

Tragedy at Fujairah: Risk Management Issues at Open-Water Swimming Events

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On October 23, 2010 the city of Fujairah, east of Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosted the eighth and final race of the 2010 FINA (Fédération Internationale de Natation) 10 Kilometer (10K) Marathon Swimming World Cup. Eighty-two swimmers, men and women, entered the water, but Fran Crippen of the United States was the only competitor who did not finish. For some time race officials and fellow swimmers did not even realize that he was missing. When the swimmers, not officials, realized that he was missing they raced back into the water trying to find him. After more than a two hour search, coast guard and police divers found him just before the last buoy on the course about 400 - 500 meters out from the land and in water seven to eight meters deep (Gomes, 2010). Crippen was carried to shore and taken to Fujairah Hospital, where he was later pronounced dead of complications from heat exhaustion (Gomes, 2010).

The death of Fran Crippen was just the culmination of the problems at the race. There was significant confusion as originally the race was supposed to be held at Sharjah, but was moved to Fujairah where organizers had only five days to prepare a course and facilities for international competition. The night before the race, coaches and managers all had questions about course safety including water temperature and shading (Gomes, 2010). The executive director of UAE Swimming said that the water temperature, one of the issues in question, had been tested early in the morning of the race as well as during the race. The morning water temperature was recorded at 29°C (85°F) and had risen to 30-31°C (86-88°F) which was then deemed to be acceptable (Lord, 2011).

On the day of the race, safety was an issue. Although there were some safety boats, there was no agreement if there were enough boats, where the boats were supposed to be and what swimmers they were to follow. Several of the swimmers openly questioned the safety of holding the event in such conditions. Christine Jennings was a multi-time All America swimmer, US 5K Champion, and Pan Pacific Games Champion. During the race at Fujairah she too had difficulty with the conditions (Shipley, 2010). She became dizzy, veered off course, and vomited several times in the water. Jennings signaled for help, but no safety boats came to her rescue (Shipley, 2010).

Another serious concern was the apparent lack of trained medical personnel available. However, the FINA Commission noted that the open water rules were “rather general and should be revised to keep up with the evolution of the sport” (Gomes, 2010). For example, under the rules at the time of the Fujairah, there is no mention of the minimum requirements or certifications of safety personnel. There was no risk assessment strategy in place and when Crippen did not finish the race, organizers were unprepared. As one witness said, “There was no response on that. It was really disorganised (sic). It made an impact on everyone there. There was a feeling of hopelessness and a belief that no-one knew what they were supposed to be doing” (Lord, 2011). Yet, Ayman Saad, **Executive Director of UAE Swimming**, contended that the water temperature

was 84 degrees and that all safety measures were in place and that the race protocol was approved by FINA (Gomes, 2010). In a chilling statement, the UAE Swimming Federation Secretary stated that, “We’ve organized so far 14 competitions and championships and never had any deaths” (Lord, 2011). Yet, while FINA rules had set a minimum temperature in which to compete (60.8 °F, 16°C), there was not a maximum temperature listed. So an event could be cancelled if the water is too cold, but there were no guidelines if the water is too hot (Gomes, 2010).

Those associated with the sport such as event organizers are under no duty to protect competitors from the inherent risks associated with their respective sports (Dobbs, 2000). However, the organizers have a duty to use due care not to increase the risks to a participant over and above those inherent in the sport (Dobbs, 2000). As such, it would be incumbent on a sports event manager to develop and maintain a risk management plan. Operationally speaking, risk management becomes ineffective when there is not a clearly articulated view of the risk policy and its relationship to overall strategy and policy (Miller, Wendt, & Young, 2010). As such, it is important to emphasize that present-day risk management is developed and implemented as a broad process for assessing and addressing risks – a process in which operational risk management is but one part. Risk management practices identify and assess the broadest possible range of risks in less structured settings (Miller, Wendt, & Young, 2010). Thus, risk management offers the organizational decision-makers an opportunity to advance a wide-ranging organizational policy for managing risks.

This case study presentation will discuss the national and international safety changes that occurred in the aftermath of Fran Crippen’s death. Information will be discussed as to how risks are often a highly interconnected assortment of items that need to be managed by a sport event manager, not just in response to the individual characteristics of a particular risk. Finally, discussion will address the need of sport event managers to be proactive in assessing and implementing a risk management plan to prevent future incidents such as Crippen’s death.

References

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