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# Maddy Meets the Challenge And a sea lion, too

*By Lee Borrowman*

Maddy Spiering escapes from the "Rock" Photos provided

Maddy Spiering started 6th grade at Stanley Middle School last week. Just three days earlier, she had been equally nervous on an occasion of a (arguably) decidedly different nature. On August 23, Maddy jumped into the chilly waters of the Bay, near Alcatraz Island; a little over an hour later she stepped out of the tide and onto the beach at Crissy Field. The 28th Alcatraz Challenge was held that Saturday. At about 8:00am over 600 bold souls left the safety of a ferry boat that was stopped 100 yards southeast of Alcatraz. Most of the athletes were adults, but a handful of children participated as well; only a few of the younger swimmers completed the difficult 1.5 mile swim. Maddy was accompanied on her adventure by her father, Mike Spiering. "Maddy never flinched…she never wanted to quit," said Spiering,, whose priority was to keep his daughter safe, "Every time I asked her how she was doing, she answered, 'great!'" Maddy started training for the Challenge with her father last January. Swimming for Rancho Colorado over the summer kept her in good shape, and together they also did some open water training at San Francisco's Aquatic Park. But prior to August 23, the furthest Maddy had swum was 1.25 miles; swimming in the Bay was not quite the same as swimming in a pool, "The water was colder than I thought it would be, and really dark – I couldn't see my hands," she explained. As she stood at the boat's edge waiting her turn to start, Maddy admitted later, she was a little bit afraid. "I was scared a shark would come up and eat me or that I'd run into a sea lion." Maddy did have a close encounter with a sea lion on her first day of training at Aquatic Park: "It kept following me; my dad said it was so close he could have hit it." The sea lion eventually swam off without incident and Spiering was quick to add that he would not actually have hit the large creature (kids say the darndest things), "But it really was a bit scary, looking into its big brown eyes." {Editor's Note: California sea lions are generally between 6.5 and 8 feet long, and can weigh anywhere from 250 (female) to 850 (male) pounds; most of the sea lions we see in the Bay are males.} Spiering said there was comfort and camaraderie in the crowd of athletes waiting to swim, but once they were in the water the swimmers rapidly dispersed in the vastness of the Bay and it was almost as if they were all alone, "Hundreds of swimmers entered the water in the space of seven or eight minutes, and all of a sudden it was just me and Maddy." During her swim, Maddy said she told herself to "keep swimming, and not swallow too much water. I was also trying to swim fast to avoid sharks." Spiering attempted to reassure her that the Bay is too warm for 'man-eating' sharks, at about 60F this time of year. Maddy

explained that she decided to do the swim because, "My dad does it all the time and always says it's fun, so I wanted to try." Spiering, a triathlete, said his three children have watched him and as they have grown older have started to say, "I can do that, too," and he offers opportunities and support. Maddy, in turn, may have inspired one of her younger brothers, who told his family that he wants to swim the Alcatraz Challenge next year. After her triumph, Maddy celebrated by visiting with family and attending a Giants game. She said that both the Challenge and middle school turned out to be fun. The greatest thing about the Challenge, according to Maddy, was "Standing on the shore and seeing Alcatraz far away and knowing I did it." Would she do it again? There was a bit of a pause before she answered, "Well...maybe!"

Spiering

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