Swimmers to take on Hartwell

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While interest isn't exactly exploding in open-water swimming, the sport has been gaining popularity since it became an Olympic sport in 2008.

Locally, Jacqueline Grossman, race director of the Clemson Aquatic Team's 15th annual Death Valley Open Water Swim meet Saturday, said it's hard to tell whether the Olympics has increased interest in the niche sport.

"It used to be I'd get to host the national championship by default, because no one else would bid," Grossman said. "Not anymore."

The Death Valley swim meet remains popular, even though it's just another local event, she said.

"This year we'll get about 250 or 300 people," she said. "The economy is probably taking a toll on some people."

While the Olympic distance for open-water swimming is 10 kilometers (6.2 miles), the longest distance offered in Clemson on Saturday is a 5K.

"I guess they picked that distance for the Olympics because a race can fit into a two-hour time window to suit TV," she said. "And that's the longest distance you can have without the swimmers being escorted" by a canoe or kayak.

It may take some time for open-water swimming to gain popularity, Grossman said. For now, it's appealing mainly to masters (19 and older) swimmers, she said.

"You don't see too many younger than 24 or 25 at the top levels of the sport," she said.

Some people don't like open-water swimming because they can't see the bottom, and some parents are afraid to let their children out of their sight, Grossman said. That's not really a problem at Clemson, where the first 500 meters of the swim course is marked with empty milk jugs, and then every 50 meters after that with buoys.

"We have a reputation of having one of the best-marked courses in the nation," she said.

Swimmers as young as 6 have competed in the past, Grossman said, and some older than 80.

"It's a sport for everybody," she said.

WANT TO RACE?

The 15th annual Death Valley Open Water Swim meet is Saturday at East Beach on Lake Hartwell in Clemson. Distances are 500 meters, 1K (.62 miles), 2K, 3K and 5K.
The first race begins at 8 a.m. Race-day entry is available.
For more information, visit www.teamunify.com/Home.jsp?team=sccat

OPEN-WATER TRAINING

For tips on open-water swim training and racing, visit www.ericaroseswimming.com/training