

Survivors?

by Eric Sandy, Del Mar

“As they scampered over the finish line, all the teams looked whumped but all smiled that satisfying grin of having finished a grueling event. Many would call it the most difficult re-check ever. All agreed that it was one of the most interesting.”

No, this wasn't some hokey made-for-TV, Crocodile Dundee, plot-to-survive spin off. It wasn't even some body-wrecking, mind-wrenching, stomach-emptying corporate-financed multi-day get-no-sleep quasi-athletic event. This was a lifeguard annual re-check. But not just any recheck. Not in Del Mar. No boring run-swim-run for these guys. If you'll remember, this was the crew that did a Navy SEAL type recheck, carrying their IRB down the beach with two passengers in the boat. And so when the fertile minds of Lifeguard Chief Pat Vergne and supervisors Mark Rathsam and Jon Edelbrock started grinding, the result was sure to be fun. “Fun” in an admittedly perverse style but for those who relish a challenge, this was one of the best re-checks seen in years.

The objectives were clear. Emphasize teamwork and multi-tasking. Keep changing gears both mentally and physically. Allow enough flexibility in the event to ensure safety while maximizing the demand for skills and knowledge. And of course, make it fun even if the laughs are part grimace.

As advertised, the start was 0600 with no slackers allowed. The “teams” were chosen by blind draw with a little massaging to keep things interesting. When the Chief described the activities there were groans and grins. Those who had trained hard weren't sure what to think. Swimmers had no great advantage, neither did runners. And then when the first-aid event was described, who knew what to expect?

So they all took off, gleefully bounding down the beach for a deceptively fast 800-yard run. Then came the swim. What had been intended as a sprint turned into a gnarly 1000-yard groan. The rumor was that some clown moved the buoy farther out the night before. And since Scott Tinley “forgot” to show up for the re-check he became the prime suspect. But already teamwork showed. “Red” team was literally towing their slowest swimmer, Student Guard Pat O' Harra into the beach. Pat later showed his stuff, running strongly before keeling over at the finish. Other “Red” team members, Dave Aker, Jon Edelbrock, Larry Helland, Cory McClusky, and Andrew Whitehead took turns in leading their team from behind to “victory”.

But immediately after the swim was the paddle and this was team paddle! That's right folks, three to a rescue board. Waddling through the surf; arms flapping like some soaked centipede, they clawed their way out around the buoy and back to the beach. And there began the first-aid event. Choosing one of their members as the victim, each team had to “immobilize” the victim by strapping them and taping them to a backboard. Supervisors checked and approved their techniques and procedures. Grabbing the handholds of the backboard, the team then lifted and transported the victim a wobbly 500 yards down the beach. Several of the “victims” soon discovered that bouncing around on that backboard was not a free ride. After running, swimming and paddling, their tired muscles did not respond well to being prone. The end of the ride produced a rude stagger as the blood rushed back down from the head. But all was well since they now got to re-enter the water for the “boat race”.

The “boats” were actually small toy rubber rafts that presented a great challenge to teamwork and coordination rather than transport through the surf. But first each team had to inflate their craft and here's where ingenuity and leadership showed. Some teams started to blow up their raft by mouth then quickly looked for better ways. Adam Chase, ever the gadget man, found a foot powered air pump that seemed to work. But it was veteran guard Jim Poland who grabbed an oxygen tank from the dive locker. Compressed air! Yessss! Soon all the craft were inflated and the teams used varying combinations of kicking, flailing, pulling and paddling to get the rafts out around the buoy and back through the surf.

With each team member bound by the rules to stay touching the raft, they now had to run with the raft 500 yards back to the finish. By now the test had taken over 40 minutes and fatigue was showing. The different demands of running, swimming, bending, lifting, running, paddling, then running some more had taken a toll. As they began the final sprint, the “Red” team again showed its teamwork. They shared the lead position of pulling the raft and the other team members down the beach. Some members who had helped more in the swim were now aided by others who ran stronger.

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that is was one of the most interesting. Even with some minor operational glitches, the test definitely met all the goals and objectives. And just to show their spirits were intact, the guards were already plotting and fantasizing about what they should do for next year's re-check. Only one thing is for sure, it will be different!

Eric Sandy, Del Mar. thankfully, an observer.



Photo by Jim Lischer