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## Williams goes with ebb and flow

### Sherwood Park open-water swimmer, 16, always 'prepared for the unexpected'

BY JOHN MACKINNON, EDMONTON JOURNAL    JUNE 22, 2010    [BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT](#)

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Nadine Williams, photographed on June 18, 2010, will compete at the open water world championships in Roberval, Que., next month.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - It's a long journey, as the distance swimmer churns, from the 25-metre indoor pool at Millennium Place, festooned as it is by a flock of mock geese in flight, a brace of decorative pelicans guarding an adjacent wading pool and that corkscrew kids' slide, to a 10-kilometre open-water competition in the endless ocean off, say, Guam in the South Pacific.

But 16-year-old Nadine Williams of Sherwood Park just goes with the ebb and flow.

Which is a good thing, because the ocean doesn't behave nearly as predictably as chlorinated aqua contained within the walls of a swimming tank.

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"You just have to be prepared for the unexpected," said Williams, 16, who has been swimming the open water for almost two years now.

"Anything can happen."

Yes, like what, for instance?

"In Rome, a couple of days before the race, there were huge waves, so all the equipment (buoys) was taken out to sea," Williams said.

"Everything was gone and the pontoon (the floating starting block) was destroyed.

"Then, we were going to swim in the lake, like two hours (inland)."

In the end, open-water race organizers at the 2009 World Championships in Aquatics reset the course in the Mediterranean and got on with it. Small stuff, in the scheme of things.

When Vancouver's Tanya Hunks won a bronze medal in the open-water swim at the Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for example, she plowed through more than a splash of the raw sewage the Cariocas pump into the Atlantic Ocean at scenic Copacabana Beach.

That wasn't an issue for Williams, who, swimming in her first world championship at 15 last summer in Italy, finished 42nd. Canadian teammate Zsafia Balazs of Toronto was 33rd.

At the junior Pan Pacific championships in Guam in January 2009, Williams was sixth in the open water swim, just the second of her career, in two hours, 10:22.55. She finished just behind Balaczs, who was fifth in 2:04:53.10.

Both swimmers are seen as prospects to swim the open-water event for Canada at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London; both will be part of a five-athlete team that will compete for Canada at the FINA (Federation International de Natation) 2010 open-water world championships in Roberval, Que., from July 17-23.

Also swimming for Canada in Roberval will be Karyn Jewell of Gatineau, Que., and male swimmers Simon Tobin of Quebec City and Richard Weinberger of Victoria.

That competition will be held on Lac St-Jean, home of the world-famous 32-kilometre Traversee du Lac St-Jean, a professional race held there annually.

Williams, a Grade 11 student at Bev Facey High School in Sherwood Park, is aware of the mystique of that race, and looking forward to getting a sense of it, at least, next month. So is her coach at the Silver Tide Swim Club, Chris Nelson.

"There's a renewed sense of pride toward open-water swimming and this (worlds) will mean a lot more," Nelson said. "I think you'll see in Roberval this summer that the town is crazier than ever for open-water swimming."

About 100 swimmers from 30 countries will compete at Roberval, well short of a quorum of FINA's membership, but the discipline remains relatively new at the Olympic level.

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"I think, right now, it's still kind of the black sheep in swimming," Nelson said. "There are some coaches that have embraced it and decided it's an Olympic event, it's just as important to the Olympics as any other single medal in the Olympics."

At five-foot-six and 135 pounds, Williams wouldn't seem big and robust enough to handle the vagaries of open-water waves, chilly temperatures, jelly fish, whatever.

Nelson said brute force isn't necessarily the answer in the open-water event.

"Her technique is the No. 1 thing that she does really well," Nelson said. "She has a really nice, what we call in swimming, a high elbow catch, which means she has a very long pull.

"Compared to most, she catches the water very early in her stroke, so she's pulling water a lot longer than most. That's a very big skill to have when you get into open-water swimming." Like any elite swimmer, Williams hones that skill by means of a brutal regimen of daily workouts.

Nelson reckons Williams puts in from between 45,000 to 55,000 metres of lap-swimming a week, going for 90 minutes before school three mornings a week and another two hours every afternoon.

Nelson was never an open-water swimmer himself, but elite triathletes, for whom open-water swimming is key, helped convince him of the value of the discipline.

"Being a new Olympic event, I'm open to any avenue to get a swimmer onto a national team. Anything they want to do, any goal they want to achieve, I want to help them achieve it."

Williams began doing open-water event as another race along with the pool distance freestyle events, the 800-and 1,500-metre races.

"And then I ended up doing very well, so I decided to stick with it.

"I enjoy it."

Sure, what's not to like? Especially if it could possibly earn you a ticket to the 2012 Summer Olympics in London?

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