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THE SUNDAY TIMES

All greased up and ready to go

These days it's not just the ferries to avoid when navigating the English Channel, it's long-distance swimmers

Amy Turner Published: 16 October 2011



The
English

Swimmers prepare on the beach at Dover (Gareth Phillips)

Channel, at its narrowest point, is 21 miles of choppy water brimming with ferries, fishing boats, hulking container ships, weekend sailors — and an increasing number of people coated from top to bottom in swathes of Vaseline.

Last year, 94 determined people completed solo swims of the Channel, up from 28 in 2001. This year, 54 people have managed the challenge, seen as the Everest of long-distance swimming. Even more would have added their names to the list, had they not been knocked back by the vicissitudes of the weather and treacherous tides that can see months of painstaking preparation end in disappointment.

Ever since the first successful unaided crossing, in 1875 by the legendary Captain Matthew Webb, a

27-year-old merchant navy officer from Dawley in Shropshire, the stretch of water between Dover and Cap Gris Nez has been seen as the ultimate aquatic challenge. By the end of 2010, 1,614 crossings had been made by 1,185 individuals.

Many of those who make the journey start by building up their stamina off the beach at Dover at weekends. Freda Streeter, 72, is a formidable retired swimming teacher who runs specialist training sessions.

She has never made the crossing — “Why on earth would I? They’re all bloody mad!” she says. Her daughter Alison, however, has made the journey 43 times, earning her the title Queen of the Channel.

Alison has now given up competitive swimming, her shoulders ruined.

“She could have opted for an operation and carried on, but in the end felt she had nothing left to prove,” says Freda.

Alison is the only woman to have swum the route three times in one go: Dover to Cap Gris Nez, Cap Gris Nez to Dover, and back.

Every weekend the harbour sessions attract as many as 100 people each day, from all around the country. “The dedicated ones, those who mean business, are here week in, week out.”

The comedian David Walliams was a regular at Freda’s sessions before he successfully swam the Channel for Sports Relief in 2006, often pausing to sign autographs after a gruelling seven hours in the water. The Channel — murky, cold and unforgiving — is a great leveller. A serious attempt leaves little space for anything else, so the swimmers tend not to have a hinterland: in the months before a crossing, they can think of nothing but the sea.

Freda, who oversees a team of four swimming coaches, is known for her strict and unsentimental approach. One tearful female swimmer, exhausted and demoralised after an off-putting setback, was told: “None of that, you’re too old to cry.” She was soon back in the water. Freda knows how dedicated the swimmers have to be: “They invest so much in this — time, money, their family relationships suffer.”

For many of the strange but growing band of enthusiasts who try to swim the Channel, Shakespeare Beach, a small strip of shingle near Dover, is the main departure point. It is dark and uninviting and there is no horizon; the water is swathed in fog and on this late summer’s night, around midnight, it is almost pitch dark. Slowly, two swimmers emerge from the black water like sea monsters. They stand plucking at their swimsuits, windmilling their arms, limbering up; muscled arms and legs slick with grease.

Through the fog, three pilot boats shine beams of white light. We watch as a petite Japanese woman scrambles out onto the shingle and raises a hand in the spotlight, grinning and leaping with excitement. The crew has fastened flashing neon lights to her swimming cap and costume so they can keep track of her as she swims alongside the boat. “Let’s go!” she screams, punching the air. She blows us a farewell kiss. A klaxon sounds, signalling the start of the attempt. She splashes off into the water, vanishing into the mist.

Farther along, an English boy in Speedos, aged 18 or so, shoos us away as the photographer tries to take his picture: “No press.” He turns and strikes out firmly, a confident front crawl. “He’ll freeze!” his mother wails, watching the glow of his head light fade into the dark.



We wait
for the
third

Freda Streeter, accompanied by her dog, keeps a record (Gareth Phillips)

swimmer to set off. But then, through the fog, we see the three pilot boats turn and head back along the coast. Mission aborted. It's too foggy tonight. Lose a swimmer in these conditions and you would never find them again.

Given the risks inherent in a Channel crossing, it's perhaps surprising that so many long-distance swimmers are queuing up to take the plunge. It is dangerous, hard-going and requires levels of determination and fitness far greater than might be involved in, say, completing a marathon.

Hypothermia and exhaustion are the greatest risks, but mercifully deaths are rare; the most recent fatality occurred in 2001 when Ueli Staub, a 37-year-old Swedish fitness instructor, died after being swept away by a wave in the dark, just a mile from completion.

Dr Julie Bradshaw is secretary of the Channel Swimming Association (CSA) and has twice swum the Channel. She completed her first solo in 1979, aged 15, and her second in 2002, swimming butterfly. She says the waiting list for crossings is currently a year long. "It's becoming more popular each season." She has a strangely crazed enthusiasm for the sport: her nickname among friends and swimmers is the Madfish.

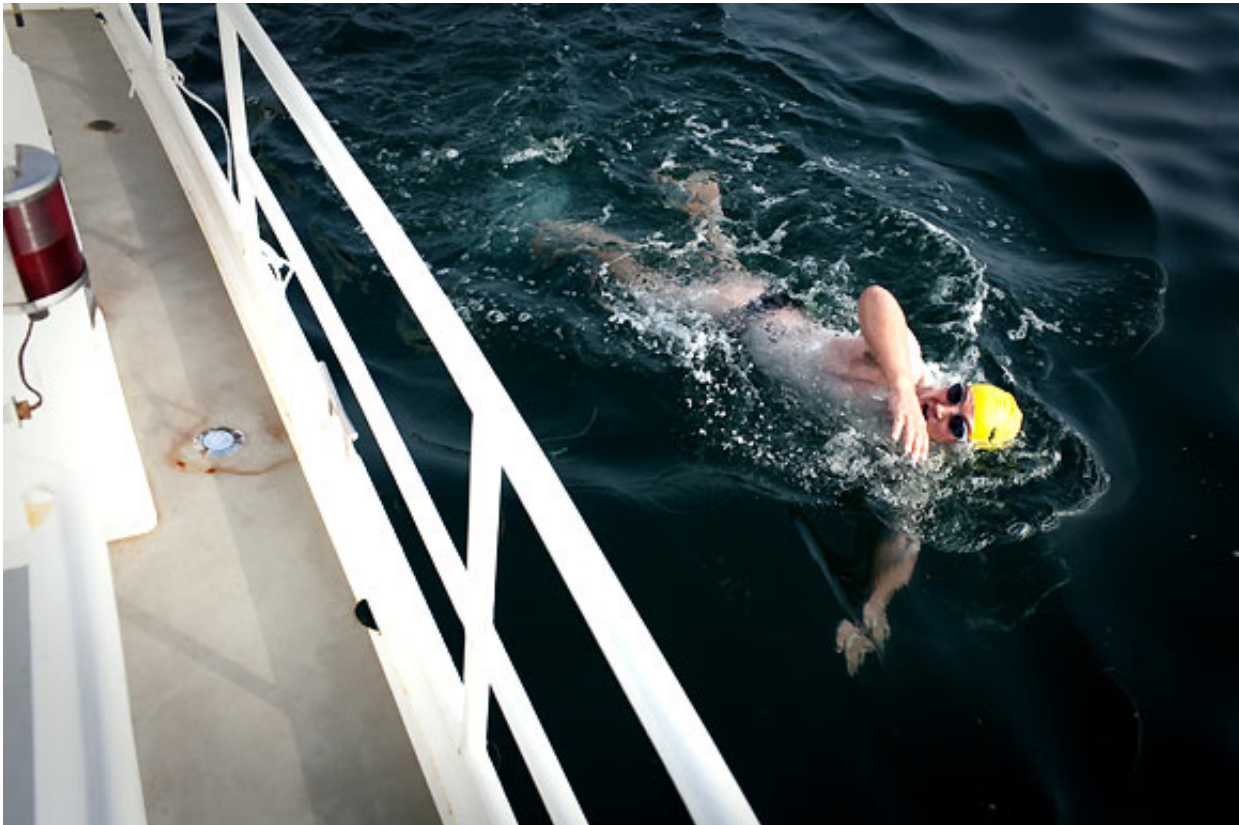
Angela Lurssen, a 36-year-old business development director from London, gave up her social life, her friendships, "all my spare time for a year", to train to swim the Channel, which she finally did, in a time of exactly 17 hours, on September 23.

What motivated her? "I hit 30 and thought, 'Oh, shit. We're here now are we?' I wanted to challenge myself, to push myself." Born in South Africa, Angela has lived in London for the past 13 years. Her father, a keen swimmer, died when she was young. "Being in the water makes me feel closer to him," she says. "Swimming the Channel is like being in a club; it has an elite status. I can be very determined when I set my mind to something. You have to be pretty bloody-minded to get across it."

The unremitting harshness of the Channel means that swimmers must go to extremes, including

cold-weather training, in their regimen. In winter they endure cold showers, go coatless throughout the season, and even keep windows open during snowstorms. It is wise to gain weight to help with insulation, improve buoyancy and provide extra fuel. After the eighth hour of swimming, despite the regular feeds, the body begins to burn fat reserves.

“The constant eating started to get me down, actually, you just feel really big and gross,” Angela says. “You have to love swimming in the sea, and you have to really, really want to get to France. The battle is 70% mental.” And it’s not cheap: boat hire alone can cost up to £2,300. To make it official, each crossing is overseen and regulated by either the CSA or the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation, who have been rivals since the 1990s, when the Federation was formed after a dispute. “It doesn’t matter who you go with to have your swim recognised as a successful one,” says Nick Adams, president of the Federation, impartially.



Thanks
to

Stefan Ivanov swims close to the boat as he makes his way across the Channel (Gareth Phillips)

dedicated training, most crossings — around 70% — are successful. Mike Oram, 62, a regular pilot on board the Channel-crossing boats, says better piloting standards have improved the swimmers’ chances. “What drives them most is ego,” he says, “which is a dangerous thing. What they don’t realise is that half the swim is about the crew on board the boat; it takes experience to navigate the Channel. They need a firm hand to guide them, and sometimes a kick up the arse.”

We meet the boats back at the pontoon on Dover harbour at 3am. The fog is lifting and, though it’s still dark, they’re preparing to set off again. The third swimmer of the night, a 39-year-old Bulgarian banker, Stefan Ivanov from Sofia, is stretching, and buzzing with excitement. His wife, Zhenie, smears his body with a mixture of nappy-rash cream and Vaseline, which is designed to prevent his skin from chafing in the salt water. “A special Bulgarian recipe,” he whoops. “I am totally psyched and ready! This is the greatest swim in the world!”

Stefan has been in training for 16 months. We board Gallivant, Mike Oram’s 36ft blue-and-white boat, and head down the coast for Samphire Hoe. The crew clap and cheer as Stefan climbs down to the black water and strikes out. He reaches the beach, raises both arms in the beam of the boat’s spotlight, and the klaxon sounds. “Let’s do this!” he cries, running into the water, and sets off. It is now 4.08am. He swims front crawl steadily in the dark, on the port side of the boat, at a healthy 67 strokes per minute. By 6am it is light. “He is a man who likes to challenge himself,” Zhenie says.

“He has totally dedicated his life to this for the past year and a half, getting up at 5am to train for hours, never taking a drop of alcohol, whatever the occasion.

The Channel has ruled our lives. I’m looking forward to him finishing so we can get back to normal.” Mike Oram has all the glass-half-empty cynicism of an old seadog: “It’s obvious he hasn’t done much open-water training,” he says. “Look at the way the tide is making him roll from side to side. He’s kicking from the hip, which will tire him out and give him backache.”

Mike is not shy about offering encouragement. “Swim, you bastard!” he shouts, when Stefan begins to slow. “This one wanted to swim there and back,” he says, rolling his eyes. “I said do a solo first and if you manage, come back for the two-way. He’ll be bloody lucky if he makes it once.”

Soon, Stefan begins vomiting his feeds. Zhenie swaps the energy drinks for warm water for the next few feeds, on the advice of Mike Ball, 53, the crew “observer”, who swam the Channel two years ago.

Ball, a towering, broad-shouldered, shaven-headed man, is in charge of making sure the swim rules are observed, and keeping notes.

“We keep a log because, at the end of the day, if a swimmer died, we’d have to stand in a court of law and present evidence that we did all we could to keep him safe: that he was feeding, responding to us, looking strong.”

We enter the shipping lane at about 7am. A huge P&O ferry looms out of the fog, a couple of hundred yards away. The wake tosses us and Stefan uncomfortably. The crew take it in turns to nap in the hold.



Just
before
10am
we
reach
the

Broken: 14 hours in cold water take their toll on Stefan (Gareth Phillips)

separation zone, the no-shipping area between English and French waters. “How far to go?” asks Stefan. “You’ve got miles yet. Just get your head down and swim,” shouts Oram.

By 1pm, Stefan is complaining of back pain, and has visibly slowed momentum. He is between the eighth and ninth hours of swimming, by far the most exhausting. He gets a ticking off from the skipper: “You should have bloody trained in open water, shouldn’t you? Get one arm in front of the

bloody other and swim. No point moaning now.” The French coast appears through the fog at around 3pm. We try to catch the vital eddy that will carry us into shore, but Stefan has slowed further, he is increasingly cold and tired. He is listening to nobody, Zhenie is calling him, Mike Ball is waving, everyone is shouting for him to come back to the boat. Stefan keeps stopping, floating on his back, retching. It looks as though his face is dirty, but in fact his features are turning purple.

Ten minutes to six and we are still drifting in, painfully slowly, with Stefan battling the current, increasingly exhausted and disoriented. “I’m worried he will never recover mentally,” Zhenie frets. At last, the crew ask Gareth, the Sunday Times photographer, to join Stefan in the water. Gareth is a strong swimmer who plans to swim the Channel. According to the rules, a swimmer may have one “support swimmer” in the water with them for up to an hour at a time. Gareth climbs over the side, shouting encouragement. They swim together, Stefan clearly fortified. “Thank God, thank God,” says Zhenie. As Gareth returns to the boat, Stefan’s feet find land. He stands briefly, half-stumbling, half-swimming to shore. He clears the water after 14 hours and two minutes, and raises both arms, swaying as the klaxon sounds.

Back on board, Stefan’s face is a fright. He is blue-green, haggard, and looks twice his age. Too shocked and cold yet to feel elated, he is shaking violently and hyperventilating as Zhenie dries and dresses him, feeding him water as if he were a child. He is brought down to the hold, where he is wrapped in blankets. He stares wildly at his wife, almost unable to recognise her. Shivering and dribbling, he falls asleep as we start back to Dover, Zhenie grips his hand.

“Wanted to do a two-way, did you?” asks Oram wickedly, looking at the ravaged body of a broken man. But he knows he will be back for more. They always are.

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