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# Open-Water Swimming Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Christina MacDougall** (November 5, 2026, 11:01 AM EST)

*In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond.*

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At first glance, practicing intellectual property law and swimming for hours across an open body of water seem to have little in common. One involves scientific literature, patent documents, client meetings and legal analysis, while the other involves cold water, changing currents, uncertain conditions and physical isolation.

For me, however, the two pursuits draw upon remarkably similar habits of mind. My legal career and open-water swimming both reward sustained attention, intellectual curiosity, adaptability, resilience and the ability to pursue a distant objective without losing command of the immediate task.

Swimming is not necessarily an escape from a demanding legal career, but rather a complementary discipline that exercises many of the same capabilities on which my career depends and from which my career progression has ultimately benefited.

My professional path demonstrates how important learning and adaptation have been throughout my career. I earned a Bachelor of Science from Boise State University, a doctorate in chemical and systems biology from Stanford University, and, later, a law degree from the University of San Francisco School of Law.

My scientific research involved complex questions surrounding DNA-damage recognition and processing. Moving from science into law required me to take an existing foundation of knowledge and learn to apply it in an entirely new way.

Knowledge in intellectual property law, particularly in rapidly evolving life sciences fields, cannot be static. I may understand the underlying scientific principles, but each new matter can require me to rapidly master a client's particular technology, distinguish it from competing approaches, understand an evolving patent landscape, and translate highly technical concepts into legally significant distinctions.

Often, the most interesting assignments begin with uncertainty. The essential professional skill is not

simply possessing knowledge, but becoming comfortable with repeatedly entering unknown territory, identifying what you need to learn, and developing that knowledge to provide useful and practical legal advice.

Open water requires a similar orientation. Unlike a pool, it does not provide a perfectly standardized environment. Temperature, visibility, wind, waves, navigation, fatigue and countless other variables can change the experience.

Open-water swimming requires awareness of not only my own body, but also the surrounding environment and the water itself. I am continually observing conditions, processing feedback and adjusting.

No amount of preparation eliminates the need to learn during the swim itself. In that sense, every swim is an exercise in learning: Preparation gives me a framework, but experience tells me how that framework must be applied to the current conditions.



Christina MacDougall's unusual hobby involves swimming long distances across open bodies of water. (Courtesy of Christina MacDougall)

The parallel becomes even stronger when I think about adaptability. Legal strategy rarely unfolds exactly as planned.

Patent prosecution may require responding to an examiner's objections, revising claims, reassessing cited art, or reconciling a client's commercial objectives with what the scientific and legal record will support. Portfolio counseling requires an even broader perspective because you have to think beyond an individual filing and toward a changing technological, legal and competitive landscape.

Good advocacy involves more than developing a strong initial plan. It also requires recognizing when new information changes the problem and responding without losing sight of the client's ultimate objective.

An open-water swimmer similarly cannot insist that reality conform to the original plan. Many different elements can change: Wind may rise, water conditions may deteriorate, and fatigue may appear earlier than expected, causing a route to feel different in practice than it appeared beforehand.

The effective response is neither panic nor stubborn adherence to assumptions that are no longer valid; it is disciplined adjustment. I have learned that resilience is not merely the ability to endure difficult circumstances, but rather the ability to maintain an objective while remaining flexible about how it is achieved.

That distinction is equally important in legal practice, where persistence is most valuable when paired with judgment. Complex problems become more manageable when I break them into questions I can answer, decisions I can make and steps I can take now.

A large diligence project, a complicated patent portfolio or a difficult prosecution issue can initially appear overwhelming when viewed as a whole. Focusing on the immediate task does not mean losing sight of the larger objective. In fact, it is often the only practical way to reach it. The ability to move deliberately through complexity, without being distracted by the total distance left to travel, is one of the most direct lessons I take from endurance swimming and apply to my professional life.

Perhaps the strongest overlap between swimming and my legal practice is sustained concentration. Long-distance, open-water swimming requires me to remain engaged for extraordinary periods without expecting constant excitement or immediate reward.

My Lake Tahoe swims have made this particularly tangible. I completed the approximately 12-mile True Width crossing in 2023 in just over 7 hours, the 21.3-mile Length crossing in 2024 in just under 15.25 hours, and the 10.6-mile Vikingsholm route in 2025 in just over 6.5 hours, completing the Lake Tahoe Triple Crown.[1] These swims demanded preparation, but they also demanded the ability to remain mentally present long after the excitement of starting had disappeared.

Those durations matter because a 15-hour period is far too long to rely on enthusiasm alone. During a long swim, I have to repeatedly return my attention to technique, navigation, nutrition, physical signals and the next manageable segment of the effort. I cannot spend 15 hours thinking about how many miles remain.

At the same time, I cannot forget where I am ultimately trying to go. Success requires me to hold two temporal horizons simultaneously: the distant destination and the present location. When my attention drifts toward the enormity of the remaining distance, I direct focus to the immediate actions that are within my control.

Sophisticated legal work often requires exactly the same dual focus. A patent portfolio may develop throughout many years, while an individual response, claim amendment, diligence question or client decision demands precise attention immediately. You need to understand a client's long-term strategic destination without allowing the larger objective to obscure the immediate technical details.

Conversely, becoming absorbed in details without remembering the destination can produce work that does not advance the client's broader interests, even if it is technically competent. Swimming long distances continually reinforces the discipline of moving between these perspectives. As attorneys, we need to know where we are going, but we also need to focus on what we are doing in the moment.

Open-water swimming complements my legal career not because swimming and law are similar activities, but because their differences allow me to exercise and further develop common underlying strengths in different environments. Both require me to learn continuously, adapt intelligently, concentrate for extended periods, tolerate uncertainty, and transform daunting objectives into manageable next steps.

Swimming also reminds me that sustained performance requires renewal. The discipline to work intensely is strengthened, rather than diminished, by having a pursuit that creates space away from work and restores the capacity to engage fully when I return.

In my legal work, I study a complicated landscape and determine a path through it. In open water, I look across an expanse toward a destination that may be miles away. In both settings, I cannot control every condition I will encounter. But what I can control is how carefully I prepare, how closely I pay attention,

how effectively I adapt and whether I continue moving forward.

In my legal practice, sometimes progress is measured in scientific understanding, legal strategy or the development of a client's intellectual property strategy. And in swimming, sometimes it is measured one stroke at a time. The underlying lessons are remarkably similar: Know where you are going, respect the conditions in front of you, remain willing to adjust and keep taking the next stroke.

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[1] https://www.tahoeopenwater.org/lake-tahoe-triple-crown-open-water-swimming/.