

Conditions of the Bay

The Great Chesapeake Bay Swim 2023

It has been my great pleasure to have written these reports over the last 20+ years, to provide informative perspective to rookies and updated information to veterans. This will be my last report as I am retiring from the GCBS after 25 (hopefully) successful swims.

For those impatient people who just want the Cliff Note version, tough. You need to read this whole report as there are some significant changes to this year's GCBS.

Please visit <http://bayswim.com/> early and often to get the latest news and updates for the swim.

(Italics is used for those major areas that are specific to this year's swim.)

While the swim course is the same every year, the conditions of the bay make each year unique. For some this is a race; for the rest of us, this is a swim with the only goal of getting to the Eastern Shore.

Bay data:



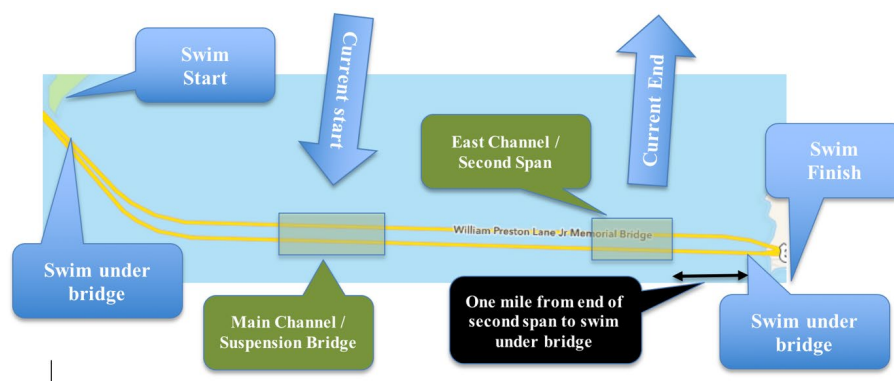
Two weeks ahead of the swim, bay water temperature reads 67 degrees; if that holds, which it won't, it would be a perfect bay temperature for the swim. Past history has shown that the week before the swim, the temperature in the Bay can rise dramatically. Keep checking the NOAA reports for the latest Bay conditions at: http://www.NDBC.NOAA.gov/station_page.php?station=44063

The two things that have the greatest influence on the swim are the bay currents and the wind. I'll discuss the currents in the next few paragraphs. Watch the weather forecast on the Saturday before the swim for the wind data, but keep in mind you can't do anything about it, so don't freak out. WBAL, Baltimore, Channel 11 seems to have the best Bay forecast in the area.

Fun factoid: Over the past 24 GCBS it's rained (drizzled) only once.

If the wind is from the west (very rare) it will be a great swim for everyone. If the wind is from the south, it will be tough on right-side breathers, from the north (very rare), tough on left-side breathers and from the east, very bad for everyone.

The race is timed such that slack current occurs during the middle of the race for the slowest swimmers. During this year's swim, the Bay will be transitioning from a diminishing current going south to a waxing current going north.



**Key Takeaway: Be informed about the conditions but no matter what they are, don't freak out.*

Pre-swim check list:

- Take it easy on the Saturday before the swim
- Bring goggles that are 100% UV/tinted and broken in
- Saturday night, eat only what you've had 100 times in the past
- Hydrate
- Stay out of the sun Saturday
- Bring sun screen and Body Glide on Sunday

**Key Take Away: Make sure you're prepared Saturday (bathing suit, wetsuit, goggles, towel, ID) so you don't needlessly stress out Sunday morning. Don't forget your ID!*

Prior to the start:

This year's Bay Swim start is really early, yea! Buses from the Eastern Shore Park 'n Ride start at 5:00 am. The last bus will depart the eastern shore parking lot around 7:00.

PACKET PICK UP CHANGES

Packet pick up will be as soon as you depart the bus at Sandy Point State Park near the bath house. This will be by a dynamic distribution, meaning your bib number and transponder will be assigned as you check in.

Bring your driver's license or passport to prove who you are. I'm not making this up, but there will be county and state police, Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security as well as some three-letter agencies, so no bluffing about who you are.

Also new, your cap will be a keepsake, no number on the cap.

Packet pickup is 6am to 7:30.

Body marking will be near the check in this year.

Want your stuff to greet you when you finish? Swim bag check-in will be in the same general area as last year, near the restrooms about 500 yards south of the check-in. Remember those small clear bags from last year. They are a memory now. The larger trash bags from years ago will be used this year. Make sure your swim number is on your bag and stuff it with any extra items you brought to the start, but please don't bring your laptop computer.

Sunscreen: Do not skimp. It could be sunny on the day of the swim. You'll need to pay particular attention to your face. You can get sunburned and sport a half moon on your forehead. Put your sunscreen on before body marking since the sunscreen can erase the permanent marker. Race officials may not allow you to pass into the start pens if your body marking numbers are not legible.

Body Glide™ will be your best friend to keep your wetsuit from chaffing you during the swim. Pick some up at your local sports store or bike shop. Do not skimp when applying. The back of your neck will need it, but don't forget about shoulders, backs, elbows and the back of your knees. Hopefully you've done a few open water swims this year and know how and where your wetsuit rubs. Climb into your wetsuit prior to the pre-race briefing. There's not a lot of time between the briefing and the race start this year.

The pre-race meeting will be at 7:30 and the first wave of swimmers start going through the entry gate at just before the 8am first wave.

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Listen carefully to the briefing by the race director. He will explain the latest current data (which can change from the predicted data as stated here), the swim strategy and the safety features that include kayakers, rescue boats, food boats and rules of the swim. Yes, there are rules.

This swim is unique since the swim “lane” is defined by the inner edges of each bridge. Remember: You have to stay between the bridges to stay in the race. If you’re under the bridge you’ll be pulled and get a free boat ride to the Eastern Shore. The currents can be stronger than you might think. Many swimmers have been pulled way off course because they got too close to the bridge span by the currents and spent all their energy fighting to get away from the edge.

**Key Takeaway: Stay calm, proceed to the start but don’t run. Don’t start questioning your sanity why you signed up for this stupid swim in the first place (that will come later).*

No More Cuisinart Start:

BIG CHANGE TO THE GCBS START:

Rather than the insane 300 swimmer start two times, this year’s start will be 10 swimmers at a time every 10 to 15 seconds. Believe it or not, pushing 10 swimmers into the water every 15 seconds means the last group will start 16 minutes after the first group, just about the same as the old 2 huge groups. The suggested swimmer alignment will be by average 100 yard pace time with the fastest going first. There will be placards identifying pace time from 1:15/100 yard to 3:00/100 yard. Place yourselves where you see fit.

The sensor will be at the water’s edge. Look at this video from the Freedom swim earlier this year. The same start sequence was used there.

[10 Swimmer Start](#)

One other swim start change: There will be a separate starting arch for wet suit swimmers and non-wet suit swimmers.

And you’re off!

The water may be a bit refreshing or shockingly cold when you first enter at the start, especially if it’s sunny and hot. Dive into the water and let it get into your wetsuit. Pop up and get a clean breath of air. Let your lungs expand while the water in your wetsuit warms up, this may take a few minutes.

Now you’re in the Bay swimming your heart out. Take this time to stretch out and warm up. Your heart will be racing, you’ll question why in the world you’re doing this and it’s only the first 200 yards into the swim.

AND ANOTHER THING

Larger, more unique buoys will be in place this year to identify entry and exit points to/from the bridge middle course and each mile marker.

Once under the northern span you’ll take an easy left. The current will be going from north to south, so don’t race to the southern span right away. Let the current pull you toward the center between the spans. Remember, if you can look up and see the bottom of the bridge instead of the sky you’re out of bounds; disqualification may loom. You may be battling the current for a while. Fight On!

The bridge curves to the left for what seems like a long time, but it’s just a little over a mile. Once the spans straighten out you should be in the middle between the two bridges.

**Key Takeaway: This swim is 90% strategy and 50% physical. At the start, enter the water easy and stretch out. If you’re swimming with a buddy don’t be shocked if you lose them early. Don’t waste time looking for them; you’ll meet up at the finish.*

The Main Swim:

With an early start you may be battling a bright sun on the right side, that's why you need to use sunscreen prior to the start.

Not the fastest in your swim practice lane; not to worry. There has always been cut off times for the GCBS. This year the cut off for the first mile is one hour after that last swimmers enter the water. So, if you're in an early start group this could give you almost one hour and fifteen minutes to make it to the first buoy. After that the second mile is one hour and forty-five minutes after the last swimmer starts. Mile three is two hours and thirty minutes and mile four is three hours and fifteen minutes. The last swimmer must complete the entire swim in three hours and fifty-five minutes which computes as 3 minute per 100 yard pace. Easy peasy.

If the wind is coming from the east (head wind) there will be swells coming your way. Try to time your stroke to the swells and swim in the trough and breath at the crest. If the wind is coming from the west (tail wind) the swells will be pushing you, but do the same thing swim in the trough and breath at the crest.

During the swim it may be necessary to adjust your cap or wetsuit neckline. Again, take a good breath, dive under the surface and make your adjustment. This way you'll have a little forward momentum to start your stroke again.

When you're in the main shipping channel, your swim will be affected more by the wind than anything else. You'll also feel a noticeable drop in the water temperature.

At the mid-point of the main shipping channel there's not a whole lot to see. You can judge where you are just by glancing at the span on the side where you regularly breathe. If the bridge starts to grow or diminish you might want to take a quick look ahead to make sure that you're swimming straight down the middle. Crazy Ivan's (swimming left, then right, then over correcting again) will just add many yards to an 8,000-yard swim. Relax and take long metered strokes. You'll probably change your stroke a few times due to fatigue, crowding, and the water chop. Don't get discouraged and don't stop swimming. The chop will be the biggest adjustment. Here you'll be wondering where all the other swimmers are. You're now in the lonely zone.

Passing the second span is where mental toughness must kick in. At the far end of the second span it's still one mile before you pass under the bridge. This is a very cruel leg; the pillars are like pickets in a fence, except that you'll be looking at each pillar in slow motion. Each pillar will be in your view for a few strokes if you're a right breather. There are 54 cement pillars at this point in the swim. If you try to count them, you'll go insane. However, if you notice the numbers at all they will have a white background. When the numbers appear without the white background you're getting very close to passing under the bridge.

Toward the end of this year's swim there will be a flood current going to the north which should help to keep swimmers away from the pillars on the south side. It will also make getting under the bridge a little more difficult. Look for the big markers on the south side. That will mark the point of passage under the south (east bound) span. There will also be kayakers there. They will help you transition under the eastbound span. Suddenly there will be lots of other swimmers. Where did they all come from? Use your best manners to avoid them and have them avoid you.

**Key Takeaway: As Dory said: Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming*

Head for Home:

Finally, you pass under the bridge and go for home. You're still 700 yards from the finish. There should be a large inflatable barrel marking the 4-mile spot. Try to get close to that, then turn left, otherwise you might be too close to the rocks on the left side and get all cut up. There is a tall vertical red and white cable marker near the finish, lots of balloons and commotion: Just aim for that. The water will be very shallow as you get even with the sea wall. It's not uncommon for people to just walk into the finish, but don't do it; swimming is faster. Also, because it's shallow it may be significantly warmer water and, therefore, energy draining. Be aware of these changes.

Keep swimming until you touch the bottom twice. Standing up will be more painful than you might imagine. Crawling is acceptable. It might be more comfortable to do an ape walk using your knuckles to help propel you forward.

BIG CHANGES TO THE FINISH

The sensor for the finish will be at the water's edge this year. Once past this point there will be a stair or ramp to the grassy upper area. You can take this nice and slow and let the personnel at the upper level help you with your wet suit.

**Key Takeaway: This is your moment. Drink it in, but don't do a faceplant trying to get out of the water.*

Congratulations, you've done it! It will seem surreal and your accomplishment may not sink in for a while but enjoy it just the same. Make sure you get something to eat and drink; you've been working hard for hours.

Best of luck! Make us proud!

The Hammer
(Going for #25)