

GOING THE DISTANCE

English Channel Crossers
Talk Training and Motivation

by Margaret Schauer

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As the sun powered down behind New York City on Sept. 9, 1998, Jim Bayles was nearing the end of a pioneering 30-mile swim from Greenwich, Conn., to downtown Manhattan. Swimming under the Manhattan Bridge in the East River, admiring the Brooklyn Bridge ahead of him and the darkening skyline of southern Manhattan to his right, the 46-year-old Newtown, Conn., resident spotted the Statue of Liberty on the horizon.

Long distance swimmer **JIM BAYLES** leaving England for France.



Emerald green and glorious, basking in the golden light of late-day sunshine, the vision of the statue was breathtaking, as singularly unique and momentous as the swim Bayles was completing to raise money for charity. It was a view to be savored after spending 13 hours in the water.

“It was spectacular,” Bayles recalls with quiet awe.

Surprising glimpses into unexpected windows, whether from within the swimmer’s psyche or from a view of the world not ordinarily seen on land is not unusual for long distance swimmers like Bayles.

He is one of several Masters swimmers from Connecticut who has accomplished the ultimate physical and mental challenge of distance swimming—the English Channel at 23.69 land miles. In fact, there have been nearly 30 successful Channel crossings by Connecticut swimmers, more than perhaps any other state in the country.

“Open water swimming is special because it’s you...alone, and your brain is going a mile a minute behind the scenes,” Bayles reflects. “We [Connecticut swimmers] are successful for a lot of reasons,” he explains. “We have access to a lot of water,

access to each other; we’re all good friends and we enjoy helping each other. We want to pass that on.”

Many swimmers often wonder how to prepare themselves for any sort of long distance event, much less swimming the English Channel. Long distance coach Bob Bruce, a USMS member from Bend, Ore., advises swimmers who are training for a 10K or more should certainly supplement a Masters practice (typically ranging from 3,000-3,800 yards) with more swimming.

“You need to spend time in the water doing more volume... with lower intensity levels,

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MARCIA CLEVELAND, author of "Dover Solo," an authoritative guide for training and crossing the English Channel.



training aerobically," he advises. "Doing 1 hour and 15 minutes of swimming isn't enough."

The psychological component of training is equally important—many swimmers agree that long distance swimming is at least 80 percent mental. "The real issue in long distance swimming is the ability to control the way you talk to yourself," Bruce says. "We constantly have conversations with ourselves as humans and we have to put away the negative side of the self talk and

maintain the positive."

So, how did Connecticut produce so many successful Channel crossers? The answer lies with a remarkable group of swimmers, dedicated to helping one another, as well as other swimmers, in achieving their long distance goals. The tight-knit support group, started in 1993 by childhood friends Marcia Cleveland and Marcella MacDonald, DPM, currently consists of about 25 swimmers who have either attempted or successfully

crossed the English Channel, some more than once.

Dave Parcels, who at 44 set the world record in 2002 as the oldest man to complete a two-way crossing of the English Channel with a time of 21 hours and 30 minutes, describes the group as "a network of people who can provide guidance and share advice and resources. Our ability to share information and experiences continues to foster the growth of the group."

Cleveland is quick to point



out that everyone in the group is respected for valuable individual training information, and “nobody’s the coach.” Cleveland, who now lives in Chicago, is the author of “Dover Solo,” an authoritative guide for training and crossing the English Channel. Unlike some of her Connecticut friends, she did not grow up fantasizing about swimming the Channel. In the second chapter of “Dover Solo,” Cleveland admits, “The mysterious unknowns of open water

CONNECTICUT CONNECTIONS

JIM BAYLES, 53, Connecticut Masters

- Completed his Channel swim at the age of 50; plans another attempt at age 55 or 60
- Has swum under all the major bridges in the New York City area and is setting his sights on other, unusual swims in the East
- Raises funds for Epilepsy Foundation of Connecticut and Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International, www.swimmingforhope.com

- ### **DENNIS DRESSEL, 53, Connecticut Masters**
- Completed English Channel swim on his fourth attempt
 - Completed a successful circumnavigation swim of the Isle of Jersey

- ### **HENRY ECKSTEIN, 56, Metropolitan Masters**
- Swam Channel solo in 1999 at the age of 50
 - A former varsity swimmer for City College

- ### **MARCELLA MACDONALD, 41, Connecticut Masters**
- The “American Queen of the Channel” with eight successful crossings
 - First American woman to complete a double
 - Attempted triple crossing in 2004, but suffered an arm injury in the third length

- ### **MIKE MAIER, 42, formerly with Connecticut Masters**
- Marathon runner and swimmer
 - Completed a solo crossing in 2002 with a time of 12 hours, 54 minutes and attempted a double crossing in 2004 (14 hours, 35 minutes), www.geocities.com/mmaier262



End of Season Swim: (left to right) Marcella MacDonald, Craig Kandell, Morris Finkelstein, Henry Eckstein, Dennis Dressel, Liz Fry, Jim Bayles and Marcia Cleveland.

- ### **GEORGE BRUNSTAD, 70, Connecticut Masters**
- At 70, became the oldest male to cross the English Channel, raising funds for charity, www.channelhopeforhaiti.org
 - At 50, won his first Masters national championship, and since then has won more than 100 nationals and a number of world championships in the open water
 - A grandfather of 10, and affectionately known as “Grandpa George” to all the youngsters he teaches swimming to at the Wilton YMCA near his home

- ### **MARCIA CLEVELAND, 40, Illinois Masters**
- Known for one of the fastest women’s solo crossings at 9 hours, 44 minutes
 - Grew up and trained in Connecticut
 - Competes in numerous relays
 - Author of “Dover Solo,” a complete guide to training for and swimming the English Channel, www.doversolo.com

- ### **MORRIS FINKELSTEIN, 54, Connecticut Masters**
- Started training in open water seven years ago after a “30-year break”
 - Completed Channel swim on July 21, 2003, with a time of 15 hours and 21 minutes

- ### **LIZ FRY, 46, Connecticut Masters**
- Completed the Channel crossing in 9 hours, 5 minutes, one of the fastest times for an American woman, and completing a dream of swimming the Channel 35 years in the making

- ### **KATHLEEN HYNES, 39, Metropolitan Masters**
- Completed a solo crossing in 1998 with a time of 11 hours, 59 minutes.
 - Married to solo EC swimmer Robert Makatura (see next column); they are one of the few couples in the world to have both swum the Channel.

- ### **ROBERT MAKATURA, 42, Metropolitan Masters**
- Swam the Channel in 1996, with a time of 12 hours, 11 minutes.

- ### **MERYEM TANGOREN-MASOOD, 33, Metropolitan Masters**
- A long distance swimmer in college
 - Second woman of Turkish descent to complete the English Channel (2001)

- ### **ORIN MCCLUSKEY, 53, Metropolitan Masters**
- Made his attempt in early August 2003, but had to abandon after more than 15 hours of swimming
 - Planning second attempt in 2005

- ### **DAVE PARCELLS, 46, Connecticut Masters**
- At 44, became oldest man and fourth American to complete a two-way Channel crossing in 2002.
 - Swam a solo in 2000; attempted triple crossing in 2004 but was thwarted by bad weather
 - Raises funds for cancer patients, www.swimacrossthe sound.org
 - >>> Compiled by Marcia Cleveland

swimming scared me.” However, the 40-year-old, self-employed, married mother of two young children tackled her fear head-on by opening herself to the experience and embracing it.

It was during the 1991 Manhattan Island Marathon Swim (a distance of 28.5 miles) that Cleveland decided she would swim the English Channel as a gift to herself for her 30th birthday. After working up to a

training regimen of 45,000 yards per week in nine sessions, Cleveland completed her solo crossing on July 29, 1994, with a time of 9 hours, 43 minutes, 31 seconds.

To keep mentally tough, Cleveland asserts, “One needs to keep looking at the bright side and think of things that make them happy.” She says after that first and subsequent Channel experiences, she also

“developed a deep appreciation for others’ achievements and their desires and wills to fulfil them.... I feel it is extremely important to give back to the swimming community, and I let our group know how important this is for all of us to do,” she says.

MacDonald, a 40-year-old podiatrist in Andover, Conn., is widely known as the “American Queen of the English Channel”

IMPROVE YOUR DISTANCE TRAINING (Even if the Channel’s Not Your Cup of Tea)

If you’ve been thinking about increasing your distance workouts and perhaps entering an open water event or a marathon swim in 2005, Connecticut’s English Channel crossers and other experts offer encouragement and their tips for training.

GROUP TRAINING MOTIVATES

“During the winter we [tried] to get together once per month, usually at the Yale University pool, for a long workout. The swims were as long as 24,000 meters, which took over six hours! It’s not just a workout where you jump in the pool and swim for six hours straight. It is a structured workout with many 100, 200, 300, 400, 500 and 1,000 (meters) repeats. The swimmers of similar abilities worked out in smaller groups at their own pace. The workouts are like typical Masters workout, only much longer.”

From May to November the group moved outdoors to a state park beach in Long Island Sound. “We are able to swim parallel to the beach only about 100 yards offshore so we swim down and back. It’s great to have company out there in the ocean. We break in to little groups of similar ability. It is always much easier to do the long swims when there are other swimmers with you.” —*Dennis Dressel*

WORK UP TO IT

“Set smaller goals leading up to bigger ones. Build up your confidence...you need to keep setting stepping stones, keep raising the bar on yourself.” —*Mike Maier*

“I entered every open water race in the local area so I could get as many different open water experiences possible. Swimming in rough conditions was good training.... Typically, I swam six days per week, three days per week of weights, three days per week of yoga. I averaged 35,000 yards per week and in my last year [before swimming the Channel], up to 50,000 yards per week. Physically, I trained with a team and did a lot of speed work with my local Masters team in the winter. In the summer, I was outdoors

doing long swims in the Long Island Sound on Saturdays and Sundays. My training swims on my own were long distance pace ladders like 8 x 100, 800, 4 x 200, 800, 2 x 400, 800, 4 x 200, 800, 8 x 100. The goal was to keep the same pace per hundred on the long swims. —*Meryem Tangoren-Masood*

GET OUT IN THE OPEN WATER

“You should swim at least three-fourths of the distance you’re training for in the pool, to see if you can survive it. Be realistic, train in open water if you can and have someone watching you, swimming with you. Work up to three-fourths of the distance, use broken-up sets, and if you can find a training partner or have someone aware of your goals, have them swim with you for a little of the way.”

—*Marcia Cleveland*

EXPERIMENT WITH NUTRITION

Long distance swimmers should increase the amount of carbohydrates in the diet. “They need more complex carbs and more calories. They also need to figure out how to feed during long swims.” —*Bob Bruce, Oregon long distance Masters coach*

Try lots of combinations to see what works for you. “I experimented around with a lot of nutrition (which is good). It boiled down to sports gel, a protein drink and a carbo drink. “I didn’t really have a nutrition coach—that would have been helpful! My caloric intake when I was at my most intense training was about 3,000 calories a day.” —*Marcia Cleveland*

TRY TOTAL BODY CONFUSION

“I have advocated TBC training for my swimmers over the last 10 years as it seems to solve most of the problems I noticed with swimmers who were following the traditional patterns. TBC stands for Total Body Confusion and the idea is not to let your body or mind slip into a set pattern. Vary your training between sprints, long swims (for different time periods), repetitive weightlifting/muscle workout and whatever else you think of that will help. Do not do the same exercises every training session because then

the body will not get used to a pattern and rebel when you do your swim. Nearly every swimmer goes through a bad mental period on their swim, usually during the sixth or seventh hour, sometimes earlier...TBC helps to overcome it by not letting the body know when the training has finished and the real swim has begun.” —*Michael Oram, CS&PF (www.channelswimming.com)*

MIX IT UP

“Long distance swimmers should cross-train using other strokes besides freestyle.” He also recommends dry land training that includes strength training, especially for older folks, working on core strength, flexibility and watching the diet. —*Bob Bruce, Oregon long distance Masters coach*

“I was doing a lot of cross-training. I was only swimming 20 miles per week, which isn’t a lot on standard, from what I’ve heard from other swimmers who went anywhere from 30 to 40 miles each week of just swimming, but nothing else. That makes you really susceptible to an injury, so I think my cross-training was to my advantage. Plus you don’t get so bored with just swimming. I set up a lot of smaller swims, ocean swims—two milers. I kept building myself up, distance-wise.” (His swim workouts consisted of three to four miles daily, six days a week, with three nights of two-hour weight sessions, plus running three to four times per week.) —*Mike Maier*

VISUALIZE SUCCESS AND PREPARE MENTALLY

“Visualization and believing in myself was my mental training. I kept a log so I could see my progress on the distance and pace I was holding. My best tip is to see yourself succeed. Visualize all the phases of the event, all the feelings, the environment and the sensations/emotions that may arise. In the case of the Channel, I visualized myself feeling sick, feeling weak, feeling like giving up, but then finding the inner strength, with the help of a fabulous crew, and making it.” —*Meryem Tangoren-Masood*

with eight crossings, including a two-way swim and an attempted three-way swim in 2004. She grew up in Manchester, Conn., and swam throughout her childhood and high school but went to college on a softball scholarship. “Things always led me back to swimming, though,” she says. “I always liked the way I felt when I was training hard.” After college, MacDonald and Cleveland reunited and began training together for their goal of swimming the English Channel in 1994, which MacDonald completed with a time of 10 hours and 33 minutes.

Now that she is a veteran Channel crosser, MacDonald has gained insights into the challenge. “If I were to do another single [crossing], I would swim 25,000 to 30,000 yards per week [to train]. For a double, I would swim 10,000 yards per practice, five days a week.” Her mindset is “to train for the Channel as though I’m training to stay alive.”

MacDonald also has much respect for the Channel and its demands on the human spirit. “If people would climb Mount Everest the way they did 50 years ago, it would be even more of a challenge. With the Channel, you have to swim it in a very basic way,” she says. Swimmers can only wear a swimsuit, goggles, cap and grease for warmth. “It’s a very pure sport and we like it that way,” MacDonald notes.

Her advice for fellow distance swimmers is to “be consistent and honest with your training. If you put in a good four-to-five day practices per week, with at least one and a half hours in the water (if training for something like a 15-mile swim) or two hours (if training for the Channel), you should have no problem if you’re consistent.”

Slow and steady has worked for Bayles, now 52, who works in real estate and is the married father of three. He admits that he was once accused of

MARCELLA MacDONALD is widely known as the “American Queen of the English Channel” with eight crossings, including a two-way swim and an attempted three-way swim in 2004.

deliberately swimming slowly so he could stay in the water longer. Ten years ago, he began using his swimming talents to raise money to help others, as he did for the Manhattan swim. In 2002, Bayles completed his solo crossing of the English Channel in honor of his daughter, Kate, who has epilepsy, with a time of 10 hours and 59 minutes.

Bayles keeps a log of his practices and reports that in the six months leading up to the Channel swim, he averaged 73 miles a month, and in the month of his Channel swim, he completed 166,000 meters. One of his training techniques was to lengthen his stroke to improve efficiency, which he did by swimming extra 50s after practice, trying to hold 14 strokes as his send-offs became more difficult. For example, he swam 12 x 50 on 55 seconds, followed by 6 x 50 on 50 seconds, 4 x 50 on 45 seconds, with 40 seconds being what he called “the end of efficiency.”



ENGLISH CHANNEL QUICK FACTS

- More people have been to outer space than have successfully crossed the English Channel.
- The Channel is approximately 19 nautical miles (38,000 yards) or 35 kilometers wide at the narrowest point between Shakespeare Beach in Dover, England, and Cap Gris Nez, France.
- Water temperatures tend to range in the low 60s (Fahrenheit) in the summer season, when crossings are attempted.
- To qualify for an English Channel crossing, the swimmer has to complete a six-hour swim in 60-degree water. (Some Connecticut swimmers think eight hours is a better measure of readiness.)
- Swimming “The Everest” of open water swimming is particularly dangerous because of strong tides that change direction approximately every six hours, weather that is hard to predict and the high volume of ship traffic.
- The success rate each season usually is less than 50 percent for solo swims.
- Approximately 103 Channel swim attempts were made in the 2004 season.
- Two main organizations coordinate English Channel swims: the Channel Swimming Association and the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation. See www.channelswimmingassociation.com and www.channelswimming.net.

>>> Sources: Michael Oram, the Honorable Secretary of the Channel Swimming & Piloting Federation, www.channelswimming.com; Marcia Cleveland, “Dover Solo.”



GEORGE BRUNSTAD swam the English Channel last August to raise money for a Haitian charity through his church. At 70, Brunstad was the oldest man to swim the 23.69 miles.

Brunstad's family friend Sister Lucy enlisted more than 300 nuns in Canada and France to pray for him. "During the swim, I knew this was going on. I felt the hand of God with me," he recalls.

In Ellington, Conn., Mike Maier, a 42-year-old father of two daughters who works as a third-shift printer, loves setting challenges and raising the bar for himself. "Most people would think working third shift is a disadvantage, but I kind of turned it around and it actually worked out well for my training."

In preparation for both his solo and double English Channel attempts, which took place in August 2002 and July 2004, respectively, his schedule involved getting to the pool after work by 9 or 9:30 a.m. and swimming three to four miles, six days a week, working out in the weight room for a few hours three nights a week and running three to four times a week. Maier ran half marathons as well as two full marathons per year, including the Boston Marathon, to build up more endurance for the swim.

Maier's advice for staying mentally tough during training can also be applied to preparing for any sort of distance event: "When you're going through building up laps, by the end of the week, you're dragging. It's hard to get to the pool, but you need to find ways to get it done. I drink quite a bit of coffee—before swimming and before going to the gym. When you work out when you don't feel like it, it sets you up for a great experience over there [in England]. You need to swim fatigued."

Additionally, he warns that there are "many unpredictable things that can happen out there [in the Channel], things

you just can't train for, and you have to be able to find ways to work yourself through those tough times—you've got to relax and use some mental tricks to stay relaxed."

Maier offers this encouragement: "People shouldn't be afraid to try the Channel, no matter how little body fat they have. I was very lean for my swims. If you've got a good engine, try it."

Without doubt, swimming the Channel or any long distance requires commitment, according to world record holder Parcells. To fit in all of his needed training time, Parcells, who is a chief financial officer and lives in Madison, says he has had to find a balance. "I do most of my training in the early morning before work. It's a time of day where I feel I can allocate the time before a busy day begins," says the father of two. "On the weekends I spend with my kids, I usually do not train at all because it is more important to spend quality time with them. It also provides me with some much-needed rest."

In addition to the English Channel, Parcells has numerous other swim accomplishments, including the 24-Mile Tampa Bay Marathon Swim (six consecutive years) and the Long Island Swim Across the Sound 15-mile swim, raising money for St. Vincent's Medical Center cancer charities in Bridgeport, Conn. Additionally, he swam a solo Channel crossing in 2000 with a time of 12 hours and 9 minutes and also attempted a triple crossing in 2004, but was thwarted by bad weather.

He credits his continuing enthusiasm for marathon accomplishments to "the environment right outside our back doors" and *esprit de corps* among his fellow Connecticut distance trainers. "A lot of it comes from our group pulling together and acting as a support group, with our resources and training buddies for each other," he explains. "I'll go out and swim with others, even if I

Good nutrition played an important role in George Brunstad's Channel training.

Brunstad's wife, Judy, a nutritionist, helped regulate his diet:

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Last August at the age of 70, the Ridgefield, Conn., resident became the oldest man to swim the English Channel, shattering the world record with a time of 15 hours and 59 minutes. Brunstad's inspiration? Raising money for a Haitian charity through his church. "You have to do these things for a purpose. It can't be just for your own glory," Brunstad says.

He credits his mental strength during the Channel swim to prayer: "There was a prayer vigil at my church with hundreds of people praying for me." While he was in the open water,

AP Photo/The News-Times, Chris Ware

don't have a swim plan, just to help them." Helping others is what this group is good at, Parcels adds. "We want to help other people achieve the same dreams we've already achieved."

English Channel crosser and marathon swimmer Morris Finkelstein of Cos Cob, Conn., agrees that the support group has contributed to so many successful crossings.

Finkelstein, for example, stayed motivated during his swim by "elevat[ing] my mind out of the Channel and focus[ing] on the positive prompts of the crew. I refused to have negative thoughts, and focused on the positive only," he says.

The nature of long distance swimming requires mental and physical fortitude, acquired through disciplined individual training and bolstered by the support of fellow swimmers, family and friends. Whatever the motivation, whatever the outcome, the success of these Connecticut swimmers against the perils of the English Channel is a testament to the friendships and inner strength that runs deep. <<<



Marathon swimmer **MORRIS FINKELSTEIN** relied on the power of positive thinking—and prompts from his crew—to make his Channel crossing.



READ MORE ONLINE

USMS member Marcia Cleveland, who has successfully crossed the English Channel, offers two workout sets to help fellow swimmers prepare for long distance events. View them online at usmsswimmer.com.

A number of Masters swimmers from the U.S. and other countries have conquered the Channel. To view lists of all official successful crossings recorded through history, visit www.soloswims.com.