

ACTIVITY: Swimming
CASE: GSAF 2000.06.09.a

DATE: Friday June 9, 2000

LOCATION: The attack took place in the Gulf of Mexico, just east of the Gulf Shores public beach in Gulf Shores, Baldwin County, Alabama, USA.

87°7 W, 30°3 N



NAME: Charles Anderson

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer, a 44-year-old male from Summerdale, Alabama, is a coach and vice principal at Robertsdale High School. He weighs 230 pounds and was wearing a bright watch on his right wrist. He was one of a group training for a triathlon. Anderson had competed in 52 triathlons and won 37 Clydesdale heavyweight age-group titles before the incident. On May 13, he had placed 24th the Clydesdales' age 40+ in Gulf Coast Triathlon on May 13 at Panama City Beach, Florida. His time was 6:50:59, including a 47:26 swim, 3:52:19 bike and 2:54:19 run.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: There was a south wind.

MOON PHASE: Some 54% of the moon's visible disk was illuminated. First Quarter, June 8, 2000. Full Moon, June 16, 2000.

SEA CONDITIONS: The water was rough and choppy, but clear.

ENVIRONMENT: The attack took place in shallow coastal waters where sharks are reported to give birth.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 feet

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: "Neck deep"

TIME: 06h38

NARRATIVE: Initially, Anderson thought he had been struck by a log in the water. "I felt this blow, I came up and a shark was attacking me," Anderson said. "First it hit my right thigh, then took off four fingers of my right hand, then it rammed my midsection, and then my right arm went right into the shark's mouth." The shark dragged him across the ocean floor for about a minute, and then pinned him down on a sandbar. Anderson hit the shark with his left arm, and struggled to get his right arm out of the shark's mouth. When he freed himself, his hand and wrist were gone, and only shattered remnants of his forearm remained. Anderson managed to make it back to shore.

INJURY: Anderson's right arm was severed below the elbow by the shark.

FIRST AID: Anderson and Whatley, who was also injured by the shark, were rescued by two nearby construction workers who heard their screams and pulled them out of the water just east of the Pink Pony Pub, a popular beach bar. One of the construction workers said that Anderson was "calm and cool, kind of laid down in the sand" before being moved to a nearby bench. A shirt was used to make a tourniquet to slow blood loss. Anderson said that he willed himself to remain conscious and make it to the hospital.

TREATMENT: He was transported to South Baldwin Regional Medical Center in Foley, Alabama, where his right arm was surgically amputated above the elbow.

SPECIES INVOLVED: It was thought that a bull shark, *Carcharhinus leucas*, about six feet in length with a mass of 180 pounds was involved in the attack.

NOTE: Police posted red flags and closed 30 miles of beaches from Fort Morgan to the Florida state line for the rest of the day while biologists made two flights along the coast looking for sharks and large concentrations of fish. The beaches reopened the next day, and although beaches were packed, few people ventured into the water.

SOURCES: Orlando Sentinel, June 10, 2000, page A20 & June 11, 2000, page A22.

Chuck Anderson maintains positive attitude 10 years after shark attack

ROBERTSDALE, Ala. — June 9, 2000 started out much like any other day. But it was a day that Chuck Anderson won't soon forget.

In fact, probably in part because he has told of his ordeal many times over the last decade, it was a day he remembers in vivid detail.

"It was a Friday morning. A big group of us were meeting at the end of Highway 59," he said. Anderson, among others, continues to train and compete in local tri-athlons, which includes training for running and cycling in addition to swimming.

Anderson and three others arrived early on that Friday morning.

"One of the group said the water was too rough for him, so he stayed on shore," Anderson said. "Myself and the two others were all strong swimmers, so I suggested we go ahead and test the water to determine if the conditions were safe for the others."

Anderson and the two other swimmers waded out 100 yards off shore in front of the Pink Pony Pub and began to swim from the east back to the west.

"About two minutes into the swim, I remember looking at my watch. It was 6:38 a.m.," he said.

"I swam two more strokes when I felt something hit me from below. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was big. It literally lifted me up out of the water."

Anderson said he was able to regain his balance and began to tread water. "I panicked and just started hollering for everyone to get out of the water," he said. "When I came to my senses I began to look around, and didn't see anything so I put my face down in the water. That's when I saw it."

It was a shark, and it was coming straight for him. Anderson shouted for his fellow swimmers to get to the beach and go for help just before the attack began.

"I put my hands out instinctively to fend him off. His first bite took all of the fingers, but my thumb off my right hand," he said. "I don't remember feeling any pain. I pulled my hands back and tried to hold my right arm up out of the water to keep the blood from going into the water. It was not very successful."

The shark then hit Anderson in the stomach, but quickly let him go.



"The next strike, I actually saw his fin coming through the water at me," he said. "That's when he grabbed me by the arm and went into a feeding frenzy, throwing me around like a rag doll."

The shark had practically Anderson's entire arm in his mouth, he said.

"I was having to hold the shark back to keep my face away from his mouth," he said. "That's when I had a conversation with God. I said if he helped me I promised I would do certain things. I told him that if I survived I would wake up every morning thanking him for the opportunity to live another day, and I would go to bed each night thanking him for the blessings of that day."

Anderson firmly believes if it wasn't for that prayer, he would not be alive today. "At that moment, the shark began to push me toward the beach," he said.

Anderson and the shark eventually came to a sand bar off the beach, where he was able to gain his footing.

"I was able to get my feet underneath me and stand up," he said. "Then I tried to rip my arm out of the shark's mouth."

In the process, Anderson's arm from just below the elbow down was stripped to the bone.

"They call it de-gloving," he said. "As soon as I was free of the shark, I began to run to the beach as fast as I could."

His companions had already called for help and emergency crews were on the way, he said. Through the whole ordeal, Anderson never lost consciousness.

"A young man on the beach took off his shirt and I helped him apply it as a tourniquet and I laid there on the beach until paramedics arrived," he said. "I know I am very fortunate to have survived. If the shark had clamped down on my stomach, or if he had turned and gone away from the beach, I would not have been here to enjoy these last 10 years since the accident."

Anderson was taken to South Baldwin Hospital in Foley, where he credits surgeon John Rodriguez-Feo, among others, for saving as much of his arm as they could.

"It really makes a big difference," said Anderson, as he demonstrates that he has a full range of motion for the small portion of his arm that remains just below the elbow. "I am able to hold onto things and even grab some things. I can do so much more than if I didn't have anything there (below the elbow)."

After going through emergency surgery, Anderson remained at South Baldwin for two days before being transferred to Thomas Hospital, where he would endure several more surgeries.

"I made them keep me awake long enough to see my children and tell them that I love them," he said. "After that I don't remember anything for five days."

Soon after the attack, word began to spread and an outpouring of support came in for Anderson from all over, particularly from the Central Baldwin area where Anderson had served as a coach, athletic director and assistant principal at Robertsdale High School for nearly two decades.

"I don't remember it, but I've heard it so many times from different people that I know it's true," he said. "When I went in to surgery, the hall was lined with people from Robertsdale, and I went

down the hall, leading a rendition of the fight song.”

Anderson would end up losing four-fifths of the blood in his body.

“I really didn’t know how close to death I was,” he said. “I am definitely blessed to be here.”

Anderson remained in the hospital for 13 days, slowly regaining his strength.

In the meantime, word of his ordeal spread throughout the local media, quickly gaining interest nationwide.

“There had never been a shark attack on Alabama beaches before,” he said, “and there still hasn’t been another one to this day.”

While Anderson remained too weak to talk about his ordeal, he received word of calls coming in to his family, requesting information.

“I remember my daughter telling me that Bryant Gumbal (then host of the NBC’s *Today Show*) had called,” Anderson said. Since Anderson was unable to respond to the calls, the first wave of media attention would soon fade, but as soon as he was able to talk, calls started pouring in again from throughout the country.

“I guess my experience as a coach prepared me somewhat for the attention,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure that wherever I went, I made two things abundantly clear. First, that I appreciated all those who helped me and provided support during my recovery. And second, that I wanted to convey a positive attitude through it all. In life, bad things happen to good people. It’s your attitude that makes a difference. You can go through life being negative, or you can choose to have a positive outlook. I choose to be positive.”

In addition to local television programs around the country, Anderson would share his story before a national audience, first on *Good Morning America*, then others, including the *Today Show*, but none bigger than the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

“It was a great experience, getting to go to Chicago (where the show is taped),” he said. “Then, we got to go to a baseball game at Wrigley Field (home of the Chicago Cubs) and a football game at Notre Dame (in nearby South Bend, Ind.)”

Anderson has since traveled the world telling his story, doing numerous shows for the *Discovery Channel*, *National Geographic* and *Animal Planet*. He also got the opportunity to carry the Olympic torch for the 2002 Summer Games in Salt Lake City.

“One of the things I am most proud of is that it has afforded me the opportunity to take my kids to places they would never have otherwise experienced,” he said. “From the very beginning, I have said that I would not go unless they let me take my family with me. Together we have traveled the world over the past 10 years.”

And while the demand for his attention has quieted down over the years, Anderson still has opportunities to talk about his experience.

On Sept. 12 he will travel (with his daughter, who is now 25 and working as an architect in Birmingham) to New York to speak before the United Nations about shark conservation.

"I know a lot of people will think it's strange that a shark attack victim would speak out against cruelty to sharks. It is a cause I truly believe in," Anderson said.

He has become involved with a group called Pew Charitable Trust, an environmental group that is pushing Congress to pass laws against the practice of shark finning.

"This practice is responsible for the slaughter of large numbers of sharks in a very inhumane way," he said. "It has gotten a lot of attention that shark victims such as myself have come out in support of this cause and I want to do what I can to spread their message."

Through it all, Anderson said, the main message he wants to convey to people is simple, that the waters of the Alabama Gulf Coast beaches of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are safe, at least from shark attacks.

"I still swim in the waters at Gulf Shores today," he said, adding with a grin. "I just don't do my training in the Gulf early in the morning or late in the day. I go to the YMCA pool where there are no sharks."

SOURCE: John Underwood, BaldwinCountyNow.com, August 22, 2010,
http://www.baldwincountynow.com/articles/2010/08/11/local_news/doc4c62a8228aef7786749465.txt



Chuck Anderson heads for the finish line in his first triathlon since he lost his arm in a shark attack