

Article Blog for the Digital Guide for TriCalifornia August 2011 for the Triathlon at Alcatraz event

I am a Venezuelan immigrant now US citizen who actually lived in San Francisco for 3 years when I was little (2-5) while my father was doing his fellowship at the USF. We moved back to Venezuela and later I moved to Boston in 1995. As you may have read in my athlete blog www.chacin.com I have never participated in any competitive sport in my life, I learned how to swim as child at the local sports club where my parents took me and I spend most of my afternoon swimming and swimming in the pool. I never learned how bike, as my parents were afraid that their little girl might fall and we don't have running sports in our schools back home, the longest I had jogged was a 20min test that we had to survive in 3rd year of high school. The only sports that I was actively seriously involved was studio dancing, (jazz/modern/latin), gymnastics. After I moved to the states, I continued my dance classes with jazz and hip/hop and latin and rollerblading, that was the extend of my fitness. Later in my 30s I was diagnosed with oral cancer in 2004 and the treatment involved a very invasive surgery and neck dissection that affected my ability to move, walk, sleep, etc for months and even years. The recovery was slow, left me without any energy due to the body's focus on healing the wound, not being able to drive for a while because I could not turn my neck side to side. I had to focus on a very strict diet to heal my depleted immune system and after my treatment was done, I decided I was going to enjoy food. I gained so much weight and enjoyed eating so many calories that I lost all my clothes and at that point I said it was enough. I started my cancer awareness diet in 2007, no flours, no processed food, nor cheese nor sweets or food after 8pm. So far have lost over 30+ lbs, and I am in optimal weight.

As soon as I reached my normal BMI in 2009, I started training, swimming first, spinning classes once a week, then running on the treadmill and then with the push of my triathlete friends I decided to become one. I bought a bike and taught myself how to bike in the basement of my building, I learned online and through my tri friends how to train and what to do, by the end of 09 I had completed my first 2 triathlons! At first I could not swim 2 lengths without stopping, nor completing a spin class with the added resistance that the coach indicated nor run more than 10min. It was a slow but steady effort.

As I trained I noticed I was a natural swimmer, that with no effort I was fast and efficient. I improved my swim bike run skills, practicing, reading online about technique on all sports and this year I hired a coach to guide me in the workouts. So with the interval training and weight programs I feel stronger than I have ever been in my life. I have swam almost 3miles non stop, biked as long as 56miles and ran half marathons. In fact I am going to do all 3 this weekend in a triathlon.

I noticed I loved swimming, that I could swim forever and it has become a great strength of mine, I have been enjoying every lake, every ocean side that I can take and when I learned about Alcatraz tri through the USAT ads I could not help but getting excited about the idea of swimming it, so I pre-registered early, just like this time. It had been a long dream of mine, to go back to San Fran where I spent my childhood, what a better comeback for me but to actually race from Alcatraz! Everyone at work was calling me crazy. Specially because of my inexperience in all sports. That was more fuel for the challenge. At the time, I thought I would sign up for a relay and just swim but as time went by it all worked out and I swam and ran and recruited a biker through the internet from the local san fran tri club. I had the time of my life!, I spent time with friends that live there, cousins and new friends that I made, like my relay buddy Joe, whom I have convinced to race the full race with me this year! He is signed up!

So all this to say that besides going to special dear place in my heart, I am racing for all those cancer survivors and non cancer survivors that think that they can't, everything is possible. Triathlons has changed my lifestyle, the training, my self confidence, has improved my health and by posting on my social networks all that I do, I have inspired hundreds in the US and all around the world where my friends live. They often send me messages thanking me, just today I received a message from a college friend saying that he had bought a bike because he saw me racing and riding in the pictures. It doesn't matter how old you are, what is your sport background, if you have disabilities, you CAN! Alcatraz tri could be the first triathlon for someone and it would be the most amazing one! I felt incredible even without doing the bike. I can't wait for this year.

Alcatraz has become my favorite race, I have raced more than 14 triathlons since 2009, but Alcatraz is the best so far. I will be traveling alone again and visiting my friends and family. I plan to ride with Joe part of the bike course. Last year he took me to the running course to see the sand ladder and we climbed it and that was very helpful to calm anxieties about it. We also swam in the aquatic park, which was extremely helpful to know what to expect from the water temperatures. I would recommend anyone to at least do that. The views during the run are spectacular, it was such a pleasure to run the trail, I loved the obstacles and the "Sand ladder"OMG that was the most fun! I just had to sign up again for this year, and probably forever, and this time I am biking too. I have a new fellow singer/triathlete friend with whom I am going to do a run with while I am visiting to warm up.

This year I am challenging myself to do it all no relay! I would advice anyone to get lots of practice in salty water, with waves, in MA the ocean is similar so I had some practice, also to use a long sleeve wetsuit and a neoprene cap. Last year I had a sleeveless wetsuit which might have affected me with the cold, this year I am ready with my full sleeve one! Last year Alcatraz was my longest run ever but this year i am more experienced with longer runs and I feel very strong. I did train climbing stairs at lunch time with friends to prepare for climbing. This year I have been focusing more on the endurance of the run and speed with interval training in all 3 sports. Lifting weights and practicing technique for swimming is key to a such a technical swim like Alcatraz in my view. Getting used to managing waves is important. Making sure you have bilateral breathing down is also important, it helps with sighting. I mostly prefer ocean than lake for OWS, probably because I am used to swimming in the sea from back home but not many are comfortable, so practice, practice, practice. I had little anxiety about the sharks though, and the water was so clear and beautiful when I swam that just felt peaceful, except for the cold feeling :) the new wetsuit will take care of that this time. The things that I have also been focusing is the cadence in the run when climbing and going down hill. Shortening strides, in both cases, will save your knees and keeping a high cadence will help. Last year I didn't know how to run fast in the downhill of the course, I found myself slowing down for fear of falling, now I know if I do shorter strides I can handle it. The things to look forward to, for me, are the views while swimming, running and biking.. the course is just breath taking, the color of the sky and water so blue with the red color of the bridge and the sand color, just something I can't get out of my mind. My biggest fear is the

climb on the bike, as a very inexperienced biker, I am afraid of slowing my cadence so much that I will fall on my side and then I won't be able to mount again. I am going to spinning class and practicing hills and shifting to be able to know how to shift when climbing and how to stay in balance and not fall from the bike. I have learned the feeling of how much is about 80-90 rpms and at which point I should shift down to the next gear to climb. Keeping a high cadence for as long as possible, before shifting, is key. I haven't mastered it in no way, but i am certainly much more prepared to ride this time. With many rides in rolling hills under my belt now, I feel more capable and confident.

Now talking about training time and life, I am a single woman but I have a million responsibilities. I am a software engineer and only in June I started a new job working for a startup which requires lots of hours of work and coming up to speed, I am also a gospel/jazz singer and belong to many choirs including the Boston Pops Gospel choir, all of which require me attending several rehearsals a week after work and I perform during the weekend. I am the musical director/cantor for two churches as well, for their Spanish services on Saturday and Sundays. So that is a lot to juggle. I study the music that we have to perform, coordinate the music we have to put together. I also have family members from Venezuela that come to visit, some of them came this spring for medical reasons and I also took care of them for 3 months. So my week is work, sing and train and entertain and provide medical care every day. Because of this, I have to be very disciplined with all my activities. I also am very strict with my diet, schedule to eat and rest time. I manage to train before I go to work at 6am or even earlier, depending if I have to sing after work. My signing activities determine what time I am going to train. I make sure that I properly feed myself for training, working and singing. I never starve and I eat very specific cancer prevention and fighting super foods and avoid all processed food, sweets, cakes and junk food. I cook for myself mostly and rarely eat out. I take vitamin supplements to make sure I nourish my body. When I am not studying some music or working, I am listening to a triathlon nutrition or training podcast while training or while going from one place to another or even in the shower. I can't have enough of triathlons, I am fascinated by the vast knowledge about the sport and inspired by all the athletes that compete in it. My favorite podcasts are Ben Greenfield fitness, tri swim coach by Kevin Koskella, the quick and dirty tips from the get fit guy, and triathlon academy from Ben Greenfield and Kerry Sullivan, their advice as

well as my coach Robert Sullivan, who is also my spinning instructor from day 1 of my training in 2009, have been my source of all my knowledge, in training, nutrition and preparation. My coach has seen the physical changes in me and I would advice anyone that can afford it, to at least try once a month. Finally, the satisfaction that you get when you see what you body can do after a race or when you look at the mirror and see the muscles that you never thought you had or could develop later in your life, is so worth it, but most of all the self confidence and pride of knowing that it was YOUR will which made it all happen, YOU that has swam from ALCATRAZ, biked that HILL and climbed running that 400 SAND LADDER.

- Remarks: Thanks so much for sharing. Your story is incredible and we couldn't be more excited to host you at the San Francisco Triathlon at Alcatraz. You are such an inspiration. - Meredith Rich