



SWIMMING UP NEPTUNE STEPS

Joel Enoch takes on Red Bull's open water obstacle race

"Go on Joel, you need this!" BBC sport commentator Tim Warwood screamed at me as I hauled myself out of the freezing water, climbed a 15ft high wall built on a barge and then threw myself back into the murky waters of a Glaswegian canal. This was not a normal swimming event!

The Red Bull Neptune Steps swimming race initially doesn't sound like much of a challenge. After all, it's only 420m long. However, factor in a unique 18m of ascent though eight lock gates, 9 degree water and head-to-head racing with some of the best open water swimmers, triathletes and obstacle course racers in the UK and you quickly realise this event is a lot tougher than it first looks.

The sun was out in Scotland as we queued for registration and I was amused to hear an obstacle course racer commenting on how

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the swimming would be the easy bit. This notion was quickly disabused. I saw at least one person pulled from the water before the first obstacle in every wave. The event was excellently organised with the exception of the water heater, which someone clearly forgot to plug in.

"It's not that bad," said the man next to me as we plugged in off the pontoon for the

start. He obviously wasn't experiencing the same full-body Chinese burn that I was. Still, 10 years in open water swimming have taught me how to acclimatise and after a full five minutes of floating face down and trying to relax, I was as ready for the start. Not, I might add, in any way warmed up, but ready.

My seven-year-old niece said the flailing arms of the start looked like "a flock of black seagulls." Very perceptive, but it didn't feel as serene when you're one of the seagulls in question. Horn. Go. Splash. Gasp. Relax. Sight. Swallow water. Pretty soon the 160m rush to the first obstacle was complete.

"If you ripped the skin off of Mark Deans I reckon you'd find the exoskeleton of a T1000," shouted Mr Warwood enthusiastically, capturing the feeling we all thought as last year's winner Mark Deans skipped up the cargo net ahead of us and disappeared into the distance.



Surprisingly I'd arrived at the first obstacle in fifth place, but then remembered that I hadn't climbed a rope since primary school and, apparently, I no longer could. Other racers overtook me as I struggled to pull my seemingly elephant-like body out of the water with a pair of arms which, while they look normal, apparently had the strength of a baby. "I. Can't. Do. This!" I thought. But somehow I eventually managed to scale what felt like Everest.

I jumped into the next stretch of water (I've forgotten how to dive at this point) and my neoprene gloves filled up with water, which made it feel like I was swimming with rocks in my hands. I made it to the second obstacle and found another rope to climb. To cut a long story short, more people passed me, my gloves were now so full of water they had no grip. I decided to take them off and the race changed. If you ever do this race, don't wear gloves. The cold is ok; a lack of grip and flooded fingers are not!

The next part was a blur: up a rope ladder, 20m fast swim, up a rope climb, dive (I'd remembered how to dive again by this stage), up ladders, more rope, over a boat and onto the climbing wall from where I could see the final obstacle. I climbed the rope, dived in and swam for the finish. I was pretty sure I was now last in my 31-strong heat but I didn't care. This was brilliant!

But it turns out I wasn't last. Not even nearly last. In fact, I finished in about the worst position: 11th, with the top 10 progressing to the semi-final. I would have loved to have raced again but now I have to wait a year to have another go at this wonderful event.

If you can, do this race. Whatever you think of Red Bull as a drink, as an event organiser they're imaginative, dynamic and interesting and there should be more of these great swim-obstacle races. A warning though, this is tough – very tough – so get training now.

NEPTUNE STEPS NUMBER CRUNCH

Number of entries: 200

Number of races: 90

Water temperature: 9°C

Course length: 450m

Ascent: 18m

Fastest male athlete:

Mark Deans 5 minutes 47 seconds

Fastest female athlete:

Shannon Botham 8 minutes 8 seconds

Highlight: The course is so tough the highlight is reaching the finish line!

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