

Open Water Lake swimmers train on Williams Lake

by Cathy Vaughan

Looking for a unique natural high that lowers your stress level, boosts your immune system, improves circulation, burns calories, and feels like champagne running through your veins? Try a spring plunge in the frigid, open waters of Williams Lake!

Open Water Lake (OWL) swimmers Colleen Purcell and Jennifer Hoyt were pumped and ready for their spring dunk in the frigorific lake waters to start their OWL training regime. The hardy ladies belong to the Canada Games Centre Master's Swim Team and train in Williams Lake and Long Lake for open water swim events and competitions.

"We are planning our first swim in Williams Lake in April," says Colleen Purcell. "OWL swimming is extremely healthy for us. As we age we lose muscle mass, our metabolism changes, arthritis sets in, and we put on the pounds. With OWL swimming there is no weight on your joints as you are using the resistance of the water to build muscles. It is a full-body workout that improves your cardio and builds muscles. As an extra bonus your body burns calories faster trying to stay warm in the icy waters. It is exhilarating! I feel 10 years younger than I did 10 years ago!"

For their first icy plunge of the training season swimmers will usually wear all their standard cold-water safety-gear to live through the shock of the chilly water. A neoprene wetsuit, thermal booties and gloves, clear goggles, earplugs, two bathing caps and a tow-float for safety. The swimmers are always followed by a non-motorized boat for safety or for someone

to take photos, and record swimmers' stats.

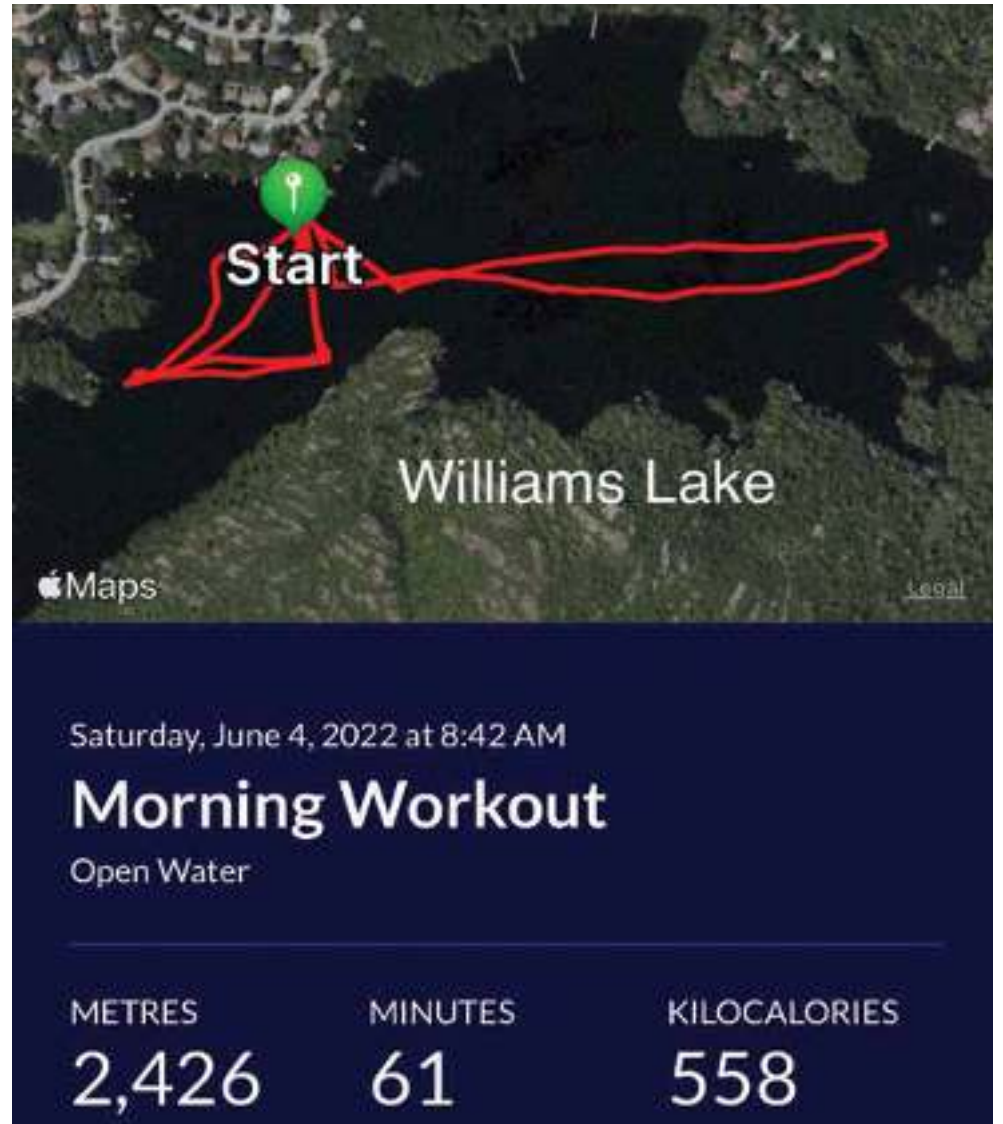
Jennifer Hoyt is quite 'seasoned' to the frigid lake temperatures and didn't wear her usual wetsuit. Purcell was in full regalia. The air temperature was about 3C and the lake water was a breath-stopping 10C. Both swimmers were in the lake under 2 minutes before safety and sensibility brought them back to shore for warm blankets and hot lattes.

"The swim was absolutely incredible! Invigorating! I feel so alive like there's champagne running through my veins. This is an incredible opportunity to swim in Williams Lake. The availability of a natural wilderness in a city is unknown in other cities in Canada. The benefits to the mind and body can't be forgotten for us and our children," shivers Hoyt as she heads for a protein breakfast and steamy latte!

During their summer training, the swimmers use the deep channel in the middle of Williams Lake at the Pine Bluff Islands Community Access area on Wynchrock Drive in Spryfield. Their workout route is a straight line to the Williams Lake dam at the eastern end of the lake and back - twice!

According to Purcell's calculations each loop takes about an hour. It is approximately 3,000 metres, burns 650 calories, and gives her a resting heart rate in the 50 - 65 range. She says that over the past two years of swimming she feels more fit, achieved her Body Mass Index (BMI) goal, and she is off blood pressure medication.

Swimming in a pool is a very different experience than swimming in open water



Apple Watch - My Swim Pro tracks - Open Water Lake Swim.

Credit: Colleen Purcell

in a lake. At the Spryfield Wave Pool, the lane-buoys and a blue line on the bottom of the warm water are visuals to keep swimmers moving in a straight line. You can stand and rest in the shallow end and check your swim stats on your electronic device under the watchful eye of the lifeguards.

OWL swimmers encounter very unpredictable conditions. Sudden changes in the lake currents, wind velocity, wave height, varying air temperature and weather conditions throw swimmers off their swim routes.

"Out on the lake, it is difficult to swim in a straight line," says Purcell. Swimmers use landmarks to help them to navigate the lake and orient their swim patterns. "During One swim session on the lake, the fog rolled in and we couldn't find each other or see our land marks," recounts Purcell.

"By mid-summer, we can't train in Williams Lake because the lake levels are so low. The old dam leaks so our waterline shrinks and we are swimming through strange vegetation, around more exposed rocks, and we see more patches

of lily-pads in our swim route. The additional threat of blue-green algae forces us to move to Long Lake to continue to train into the fall weather," states Purcell.

At Long Lake in Spryfield, the Nova Scotia Swim organization deployed colourful buoys as markers in the summer months to support all OWL swimmers around HRM. Swimmers from other OWL groups in Bedford, Sackville and Dartmouth use Williams Lake and Long Lake as their training locations because of the warm, safe, clean waters and accessible community entrance points on the lakes.

"We would certainly encourage and welcome other open water lake swimmers to join us. It is much easier to enter cold water with other enthusiasts! We swim through the week and take longer swims on weekends," states Hoyt. You can message Hoyt on her Instagram page [jenhoyt_greenfrogjoin](#). Join other OWL swimmers in your area by checking out Maritime Open Water Swim - Facebook.

It doesn't matter how slow you swim, you are still lapping everyone on the couch!



Colleen Purcell and Jennifer Hoyt - April swim!

Photo by Cathy Vaughan