

# *Panic Under the Pier*

Or,  
Lifesaving at the 1999 U.S.T.S National Championships

By Tim Fellars

What do you call a large triathlon held on the southside of the Oceanside Pier during a big south swell? A busy morning for the Oceanside Lifeguards.

When the U.S. Triathlon Series decided to hold their National Championship race south of the Oceanside Pier, they were warned that if the race coincided with large surf, competitors would be in danger, due to the currents sucking them into, under, and through the pier. And when the dawn broke on October 10<sup>th</sup>, those fears were realized with a solid 6-8 foot south swell pounding Oceanside beaches.

The race's starting point was moved even farther to the south. But as soon as the competitors rounded their last buoy, they exhibited an almost unstoppable attraction towards the pier. Despite the best efforts of lifeguards to herd the masses away from the pier, the heavy ground swell and swift current pushed hundreds through the pier, most with lifeguard escorts.

"I was standing on the beach, looking at orange cans and yellow swim caps everywhere in the water, and I said to myself, 'This is out of control. We need more guards out there,'" said Captain Matt Stephens. "But then I looked around and nobody else was left on the beach. Our whole staff was already out there with one or two, sometimes three victims each." So Captain Stephens grabbed a can and began plucking swimmers off the pilings himself.

In a crazy, chaotic half-hour, the lifeguards rescued 84 competitors – with, miraculously, no serious injuries to guards or swimmers. **For the event as a whole, Oceanside lifeguards rescued a total of 174 triathletes!**

Colin Whitbread described his participation in the melee, "I heard screaming on the inside and just started paddling my board as hard as I could toward the impact zone when I noticed three guards were racing past me in the opposite direction. I was screaming, 'Where are you guys going! We've got rescues on the inside!' And then I looked behind me just in time to see them scratching over the top of a monster set! I got worked --but I held onto my board!" Colin had three people on his paddleboard when the last wave of the set hit them. They all made it safely to the north side.

Some guards were paddling victims under the pier when unexpectedly the triathletes jumped from the safety of the paddleboards to bear hug the pier pilings. A swift tug on the neck of their wetsuits usually was enough to pull them to safety, but sometimes the waves receded before lifeguards could reach them. The pier huggers were left stranded high-and-dry -- 10-15 feet above the water -- requiring the guards down below to coax them into jumping down to safety.

As Dave Wagner, a 12 year veteran, said to his younger counterparts, "Days like this are why we became lifeguards, boys!"

Filename: Panic Under the Pier article 6-00  
Directory: D:\personal\newdocs  
Template: C:\WINDOWS\Application  
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot  
Title: Panic Under the Pier  
Subject:  
Author: TFellars  
Keywords:  
Comments:  
Creation Date: 6/13/00 11:33 PM  
Change Number: 3  
Last Saved On: 6/15/00 10:44 AM  
Last Saved By: Eric W. Sandy  
Total Editing Time: 3 Minutes  
Last Printed On: 9/14/00 10:36 PM  
As of Last Complete Printing  
Number of Pages: 2  
Number of Words: 415 (approx.)  
Number of Characters: 2,369 (approx.)