

Marathon man in the water

Swimmer Kersh says hard work key to success

BY PETE PERKINS

Democrat-Gazette Staff Writer

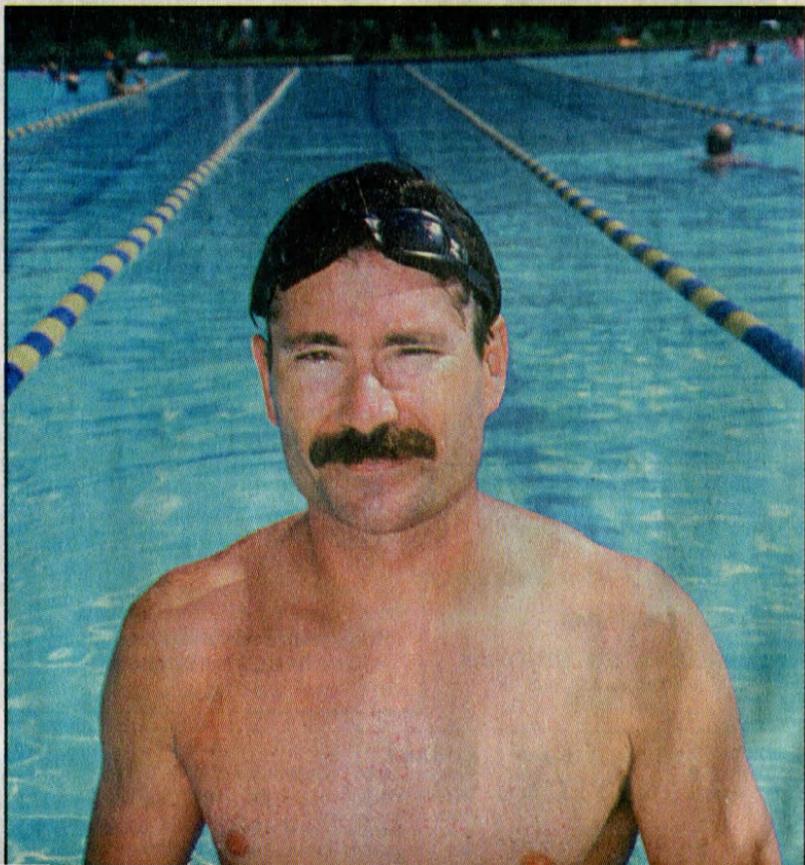
Russellville's Richard Kersh doesn't run marathons. He swims them.

In his latest effort July 16, Kersh competed in the Seal Beach Rough Water Swim, the U.S. marathon swimming championships. He finished 11th out of 55, swimming the 10-mile, Pacific Ocean course near Los Angeles in 4 hours, 2 minutes.

Kersh hoped for a better finish. Early in the race, he thought he would get it. Kersh swam near the leaders through the first two hours.

But surf swims hold infinite variables. Among them are the reliability of the race's volunteers.

A friend introduced Kersh



crew."

His crew's strongest member will be Shelley Taylor. Taylor, of Sydney, Australia, is the world's top-ranked women's marathon swimmer. She and Kersh became friends as schoolmates at the University of Arkansas in the mid-1980s.

"Obviously, she knows the sport real well," Kersh said. "You need someone who knows what's going on. The last time I swam around the island, I was in third place at the five-hour mark. Then I got in a bad current on the Hudson River.

"To show you how bad we screwed up, a guy on our boat spotted a swimmer on the other side of the river. I was swimming as hard as I could. This other guy was drinking out of a water bottle, not swimming at all, and he was going faster than me. You need someone who can watch for signs."

Kersh, 36, is an exercise physiologist. Clearly his work and recreation complement each other.

A friend introduced Kersh to a volunteer surfer who would paddle beside him with his drinks and aid with course navigation.

"I knew I was in trouble as soon as he started calling me 'dude,'" Kersh said. "Two hours into the swim, he started complaining that his back was hurting. First thing you know, he's a city block behind me. Then he's two blocks back. I needed a drink, so I waited for him. He said, 'Hey, dude, my back is, like, really hurting, dude.'"

Kersh's assistant soon dropped out of sight. When Kersh next needed a drink, he flagged down a support boat and asked them to find and retrieve his surfer.

Within minutes, the boat returned.

"The guy says, 'Hey, dude, like, I'm thinking I can make it now,'" Kersh said. "It was important to have him. Not only to carry my drinks, but also for navigation."

His surfer lasted 10 more minutes, then fell behind again. This time, Kersh did not wait. He swam off alone.

"I'll never forget when that guy looked at me and just said, 'Aren't you tired, dude?'" Kersh said.

He struggled to stay on course and swam without adequate nourishment. Kersh finished out of contention, but he wasn't particularly bothered. Winning was not his objective. Kersh was training.

Kersh competed at Seal Beach as a warm-up for the



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IN THE SWIM — Richard Kersh of Russellville, an exercise physiologist, swims nearly 3 miles daily. Kersh, 36, is training for the Manhattan Swimming Marathon, a 28½-mile swim around New York City.

Kersh's course

■ A list of marathon swimming events entered by Russellville's Richard Kersh. The time listed is in hours and minutes.

DATE	DISTANCE/PLACE	FINISH	TIME
July 1994	.10 miles/Los Angeles	11th	4:02
Feb 1993	.31 miles/Sante Fe, Argentina	—	DNF
Aug. 1992	.28.5 miles/New York	11th	7:40
July 1989	.20 miles/Italy	18th	10:13
Aug. 1987	.28.5 miles/New York City	9th	8:19
July 1983	.19 miles/Quebec	—	DNF
July 1983	.15K/Quebec	4th	3:38
July 1982	.19 miles/Quebec	—	DNF

Manhattan Swimming Marathon, a 28.5-mile swim around Manhattan Island swum every year in late August.

Though not the world's most difficult swim, the loop is perhaps its most publicized. With New York's concentration of media nearby, swimmers and

support boats navigate the cool and sometimes rancid waters of the East, Harlem and Hudson rivers.

Kersh said he hopes to complete the course in less than 7:30.

"I think I can do it," Kersh said. "I have a great support

each other.

It was Kersh's first marathon swim in 1982 that introduced him to his current vocation.

"I was in Quebec for the Lake St. Jean (Professional Marathon Swim), and there was this group of scientists gathered around," Kersh said. "I asked them what they were doing."

Researchers from the University of Quebec-Laval were studying athletes exposed to cold water.

"They told me they were exercise physiologists," Kersh said. "I'd never heard of an exercise physiologist. I asked them, 'You can actually make money doing this?'"

Kersh was then a geologist living in Texas. A year later, he was studying for a masters degree in exercise science.

A decade later, he operates his own business, Kersh Wellness.

He swims nearly 3 miles a day. Next week, in his final preparation for the Aug. 20 Manhattan swim, Kersh will increase it to 6 miles. He swims at Arkansas Tech's pool in Russellville or at the Westside YMCA in Little Rock.

Kersh, the scientist, knows it is all the time in the water that enables him to swim 30 miles without stopping.

"I have the advantage of being an exercise physiologist," Kersh said. "I know there's nothing magic about it. It's just hard work. People look at it as though it's an amazing feat. But I say, 'Just try it.'"