

# Becoming a Channel Swimmer

September, 2012

## Welcome

My name is Karen Throsby, and I am a sociologist at the University of Warwick specialising in issues of gender, technology and the body.

Following my decision at the end of 2008 to train for a 2010 English Channel swim, I quickly realised that this was a unique opportunity to bring together my combined research interests and swimming obsessions to form this project.

In 2010, an article in the Guardian about the research described me as an "aquatic sociologist" - what better job description could there be?



## Aquatic Sociology

Over two and a half years, I carefully recorded my own experiences of training for an English Channel swim, as well as studying training communities and locations, interviewing swimmers, reading blogs and forum postings, and generally immersing myself in the Channel swimming world. The aims of the project were to explore both the social workings of an extreme sporting subculture about which very little is known, and to use Channel swimming as a means of thinking about what counts as a sporting / fit body in contemporary society.



The project ran from May 2009 to September 2012, and my fieldwork covered locations as diverse as the West Midlands, the Lake District, Dover and Jersey (UK), Cork (Ireland), Gozo (Malta) and San Francisco and San Diego (US).

During the research period, I also completed 4 marathon swims (Round Jersey, Jersey to France, the English Channel and the Catalina Channel), and as I travelled around, I met up with prospective, successful

and unsuccessful Channel swimmers, conducting 45 formal interviews, as well as uncountable swimming conversations on beaches, or in saunas, hot tubs, bars, cafes, hotels, living rooms, and the back of my campervan.

This magazine sets out some of the key findings from the research. For more details, please visit the address below.

Enjoy!

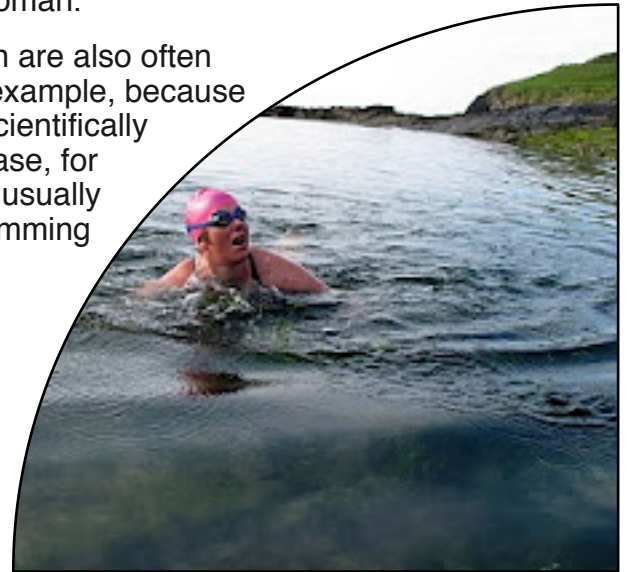
# "Man up!": Swimming and Gender

In many ways, gender seems irrelevant to Channel swimming. Separate male and female records are kept, but men and women train together, and with the exception of different costume regulations, the requirements for completing a swim are exactly the same. Nevertheless, there are some significantly gendered aspects to the process of becoming a Channel swimmer.

In the course of the research, I was told repeatedly that "women can be just as good as men" at Channel swimming, but while it is widely accepted that gender is a terrible predictor of swimming ability, femininity is continually used as the marker of weakness in everyday conversation. For example, swimmers who are slow to get into the cold water are often urged to "stop being such a woman", to "man up", or to "grow a pair". For both male and female swimmers, then, to swim successfully is to be more like a man, and less like a woman.

Especially as explanations of high performance, women are also often credited with a biological advantage in swimming - for example, because of higher average levels of body fat, a presumed (but scientifically unproven) higher tolerance for pain, or in one bizarre case, for having "more flexible ankles". While these remarks are usually intended as compliments, they also present female swimming achievement as accidental rather than earned.

Some women received negative comments from those outside of swimming about their increasingly big shoulders - for example, being described as "manly" - whereas this was celebrated in relation to men, attracting compliments. But many women also enjoyed the solidity and power of their new muscularity.



## Dirty and disshevelled

Many of the women in the study talked about how great it felt to do things that are normally off-limits for women.

This included: being strong, muscular and powerful; taking time for themselves; eating freely and in public, and getting dirty and dishevelled.

## "you kind of disappear as you get older [...]. This is my way of not quite disappearing just yet"

(female US swimmer)

Many of the women I interviewed talked about swimming in relation to their lives as women.

Older women, whose bodies are often devalued in contemporary society, talked about how it gave them pride and a sense of worth that they didn't always get in other aspects of their lives.

Others talked about swimming as an escape from the demands of domestic labour and other caring responsibilities. As one female swimmer noted:

"It's a chance to be something other than their cook and nurse"

Women's everyday lives affected their ability to participate in marathon swimming. But conversely, for some, it provided a relief from the burden of those responsibilities, as well as an opportunity to think differently about conventional expectations about women's lives and bodies.

# Heroic fatness

In most endurance sports, low body fat gives a performance advantage, but in Channel swimming, body fat provides valuable insulation from the cold. Consequently, most Channel swimmers try to either gain, or at least maintain, body fat in preparation for a swim. The Channel swimming body, then, is unusual among endurance sporting bodies, providing a direct challenge to the contemporary 'war on obesity', which is based on the notion that lean = fit / healthy, and fat = unfit / unhealthy.

For many long-standing endurance triathletes or marathon runners, the concept of gaining fat to improve performance seemed very puzzling and unpleasant. For these swimmers, weight gain took on a heroic quality - an undesirable necessity, and a form of swimming suffering.

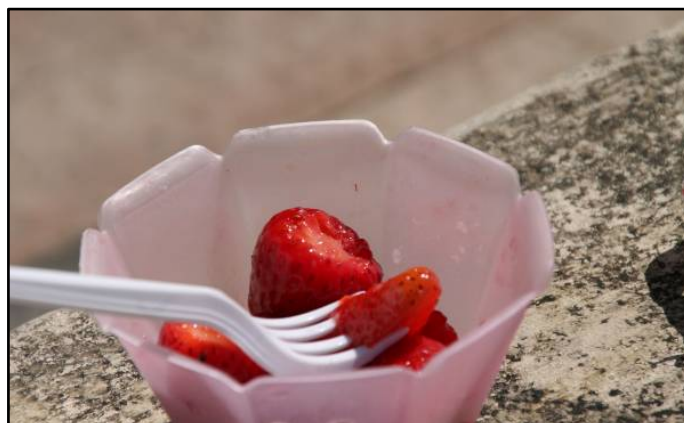
This willingness to suffer weight gain was used to mark those swimmers out as utterly committed to their sport, even beyond the achievements of the most elite athletes:

"Michael Phelps could never swim the Channel" (male US swimmer)

Fat gained on purpose for swimming is given a higher moral status than pre-existing fat.

I frequently heard swimmers make negative comments about non-swimming fat people as "lazy" or having "let themselves go", while celebrating their own newly acquired fat.

This difference between *being* fat and *getting* fat also applied within the swimming community. Watching a group of young male swimmers



jokily slapping and wobbling each others' newly acquired fat on the beach, a male UK swimmer who described himself as having "always been fat" commented:

"It makes you wonder what they must think about me".

The experience of fatness in Channel swimming, then, depends on how / when that fat is acquired, and not all fat is treated as morally equal.



Channel training also provides an opportunity for those with long histories of struggling with their weight to re-evaluate their bodies. Several of these swimmers chose not to continue trying to lose weight after their swims, and abandoned unhealthy and obsessive habits like daily weigh-ins. They also took great pleasure in fending off warnings from doctors with

reminders about their extraordinary capacity for swimming, and their excellent performance on standard measures of health such as blood pressure and resting heart rate.

"My body is amazing. Just look what it can do."

(female UK swimmer)

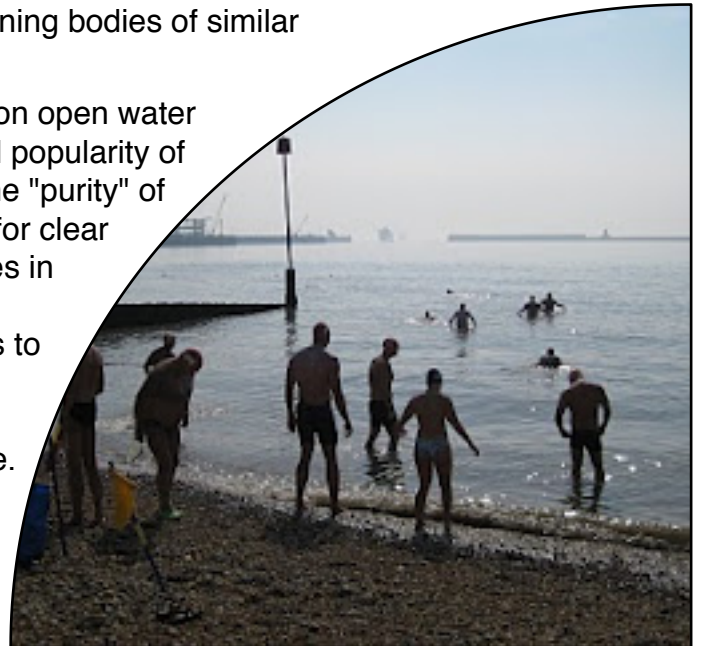
# "Real" swimming....

One of the perennial and fiercely-fought discussions within Channel swimming (and other similar marathon swims) is what constitutes an authentic swim, and how the rules of the sport can be protected as both marathon swimming, and open water swimming more generally, become more popular. In particular, the use of wetsuits in marathon swimming has become a touchstone for these discussions.

The rules of English Channel swimming are fairly straightforward: from shore to shore, in a regular swimming costume, single latex / silicone cap and goggles, and without touching the boat or anyone on it. These rules are a nostalgic (but not literal) nod to the conditions of the first crossing by Matthew Webb in 1875. They have also been adopted, with some small adjustments (e.g. brief shark or lightning breaks) by the governing bodies of similar marathon swims globally.

However, the rise of triathlon and mass participation open water swimming has led to the increased availability and popularity of wetsuits. For some, this threatens to undermine the "purity" of Channel swimming and there is growing demand for clear demarcations of wetsuit and non-wetsuit categories in swim records. Others advocate terms such as "adventure swimming" for wetsuit marathon swims to preserve non-wetsuit swimming as the 'real' marathon swimming. Others argue that these divisions exclude and deter, rather than categorise.

These boundary debates over what counts as 'real' swimming highlight the fact that swimming is not only about swimming, but also about who we are, and who we want others to think we are.



## The comfort of small things

I asked everyone I interviewed what they like to eat as a treat after a long swim. The results were hugely varied, and demonstrate the comfort of small things in the face of a big task (and its after effects):

- > jelly babies
- > tinned peach slices
- > rice pudding
- > cherry bakewell tart
- > boiled egg rolled in pepper and salt
- > tortilla chips
- > McDonalds
- > full English fry-up
- > cup of tea
- > ice-cream
- > flat Coke
- > bacon sandwich

# In search of pleasure

For most people not involved with Channel swimming, it is easily imagined in terms of suffering: cold, tiredness, nausea, pollution, boredom, pain. This impression is reinforced by the fact that most Channel swimming stories are tales of suffering and overcoming (or being overcome) - perhaps because those are the bits that are most easily remembered, or because they make the most entertaining stories. But both my own experiences, as well as those of the swimmers I have met, show swimming pleasure comes not simply from completing a swim, but also from the swimming itself.



## Let it flow....

Many swimmers reported experiencing 'flow' states while swimming - a euphoric state without any sense of time, and the sensation of completely uninhibited movement. For the swimmers, it is "stretching, reaching, gliding bliss"; "a comforting euphoria"; "like flying"; "like I could swim forever".

"And so when you swim in a pool, it's like a puddle. Like a dead puddle. And it's good - you can get fitness out of it. But when you go out here, you're stepping into something that's very much alive... " (female US swimmer)

Being out of the urban environment and into the open water is another important aspect of the pleasures of swimming. These pleasures lie in the unpredictable, mobile nature of the open water; a sense of space and freedom; and encounters with wildlife. In La Jolla in San Diego, for example, I was treated to sightings of (harmless) leopard sharks, bat rays, and seals, and underwater, I could hear the squeaks and clicks of dolphins. Even in the less exotically populated waters of the UK, fish, birds, the occasional seal, and beautiful (but sometimes unwelcome) jellyfish make an appearance. The open water is a long way from the "dead puddle" of the swimming pool.

## New communities

Many of the swimmers whom I met told me that the community itself was one of the greatest pleasures of swimming. This includes a 'virtual' global community of swimmers, many of whom will never meet in person, but who communicate and share swimming experiences through blogs and social media.



# Who are you swimming for?

One of the most common questions that people ask when you say you are going to swim the Channel is "who are you doing it for?" - a question that presumes that you are swimming in aid of a charity. This association between endurance sport and charity fund-raising is well established in contemporary society, as we can see in mass participation events like the Great North Run or the London Marathon. However, while many swimmers were eager to swim for a charity, others expressed scepticism and reluctance, resenting the pressure to do so.

"I didn't want to do it for myself. I wanted to achieve something more for someone else" (male UK swimmer)

Many swimmers recognised the intensive investment of time and money that goes into a Channel swim. "Doing it for myself", then, always risks appearing self-absorbed.

Swimming for charity provides a counterbalance to this self-involvement by giving to others.

Some swimmers swam with personally relevant charities in mind - for example, following the death of a loved one, or after experiencing an illness or personal crisis. For others, the act of giving was more significant than the specific



charity, and they either shopped around or were solicited directly by charities who had heard about the Channel swim.

In addition to the altruistic desire to support a charity, then, we can also see that charitable swimming makes a statement about the *kind* of person that you are (and aren't).

Swimmers also used the fund-raising aspect of Channel swimming to inspire them to keep going - for example, by not wanting to 'let down' sponsors, charities and the clients of those charities. But this also created additional pressures for some swimmers, raising anxiety around the swim, as well as adding fund-raising work to the already demanding process of training.

In spite of these reservations, many still felt compelled to swim for charity. These swimmers often compromised by setting up a fund-raising account but not actively soliciting donations.

"....people will think it's a bit weird if you don't do it for charity" (male UK swimmer)

But some people remained sceptical about purely altruistic claims:

"There's this person at my swimming club who sends e-mails about three times a year saying 'I'm doing this now. The reason I'm doing it for this cause'. And my response is: 'Bollocks'. The reason you're doing it is because you want to swim the Channel." (male UK swimmer)



# Becoming a Channel swimmer...

In many ways, a Channel swim is a zero sum game - you either make it or you don't. But the swimmers I met don't necessarily evaluate their own swims in black and white, using far more fluid categories of success and failure.

For some successful swimmers, the completion of the crossing was a defining moment of their lives. As one male UK swimmer told me:

"I think about my Channel swim every single day".

These swimmers didn't necessarily continue within the Channel swimming sport, but treasured having completed the swim.

Others, however, found completing the swim to be anti-climactic after all the hard work of training. Some felt disappointed after finishing in a slower time than expected, while good swim conditions left some feeling like they hadn't been fully "tested".

As you might expect, unsuccessful swims were the cause of considerable frustration, especially where external factors brought an end to a swim. Many who experienced unsuccessful swims talked about their "unfinished business" with the Channel.

But many unsuccessful swims were also remembered as successes. People proudly recalled having pushed themselves beyond what they had ever imagined possible. Others talked about their year of training as an exciting adventure.

"Even though I didn't make it, I'll never regret it. It was a wonderful experience!"

(female UK swimmer)

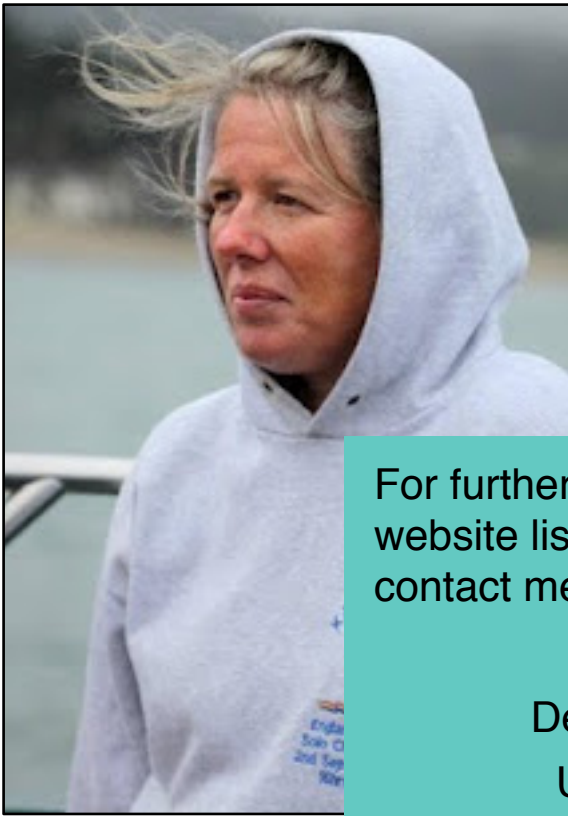


Swimmers memorialise successful swims in many ways including: tattoos; framing and displaying swim charts; videos; blogs; the collection of pebbles from the landing beach; clothing embroidered with dates and crossing times; jewellery; and personalised car number plates.



## Top tips from the swimmers

- always listen to Freda
- get your feeding right
- don't look up
- spend time on technique
- don't skimp on vaseline or suncream
- don't eat tomatoes after a long swim - it stings
- never ask how much further - you'll never like the answer
- and finally....  
ENJOY IT!!



For further information, please visit the website listed at the foot of the page, or contact me at:

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