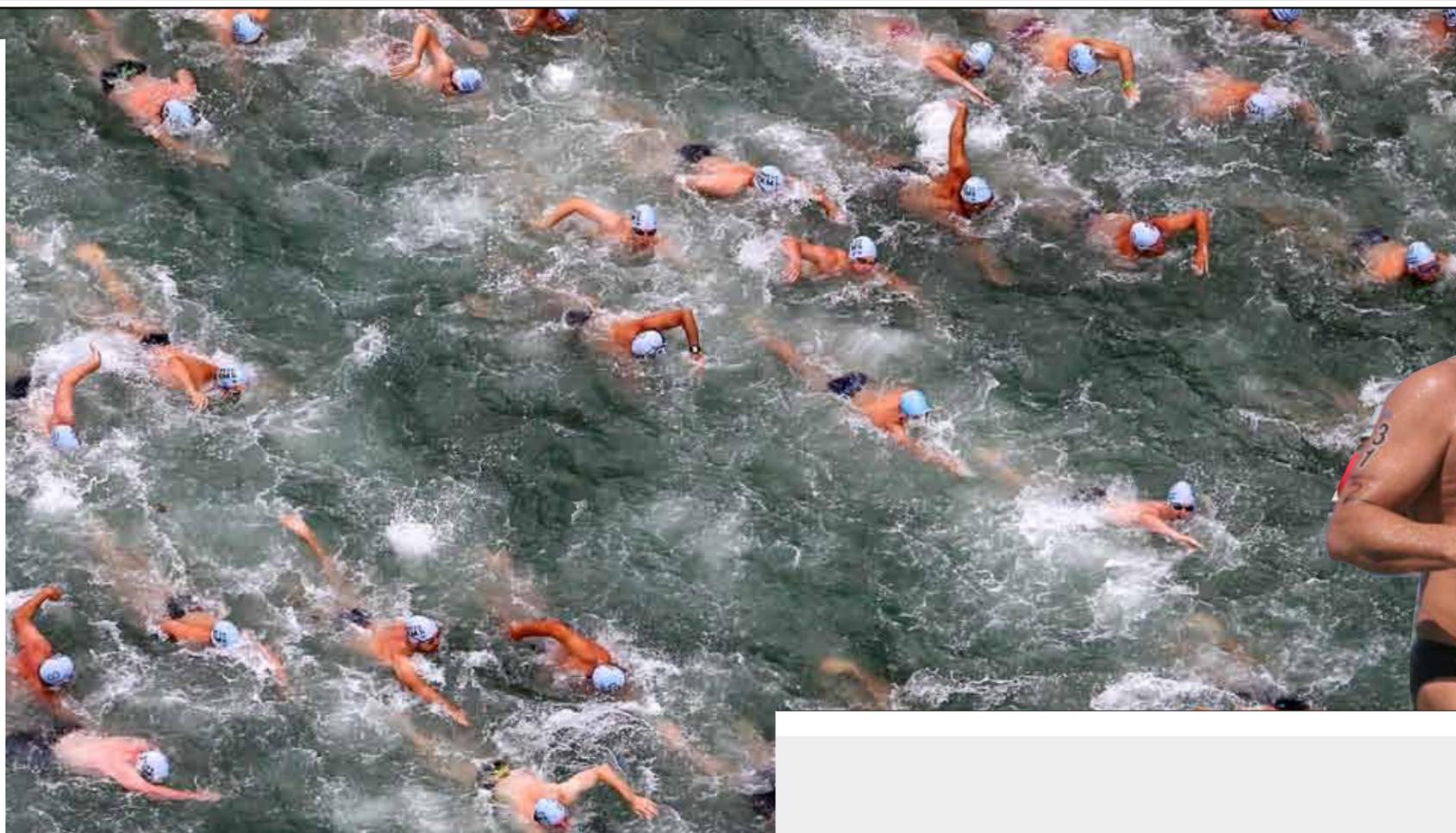
Ellercamp’s website may be partly responsible for the growth of the ocean swimming community. Other catalysts for the spike in interest, he suggests, include Fairfa Media taking over the running of the Cole Classic and specific programs such as Can Too, which raises funds for cancer research.

Lisa Dowsett, head of administration and operations for Fairfax Media, says the biggest entry group for the Cole Classic is men age 30 to 39, then women of the same age.

“They are very much AB demographic, very focused and driven,” Dowsett says. “They want goals to aim for and challenging events to compete in: they are people who are driven in their careers and outside work, too.”

The Sydney event is named for Graham Cole, a keen ocean swimmer and body surfer at Bondi Beach. In 1981 he travelled to Hawaii to swim in the Waikiki Roughwater and returned keen to set up a similar event in Sydney.

The Cole Classic moved from Bondi Beach to Manly in 2005 and is now managed for Manly Life Saving Club by Fairfax Events, part of a stable of sporting and festival fixtures that are cross-promoted to participants to boost entries.



The first person to complete a recorded crossing of the Rottnest Channel was Gerd von Dincklage-Schulenburg on 24 January 1956. His 9 hours 45 minute swim stirred the imagination of the *Weekend Mail* newspaper, which offered cash prizes to better his time and led to the first race that year.

The official Rottnest Channel Swim started in 1991 and by 1998 had become the world’s largest open-water swimming event. This year’s swim drew 2300 swimmers from around the country and overseas. When boat crews and spectators are added, the event takes between 10,000 and 12,000 people to Rottnest Island, off the Western Australian coast near Fremantle, for the day.

Ellercamp reckons open-water swimming exerts a pull on people with greater sensibility and a consciousness of the environment, as well as a sense of community.

“Once they have swum past the shark nets, they are on the frontier,” he says. “Ocean swimming stretches your own borders, all before lunchtime, and allows the rank and file to go up against the best in the world – which doesn’t happen in many sports.” ■

“Ocean swimming stretches your borders, all before lunchtime, and allows the rank and file to go up against the best in the world.”

Kickstart for Cook’s day

CEO Brian Cook has been with the Geelong Cats for 14 years and before that was CEO of the West Coast Eagles club, a coach and a player.

He began serious ocean swimming 20 years ago when he finished playing football and over the decades has completed 20 Rottnest swims. “When you can’t run you start riding, and when you can’t ride you start swimming,” Cook laughs.

Cook swims without a wetsuit in Port Phillip Bay through winter. “I’m sure it’s good for you. It keeps you healthy and young and the camaraderie comes from like people with like vices, so there’s a social attraction there.”

Lessons that can be applied to Cook’s business include persistence, respect for the elements and humbleness.

To keep his mind occupied as he chews through the kilometres, Cook talks to himself. “You think how you might deal with work. You can focus and be innovative when you are brainstorming in your own head and don’t have anyone else to talk to.”

