

ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: GSAF 2001.09.30.b

DATE: Sunday September 30, 2001

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean at Ixtapa (a few miles north of Acapulco), Guerrero, Mexico.

NAME: Brian Lavelle

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer is a 26-year-old professional triathlete from San Jose.



BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: Full Moon, October 2, 2001

SEA CONDITIONS: The surf was high with 10-foot waves following in the wake of a hurricane that had just battered the southern tip of the Baja peninsula. The water was extremely murky and underwater visibility was less than a metre.

ENVIRONMENT: "One of the guys I was swimming with, Kevin Doherty, had crashed in the race and had blood on his arms and legs," said Lavelle. Lifeguards were flying black flags, signifying high waves and undertow. And the waves were pitching up high from deep water and crashing into extremely shallow water, creating a lot of foam and turmoil. "At the time, I was far more scared about the waves than any shark. It was dangerous and we were just stupid. In retrospect, it might have looked like an episode of Jackass," said Lavelle.

TIME: Late morning

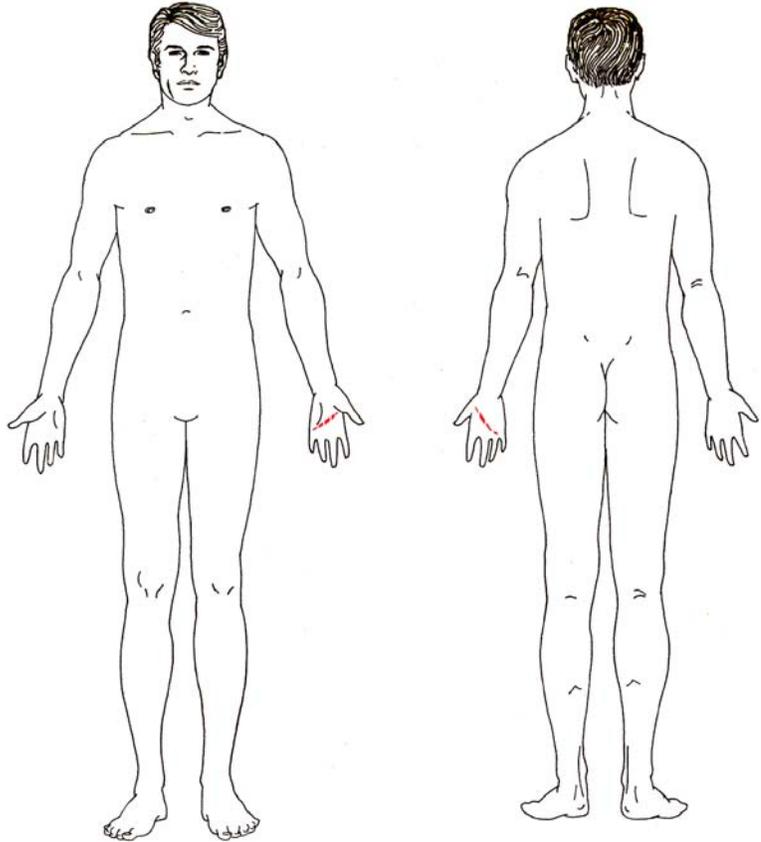
NARRATIVE: Lavelle finished 15th – out of the points and the money in an Olympic distance contest earlier that morning. Then he and some fellow triathlete friends decided to enjoy body-surfing. "Kevin and Ian Ray and I were just treading water and chatting," said Lavelle. "Another friend, Mark Fretta, who had finished 10th in the race, was wading inside the break near the beach when the shark came on scene. It came out of nowhere. When it clamped on my hand, it didn't register at first. For an instant, I went into a sort of dream world where it didn't seem real at all. Suddenly, it registered: 'Damn! I got bit by a shark!'"

Lavelle said he next noticed that "the bottom row of teeth hit the palm of my left hand, the top row hit the top of my hand. I thought this was crazy – that meant my fingers were in its mouth. After [the shark] gripped me, it gradually increased the pressure for about three seconds. So with my adrenaline skyrocketing, I hit the shark on the nose with my free hand, and it released my hand."

"The next thing I knew, I think I broke [Australian Olympic freestyle gold medallist] Ian Thorpe's 50-meter record," he said. In his first few frantic strokes, Lavelle started with a strong kick and got an added turbo boost of adrenaline when he his feet pushed off on the shark's sandpapery skin. ... "I was sprinting full speed to shore and not thinking about anything else when I found myself catching a huge wave," he said. Lavelle found himself free-falling nearly 10 feet with the wave. "At the same time I was telling myself, 'My god, I am safe from the shark.' Then I thought, 'Oh shoot, I am killing myself on this wave'. Luckily,

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there was some water at the bottom of the wave and I didn't break my neck. Everything after that was sketchy. I got tumbled all around and honestly I didn't know which way was up or down. I got nervous because my oxygen level was low. I took one breath and three seconds later another big wave hit and pummeled me, and I didn't get a chance to get a good breath. Finally, I came up and got air and Kevin, Ian and Mark helped me to the beach."



INJURY: For a moment, Lavelle said he was afraid to look at his hand or arm. "I didn't know if my hand was missing," he said. "I thought for sure some fingers were missing. I had my hand by my side and slowly brought it up to my face. My hand was bleeding heavily, but thank God, no fingers were missing!"

FIRST AID / TREATMENT: Lifeguards and a local doctor treated the left hand, putting on some gauze and stitching the wound.

SPECIES: The incident involved a tiger shark, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, 1.6 metres [six feet] in length.

REPORTED BY: Timothy Carlson