

Swimming the Strait of Gibraltar

By LAUREL BUSBY
Staff Writer

Alan Morelli twice swam across the 11.6 mile Strait of Gibraltar. During his first swim through one of the world's busiest shipping channels, Morelli was part of a group of six (including a two-time Olympian and former world champion), which set a record for the most swimmers crossing at one time.

On the second trip from Spain to Morocco in July of this year, he helped inspire three non-elite swimmers who were addressing both physical and mental challenges.

"They never thought they could do this," Morelli said. "I said, 'No, you can do this.'"

Morelli, a 19-year Palisadian, knew from experience that challenges could be overcome to conquer endurance swims. He had been injured in a car accident before his first swim across the Strait and had spent months working to recover. He also suffered injuries years earlier during a triathlon bike accident that not only required extensive physical therapy to heal, but also inspired him to assemble a chain of physical therapy clinics to develop and test software to get better clinical results and help others get active.

"What motivates me seven days a week is to get others to live a healthy and active lifestyle—to get their hearts pumping," said Morelli, whose company operates 46 clinics across the country. "Other people have ways to help and leave a legacy. Mine is clearly based on physical movement."

In his recent Strait of Gibraltar endeavor, three of his company's board members, Brian Wing, Larry O'Shea and Scott Schroeder, took on the challenge of the swim and used the company's OptimumMe program to prepare.

Wing had back surgery earlier in the year, Schroeder had shoulder issues that the



Above: At the start of their swim off the coast of Spain, Larry O'Shea (pink cap), Scott Schroeder (red cap), Alan Morelli (white cap) and Brian Wing (barely visible red cap) swim for Morocco. Photo: Marko Simic

Right: Larry O'Shea, Alan Morelli, Brian Wing and Scott Schroeder discuss their swim in Cadiz, Spain. In the background lies the coast of Africa. Photo: Sam Gillen



physical therapy eliminated, and O'Shea was a triathlete who found swimming to be his weakest sport. All were good athletes, but none had ever done this type of endurance swim before, except Morelli, whose multiple endurance swims have included a 12.6-mile swim from Manhattan Beach to Santa Monica.

"What we did is shocking for most people, but when you break it down to individual movements, it is 12,500 movements," said Morelli, who swims at the Palisades

High School swimming pool.

His group went to the Optimis Sport + PT Clinic at 15200 Sunset (in Pacific Palisades), where physical therapist Edwin Tinoco and exercise physiologist Aishea Maas helped analyze and improve their physical motions and cardiac readiness for the swim.

"They're the ones who got us into the position to handle what we were going to face," said Morelli, who noted that Tinoco and Maas helped the company develop the OptimumMe assessment tools that could be used to aid people to achieve whatever physical goals they have—whether athletic challenges "or lifting up a cup of coffee." The two have "the ability to do that for people, even if they're not crazy people trying to swim from Europe to Africa."

Morelli worked to help his friends develop the mental strategies needed for the five-hour-and-15-minute swim.

Conditions overall were much worse than Morelli's first crossing during the same week five years before, which had ideal, calm waters. That effort took about 4-1/2 hours.

This time, "we picked the worst conceivable day to swim," Morelli said. "It was like jumping in a washing machine." But the churning conditions of the water didn't give the group pause. "I was really moved by the strength of spirit and courage of Larry, Brian and Scott for them to even jump in the water. But they had all adapted the mindset that I had tried to instill in them that they can't ever let fear or doubt of whether they're going to make it enter their minds—never even for a second. It clearly worked." Afterwards, all three men said that they "never even thought that the conditions were really bad."

For the swim, Morelli led the way at a pace that was slower than usual for him, so they could all remain together. But during the final two kilometers approaching Morocco, he had to swim ahead by pushing himself at a faster rate, because he was starting to experience hypothermia as they felt an influx of the colder Atlantic waters. These waters were probably in the upper

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Palisadian Alan Morelli celebrates his last day of training before swimming the Strait of Gibraltar this year. Photo: Stephan Dastous



Brian Wing takes a long training swim off the coast of Santa Monica. Photo: Stephan Dastous

Gibraltar

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50s, Morelli estimated. Other parts of the swim had temperatures approaching 67 degrees at the highest.

In addition, those final two kilometers required the men to swim against a powerful current, which meant they had to swim diagonally towards the Mediterranean. "It was very challenging to make any headway," Morelli said. "If we weren't swimming hard, we would have moved backwards."

Two boats accompanied them—one in front and one to the side. The boats helped ensure that the swimmers made it through the busy boating channel without running into any ships. Aside from ships, the group also had to worry about encountering a variety of sea life.

"It's like the wild west," Morelli said. "There are killer whales that frequent those waters, sharks of all kinds, 500- to 600-pound tuna, barracudas. It's pretty crazy—the diversity of wildlife. You never know what you're going to see while you're out there."

At one point, the side boat had to move away for a bit, because it encountered an octopus attacking a huge sunfish. Morelli's wife, Julia Zhu-Morelli, was in that boat, so Morelli was keeping track of it as he swam. His son, Carlo, 15, also rode ahead in the guide boat to watch the swim, which made the event particularly special for Morelli, as neither had been able to join him the first time.

For the previous swim, Morelli had also had to re-teach his body how to find equilibrium in the water after his car accident.

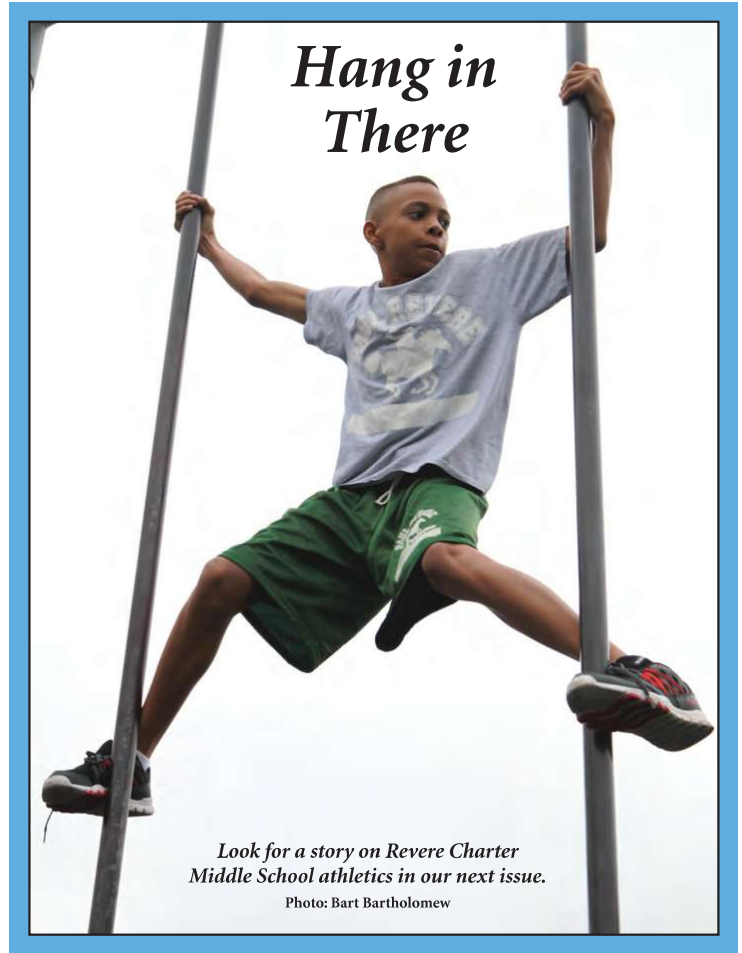
Part of a bone in his inner ear had been sheared off when a motorcycle did a U-turn in front of him and they collided. He also had cracked some ribs, but the inner-ear injury was much more serious.

"I went from being a very, very strong triathlon swimmer who would win races to being barely able to swim 25 yards," Morelli recalled. The injury also made it "impossible to drive or be on a bicycle—very challenging."

Morelli chose to forego a risky surgery that would have put a steel plate in his head and also involved a high risk of encephalitis. Instead, he opted to work to help his bone re-grow by taking supplements and stimulating the area through swimming, among other efforts. The swimming made him extremely nauseous, but it stimulated the bone to grow calcium deposits back. "The hell for me" was spending 6 to 7 months swimming as the growth occurred.

However, Morelli said, it was also "what inspired me to do marathon swims," and his first bike accident injury, which dislocated his hip and damaged the associated ligaments, inspired him to start his physical therapy company. This year, his friends were in turn inspired to swim the Strait of Gibraltar with him. He said that in recorded history, only a few thousand people are estimated to have done endurance swims more than 8 miles in length.

"It's cool to be able to have the technology and experts like Edwin and Aishea to help people do something that so few people have done before. It opens your mind," Morelli said. He added, "If we can do that, then the readers of the *Palisades News* can take on challenges that they never thought they can do."



Hang in There

Look for a story on Revere Charter Middle School athletics in our next issue.

Photo: Bart Bartholomew

Rec Center Spooktacular

The Palisades Recreation Center will host its traditional Halloween Spooktacular from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, October 31. The cost is \$10 per child (cash only, no credit or debit cards).

Admission allows children into bounce houses, a pumpkin patch, a reptile petting zoo and the Reptacular reptile show.

There will be carnival games and prizes, crafts and a DJ. New this year is a trick-or-treat path that features all sorts of tricks and all sorts of treats.

Also new this year are food trucks, which will offer families different food options. Everyone is invited to come in costume.

Palisades Park Advisory Board member Susan McInerney, who has organized the event for the past five years, is looking for volunteers. Community-service hours are available. "If anyone is interested in sponsoring a booth or any element of the day, we have many opportunities available from \$50 to \$250," McInerney said.

E-mail McInerney at sbmcinerney@yahoo.com to volunteer or learn about a sponsorship.

Girls Lacrosse

Training Underway

Girls interested in learning to play lacrosse, or those who want to tune their skills can sign up for fall lacrosse. Clinics for U9, U11, U13 and U15 (those born on or after September 1, 2000 to those born on or after September 1, 2006) are held Sunday afternoons at the Palisades Recreation Center, 851 Alma Real Dr.

Every player must have mouth piece and goggles, which are required in girls' lacrosse. Players must have own stick. Contact Katie Sabini, (310) 775-5150, or email ktsabini15@gmail.com.

Visit: palisadeslacrosse.org.

Thanksgiving Turkey Trot Signups Begin

Registration for the third annual Banc of California Pacific Palisades Turkey Trot 5/10K is now open. The race begins and ends on the Palisades High School football stadium on Thanksgiving Day, November 26. Street closures in the Asilomar bluffs area begin at 6:30 a.m. and the race starts at 8 a.m. Adults (18+) are \$35 pre-race and \$40 race day; children are \$25 pre-race and race day. Proceeds from the race support Hearts of Hope and the Los Angeles Food Bank. To register visit: paliturkeytrot.com/



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