



Lap Swimming With the Chlorinated Merpeople

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

“

Lap swimming is part meditation and part marathon. In the first few minutes, my mind darts between the day’s patients, my to-do list, family matters and news of the world. Over the course of the swim, thoughts tend to slow down and simplify to the here and now.”

WHEN I GRADUATED FROM USING A WALKER TO A hard external knee brace after the deftly delivered intra-articular steroid given to me by Dr. M, I still had remarkable pain and an obvious gait deformity. I could bear enough weight to ambulate using only a cane. The shot allowed my acutely torn menisci to stop releasing inflammatory cytokines and permitted the knee to bear more of its assigned weight. I no longer had to be driven to the office by my dutiful nurse and the walker could be folded away.

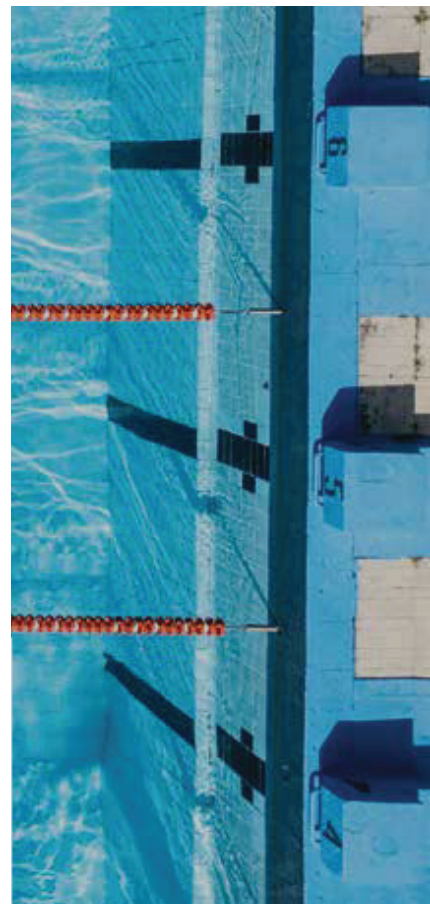
I wish I had a better “war story” for this injury. It was due to pickleball + stubbornness + a missed hose + a gopher hole. The pickleball is the most defensible: playing doubles with my 31-year-old son as my partner at a pickup court near the harbor. We had a streak of luck defeating a run of worthy opponents (mostly my son’s doing) which allowed us to stay on the court for about six straight matches. I felt fine going home but the next day the knee was both stiff and sore. There was no swelling or redness, and no extreme joint tenderness, so I figured I should just lay off the pickleball but keep walking the 2-mile roundtrip to work and back. No “rest and ice.” Just “walk and wait.” My inflated ego wouldn’t allow me to baby the knee. So when it didn’t get better (or rather got gradually worse) over the next few weeks, I again insisted it would just take more time and more walking. Then there was the front-yard hose I tripped over in the twilight (acute exacerbation No. 1) and then a head-in-the-clouds misstep into a gopher

hole while walking Vanna, our Tibetan terrier (acute exacerbation No. 2). By now, the knee was howling, swollen, and wouldn’t allow me to bear weight. Maximum dose Tylenol plus celecoxib kept me barely functioning.

The MRI unsurprisingly showed tears in both my lateral and medial menisci. Dr. M’s steroid shot gave me about 50% relief within 24 hours. We discussed getting surgery in the next few weeks to prevent accelerated joint degeneration. In the meantime I had to get some exercise so as to not go crazier. That’s how my investigations brought me to learn about The Bud Kearns Municipal Pool in Balboa Park.

William A. “Bud” Kearns had been the recreation

director for the City of San Diego in the 1920s and ‘30s. He was especially keen on expanding aquatic sports for our citizens. The pool that now bears his name was constructed at its current site in Morley Field in 1933. It is open every day except Sunday. Two dollars and twenty-five cents, the cost of admission for those over 60, buys me access to this gem, this resource,



this conduit. The shallow end is reserved for kids getting lessons. The deep end most afternoons is home to water polo practice happening under the gaze and scolding bullhorn direction of a no-nonsense coach. Between these two ends are the 15 lanes, roped off with stringed buoys, for me and the other lap-swimming chlorinated merpeople.

In myths from around the seafaring world there exists a fabled species that is half-human and half-fish. Mermaids are the female and mermen the male version of this creature. In some stories (particularly Celtic and Norse), seductive mermaids lure sailors to their watery deaths. In others, including African and Japanese, the merpeople

can be either benevolent or dangerous. In the antiquated outdoor locker room, the mermen with whom I change from street clothes into swim gear come in every age, shape, size, and color. Some are stout and have come to burn calories and drop weight. Some are trim and have all the cool gear that mark them as former competitive swimmers, there to maintain their skill and times. Some — like me — are the limping-wounded, removing our knee and ankle braces and stashing our canes before doffing our swimsuits. Undoubtedly, a similar scene happens in the women's locker room.

After the mandatory pre-swim shower, we merpeople make our way up the concrete ramp to the pool area. We then enter the water in a variety of telling ways. Some tentatively descend at the shallow end using steps and the hand rails (as I did for the first months so as to offload my bad knee). Some squat, sit and twist their way directly into their claimed lane. Others jump or dive in from the smooth coping of the concrete border. All of us arrive into a lane that is temporarily our private and sequestered aquatic habitat. The former competitive swimmers propel themselves with more speed than do the rehabilitating lame and the weight-loss seekers, but, remarkably, once in the water all the merpeople possess a kind of similar grace. All of us find ourselves in a world of relative weightlessness and frictionlessness compared to our terrestrial

lives. The forgiving water supports us and transforms us, for a while, into this other version of ourselves.

The water is heated to a Goldilocks-level 81 degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature used in Olympic and NCAA competitions and the same temperature recommended by the American Red Cross for exercise swimming to minimize both stress and overheating. It is a level that is at once enlivening and comfortable. And while swimming laps, the fewer distractions the better. The focus is on breathing, form, and adjusting intensity to ambition and stamina. By trial and error, I've acquired my own hacks to help that focus: short haircut, tight-fitting goggles, truncated flippers, and a tight rubber finger cot to keep my wedding ring from sliding off.

Lap swimming is part meditation and part marathon. In the first few minutes, my mind darts between the day's patients, my to-do list, family matters and news of the world. Over the course of the swim, thoughts tend to slow down and simplify to the here and now. How are my shoulders holding up? How is the balance of propulsion between my legs and my arms? Am I hyperventilating or underbreathing? Ultimately I aim for the simplicity of a machine tasked with conveying my animal consciousness back and forth across this waterpath for no reason whatsoever. At some point either my tired muscles or the numbers on my diver's watch tell me I'm done for the day.

Exiting the pool is not as easy as I remember as a kid growing up in Southern California. But after a lap session (which has grown over the course of my adventure from 10 minutes to 60) I somehow push my body high enough to tuck my good knee onto the concrete deck, and eventually rise to standing as my body reacquaints itself with standard gravity. From there I shuffle in my sandals down the ramp, rinse off in the blessedly-warm shower, and then change back into my land-lubber clothes.

My endorphins stay high for at least an hour after each session. My knee is slowly healing. After a few months of swimming twice a week, I have been able to ditch the knee brace. I have decided to hold off on surgery for now. I have also decided to continue to incorporate swimming into my life. The water is kept at 81 degrees during both summer and winter. It is obviously more of a challenge getting in and out during a chilly winter than it was in July — but I'm thinking a regular, temporary transformation into a lap-swimming chlorinated merman that has been so good for my knee will be good for the rest of me as well. +



Dr. Bressler has been practicing internal medicine in San Diego since 1984. During his career he has taught medical students and residents and also chaired various hospital committees. He is currently affiliated with Scripps Mercy Hospital and Mission Hills Post Acute Care.

