

## Hang in there!

At 7.00 am one beautiful, sun-drenched Sunday morning I stood on a beach with 500 other men and women clad in swimmers and wet suits, ready to hurl our bodies into harbour waters and the thrill of a triathlon competition. Now triathlon is a race made up of three continuous components: a swim, a bike ride and a run. The trick is to be accomplished in all three, but most people have their 'weak' spot. For me this achilles heel is the swim leg, so it was with a touch of anxiety that I stood there contemplating the course before me.

The gun was fired and we were away to a splashing start. As we approached the breakwater which shielded the harbour from the ocean I noticed the swell pick up. Thank goodness I've been training in open water and not just the pool. So far so good. But soon all was not well. The swell was bigger than I had anticipated and the waters were becoming increasingly choppy. By now I was beyond the breakwater and finding it extraordinarily difficult to make headway. To add to my difficulties my goggles had fogged up and my vision of the turning buoys was obscured. Waves slapped me in the face causing me to swallow water (greasy and polluted) and my stomach felt queasy. All you have to do is make the turn and you'll be heading back to shore, I told myself calmly. Yet the distance seemed interminable, my pace

agonisingly slow and, to my alarm, I felt myself beginning to tire.

It was then that the small print on the entry form came back to haunt me: "Swim hazzard: Choppy seas outside breakwater – seek assistance from lifeguard if in distress." I had paid no attention to it at the time. Now it rudely impinged on my mental focus. I was at the halfway point and experiencing an overwhelming sense of failure. Oh no. Any minute now I'm going to have to signal for help. They'll have to tow me in. Me! The only wimp in 500 competitors. What was the use of all that training? And finally the unthinkable crossed my mind: I never want to enter another triathlon ever again.

At that point a curious thing happened. Somewhere to my right I glimpsed a lifeguard on a surfboard with two competitors clinging to the sides. It was a vague, split second image but enough to release me from my state of isolation and rekindle a spark of confidence. Hey, I'm not the only one having trouble here! With that simple revelation, I just put my head down and swam, like a crazed seal, the rest of the distance home.

After staggering out of the water the rest of the race proceeded without fuss. The elation of finishing held special delight as I mingled with the crowd and the post-race chatter. 'That swim was awful.' 'Yeah, I hated that swim!' 'I saw three blokes near me towed in.'

Metamorphosis complete! So, I was not a failure after all. Just a struggler like everybody else!

Days later, in a moment of prayer, I revisited the sporting memories of that morning as a parable for the faith journey. How easily our weaknesses can distract and discourage us from reaching for spiritual goals. And yet, in God's plan, our struggles have their place. Like those swimmers clinging to surfboards, even our weakest efforts can be a sign of hope to somebody else. As Christians we stumble, we fall, but we are determined to keep reaching for fullness of life in Christ Jesus. As St Paul put it: 'Straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3:13-14).

Focussed on Christ, let's press forward in faith. •

