

Russellville's 'Marathon Man'

By Warren Byrd

Sports editor

Russellville's Richard Kersh wants to travel the four corners of the globe, but he didn't want to enlist in the armed forces to do it.

And it's not because the physiologist at Kersh Wellness Management isn't in top condition.

Kersh, whose job includes designing various health wellness programs for corporations, has been able to tour the world via marathon swimming races, the latter of which sent him to Santa Fe, Argentina, the starting point for the Rio Coronda Marathon Swim.

Kersh, a veteran marathon swimmer after 11 years on the circuit, finished 13th in the Around the Island Swim at Manhattan, N.Y., several months ago. He aimed to fare better in the 31-mile swim in the Paranas River in Argentina.

Unfortunately, Kersh had to pull up 20 miles into the swim.

He had some very legitimate reasons for doing so.

"I did not swim my race. One of the reasons is because they offered a \$1,000 bonus to the first person to

get under the first bridge, which was 2,000 meters away from the start. It was a fool's game. What they tried to do was entice a sprint at the first of the race.

"Four of the guys I was racing against will be participating in the '92 Olympics," said Kersh. "I knew from the speed of these people I wouldn't be able to go out in a sprint. The lead pack had five swimmers in front of me. I started speeding up, and I went out way too fast in my stroke. I had no intention of being the first one under the bridge, but I didn't want to lose sight of the pack. I wanted to stay on their heels. If I didn't, I would never catch them."

Kersh said that nine of the 30 entrants dropped out of the race. After hearing Kersh's description of the race route, it made sense.

"You swim five miles down the Rio Coronda, then you swim a channel that connects that river with the Paranas River. The channel is called the El Vado. It's about eight kilometers — and you had to swim up stream with a 2.5 mile per hour current against you. It took almost two

hours for me to swim it.

"I had to pull out at the 20 mile mark," said Kersh. "My stroke was ruined at that point. I wasn't getting any power out of my stroke."

Kersh said that the fresh-water river was "fairly clean," but it had some salt in it. It was a red clay river, Kersh said, and he couldn't see but about two inches in front of him in spots.

Despite having to pull out, the trip to Argentina was well worth it, Kersh said.

"It was wonderful down there. There were at least 300,000 people watching us swim. It's a major event for Argentina. We swam under bridges that were packed with people, and you could hardly see the bridges. There were boats with bands on them that would go by us in the river. People were beating on pans and things.

"The people down there are very friendly," said Kersh. "They had some great food, and it was inexpensive. It's a fairly unique culture, very European. There are lots of German and Italians there. A real neat mix of people. I saw some of the sights.

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"The main thing about the trip is, I had a very warm feeling about the people there," said Kersh. "They are very kind, very nice. In fact, one of the race promoters took me shopping. I had an interpreter with me, and the promoter told the interpreter that he wanted to guarantee that I would be back to swim in the race next year, so we (promoter and Kersh) exchanged watches. That was pretty neat."

Kersh said he doesn't know what his immediate plans are, as far as marathon swimming. He learned from some other swimmers that he needs to extend his practice regimen.

"My yardage isn't correct," said Kersh. "I was doing 8-to-10,000 meters a day. They said the minimum should be 18,000 meters a day."

Kersh learned that 19 of the 30 entrants swim professionally, which means they are able to practice without worrying about fitting in a job and a family. Kersh would like to make a return trip to the Rio Coronada Marathon, but he is undecided right now.

"What I would like to do is go back and swim it right," said Kersh.

A long way to go



Richard Kersh swims in Around the Island Marathon with the Manhattan Skyline in background.

"I need to get a top 10 finish to get into the World Series (held in Germany). It depends on how much time I can train."

Kersh said that he doesn't swim

"for the dreams or grandeur of it," but "for the experience and the adventure."

And he doesn't have to wear an Army uniform to get what he's after.