North Channel Swim - Graeme Lowe

Wednesday 22 July 2015

I started the 21-mile North Channel swim from Ireland to Scotland at dawn on 22 July 2015.The water was 12C (54F) but a combination of nerves and excitement meant it didn't seem too cold. The sea temperature is one of the big challenges of this swim that makes it renowned as one of the toughest in the world with only 26 people completing it.

It helped that I had acclimatized when I came to Donaghadee two weeks earlier to try the swim then. I had been accompanied by my support crew of Sally Minty-Gravett and Wendy Trehiou. We waited for 6 days and every day the wind was too strong to even think about starting so we enjoyed the hospitality at the Pier 36 hotel and explored Northern Ireland. On our last day the weather settled down enough for a relay team to try but unfortunately the strong tides meant they had to give up after swimming into the late hours.

Whilst they swam I had a tough decision to make as the weather for the next day was marginal but might be OK for me to try. After much deliberation I decided not to chance it. I felt that the swim would be tough enough for me and I needed better conditions than forecast. We flew home having spent lots of time and money seemingly for nothing. I find these decisions the hardest part of Long Distance swimming as there are so many factors. Was I worrying too much about the logistics of rearranging flights? What if the next person on the tide went ahead and had a great day that could have been mine? What if I didn't get another chance that season and all my training was wasted? All these worries stayed with me on the way home until that night we heard that the pilot had cancelled the next day's swim due to deteriorating weather and the relay taking too long. It was such a relief as we could have been sat there having wasted another day.

Looking back the first visit had been really useful and I would recommend anyone thinking of this swim to do a reconnaissance trip. We had met the pilot, Quinton Nelson, who was very welcoming and shared his vast experience. This helped build a relationship and gave us a chance to check out his boat, which is a beautiful lifeboat he had restored.

When I made the booking Quinton had told me the sea would likely be 14C for my swim. For 5 years I have trained through the winter going as low as 7C (45F) and building up my cold water tolerance. I had also completed the mandatory 6 hour qualifying swim in 12C (54F). This all meant that 14C (57F) was well within my comfort zone. From Pier 36 you can walk across the road and swim across the harbor at high tide. Sally, Wendy and I went in each morning we were there for a training swim and the temperature on my trusty Casio watch was 11.7C. There is a huge mental difference between 14C and 12C but after three days we were enjoying being in for 2 hours and I had regained my winter swim acclimatization and confidence.

Back in Jersey I watched the weather on WindGuru and waited for the next tide. On Saturday 18 July I emailed Quinton and suggested that the weather looked favourable for the next Wednesday. He replied cautiously like all pilots, but gave me the option to try if I wanted. This was great as not only were the weather and tides OK but the travel arrangements from my home in Jersey also worked out. With everything aligned so perfectly I felt like this was my one chance and I had to grab it with both hands.

One problem was that I was booked to go to Zurich the weekend after for a three person 26 km relay with my daughter and a friend. I was confident I could do both but there was a possibility I would not be too tired to swim the relay. I rang my team mates and they were both incredibly supportive and told me to do the North Channel even if it messed up the relay. Fortunately, we did manage to complete the relay in Zurich but only just, as my wrist gave out at the end of my third turn and I had to rely on my strong team mates.

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Another problem with going back to Northern Ireland was that neither Wendy nor Sally could make it. They had given up so much time on our first visit and had other commitments that week. I consulted with Sally and she suggested I asked Bianca Kempster. Bianca and I had crewed together on a friend's English Channel swim and I had seen at first-hand how great she is as support crew. I rang her and straight away she said yes which saved the swim. It was only when we got going that I realized I had asked her to do this on her own and it amazes me how capable and confident she is. WE also had great support from the ILDSA observer and Quinton's young crew. This is a sport where people focus on the individual but we all know how much of a team effort it really is.

We flew over on Tuesday and had to stay in the Pinecroft B&B as Pier 36 was full. This worked out very well as is a lovely place run by a delightful couple who treated us like visiting relatives.

As I swam my toes felt frozen and gradually the cold crept up my foot and I worried that this would progress all the way. Thankfully it stopped half way up my foot and although I didn't feel my toes against until well after the swim I didn't get cold.

I had swum as a teenager and started again in my forties to get fit. This led me to a number of big swims, including the English Channel, Catalina Channel, Lake Zurich solo, Round Manhattan and local swims in Jersey. I had taken a rest the previous year as I fancied a break but the year of my North Channel I turned 50 and wanted a challenge to mark the event. My usual approach to choosing a swim is to mentally flick through the options until one makes me nervous. The North Channel definitely did that.

One of the big worries with the North Channel are jellyfish. I had never been stung by one so this was an unknown to me. One reason for going early in the season was that there should be less jellies but it would be colder. Pretty soon after I started I saw my first one and I gave up counting at 100. Most were below the surface but every now and again I would get caught by one nearer the surface. The ones that stung were Lions Manes. They had long hair-like tentacles that dragged down your front, stinging arms, chest, stomach and even lips. In the cold water the stings weren't too painful but in bed that night they itched badly as I thawed out. The advice is to use shaving foam to soothe them so unable to sleep due to the stings I got up at 2am and smothered my arms in shaving foam. It worked but I then stood there unable to go back to bed or sit as I didn't want to make a mess. Laughing at my stupidity, I rinsed off and the stings came back.

I had swum through plenty of jellyfish but then I got to a big swarm of them. This was a different level. They went as far as you could see to left and right and there was no end in sight. There were only two options – stop or go on through them. Luckily most of them were 6 feet below the surface so I swam over the top like a film where you sneak through the aliens not waking them. Every now and again one would be on the surface but these were mainly the moon jellyfish, big white saucers that hardly stung. However, there were a few of the Lions Mane ones in there as well to make the swim interesting. Its hard to be sure how big this swarm was but something like a football pitch and I went through two of these in the whole swim. I know this sounds crazy but looking back this was the highlight of the swim. What a privilege to be so at one with nature, sharing the sea with so many wonderful creatures.

Another wonderful sea creature that I was lucky enough to swim with was a 10 foot pilot whale. According to my crew it swam with me and around the boat for an hour. Unfortunately I didn't see it, which sounds ridiculous. I have had this before, missing dozens of dolphins on my Catalina swim, but the problem is that you have to focus on the swim. It's not a sightseeing trip so you miss things. But I would like to have seen a whale.

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At around the half way mark I was told all was going well. But then at the 10-hour mark Quinton told me to go faster. At 11 hours I was told to sprint or the tide would push me past the lighthouse and further from shore and I wouldn't make it. I swam as hard as I could, focusing on technique in the increasingly rough water. I forced myself to breathe to the side and not look forward, knowing the lighthouse was in front of me and to the left. I figure that if f I saw come into view to my right as I breathed then I would have failed.

The whole crew cheered me on which was wonderful and a great help. After half an hour or so they stopped and I figured that either it was OK or they had given up but didn't want to tell me. I wasn't sure which so I kept on swimming hard. For me this was the key to the North Channel. You have to be able to handle the cold and jellyfish but importantly you also have to stay quick enough to beat the tide.

By this time the wind had got up to a Force 5 as forecast and the sea was rough. The crew pointed in the direction I should swim and I took a bearing on a radio tower high on the cliff above the waves. It looked like I had a half a mile to go which seemed like forever.

Then I saw a flash of purple as I turned my head to breathe. I thought I might be hallucinating due to a combination of fatigue and cold. Then I caught another glimpse of purple across the rough water and thought I heard voices. I genuinely worried that I was losing it but it was Bianca who had jumped in wearing her bright suit and came up behind me to guide me in. Imagine that, leaping in to rough, cold, jellyfish infested water to provide support.

She stopped me and pointed to the left. I was going the wrong way and I had less than 100 yards to go not the half mile I thought. Much relieved I swam in and tried to stand on a rock but was knocked over by the waves. After a couple of attempts I gave up and swam the few extra yards to touch the cliff. I turned toward the lighthouse that had caused so much anxiety and floated in the water enjoying the sense of achievement.

I finished in 12 hours 27 minutes becoming the oldest person to finish the North Channel as well as the first person from Jersey and 27th overall.