

## The Powerful Call of the Open Water



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Cave Rock on Lake Tahoe was a favorite training cove for **FRED ROGERS** as he geared up to swim the length of the lake in 1955.

> **U**npredictable, extreme, physically grueling and mentally challenging, open water swimming has long attracted purists in the sport. And it turns out there are a lot of purists. How else to explain the longevity of the Boston Light Swim, “the granddaddy of American open water marathons” originating in 1904 and still going strong today with a rigorous eight- to 10-mile course. Or the popularity of the Atlantic City World Championship Ocean Marathon Swim that got its start in 1954 and offers swimmers a 22.5-mile challenge around Absecon Island.

Bob Brown, assistant chief of the Atlantic City Beach Patrol, was a young lifeguard when fellow guards Ed Solitare and Ed “Dutch” Stetser accomplished the feat. “Those fellows trained all summer, and it took them an awfully long time,” recalls Brown. The late Jim Toomey masterminded the swim, which attracted every top distance swimmer of the era in its heyday. It’s the unpredictable conditions that make open water

swimming so exciting, notes Brown. “You never know what the temperatures or the roughness of the ocean will be.”

Manhattan Island swimmers were warned of typhoid fever in 1930, but the race went forward. Each year, several dozen swimmers and a sizable relay field take to the water to follow in the wake of Robert Dowling Jr., credited with being the first to circumnavigate the nearly 30 miles around Manhattan in 1915.

In California, the La Jolla Rough Water got its start in 1916 with a chilly 1.7-mile race won by Charles “Chubby” Shields in a time of 48 minutes. War interrupted, but the Pacific swim has been held continuously since 1931, averaging more than 2,000 competitors in recent years.

The call of the open water can be a powerful motivator.

In 1955, Fred Rogers, a 29-year-old from South San Francisco, swam the 23-mile length of Lake Tahoe, with a time of 19 hours, 6 minutes and 6 seconds. “My friend had

tried it before me and gave up after maybe 12 hours in the water. He said it was an impossible feat,” recalls the now 82-year-old Californian.

But Rogers was undeterred and spent a year in Lake Tahoe, working as a resort lifeguard and training at Cave Rock and Zephyr Cove. Plus, he had already swum the width of the lake to claim a \$300 prize. “I had all the confidence in the world I could do it,” he says of his historical swim. Even today, few have the octogenarian’s stamina for both the two-mile and one-mile turnaround races at Pinecrest Lake, where Rogers represents University of San Francisco Masters.

Pioneers like Rogers continue to inspire new generations of open water swimmers. In 1998, Ron Collins became the first to swim the length of Tampa Bay at a distance of 24 miles and the now-annual event attracted 56 participants this past April. “It’s a wild race,” says Collins.

But, of course, it’s open water. <<<

### FUN FACTS

>>> **Boston Light Swim.** In the early years of this 101-year-old swim, participants swam nude because swimming attire of the era was not appropriate for distance swimming. On Aug. 8, swimmers (suited up) will traverse Boston Harbor, starting offshore from the famous Boston Light, currently the only manned lighthouse on the East Coast.

>>> **La Jolla Rough Water Swim.** Popular with adults and children, this venerable open water swim came about in tandem with the World’s Fair in 1916. Today it is affectionately known as the “Big Wet One” and will take place Sept. 11 with swims for juniors, Masters, and amateurs, as well as a three-mile Gatorman.

>>> **The TransTahoe Relay,** sponsored by San Francisco’s Olympic Club on Lake Tahoe, crosses the Nevada/California state line. The 11.5-mile race (set for July 23) starts on Sand Harbor Beach in Nevada and finishes in Skylandia Beach, Lake Forest, Calif. No wetsuits are allowed and the water temperature on race day typically ranges from 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

>>> **The Manhattan Island Marathon,** at 28.5 miles, is 6.5 miles longer than the English Channel, the event on which it is modeled. Although swimmers have circled the island dating back to 1915, the first official marathon swim took place on a humid September day in 1982, a feat that winner David Horning described as “swimming uphill.” The 2005 event is set for July 9.

>>> **Atlantic City World Championship Ocean Marathon Swim,** formerly known as the Around the Island Swim, once drew champions like Tom Park, Cliff Lumsden, Alfredo Camarero and Greta Anderson. Overall, however, the single dominant performer was “The Flying Dutchman,” Herman Willemse, the five-time champion between 1960 and 1964. A great spectator race, the swim, set for Aug. 13, prompts homeowners on Absecon Island to throw lavish seaside parties in honor of the event.