

Money Swims Rivalled Today's Events



Courtesy of Bill Volckening

>New York swimmer Edward Keating won \$5,000 in the 24-mile Lake George (N.Y.) swimming marathon (above), and earlier the same year, a 17-year-old Canadian named George Young pocketed an unprecedented \$25,000 after being the first and only swimmer to finish a 20-mile race from Santa Catalina Island to the California coast.

That was 1927, and the two young men were among the first ever to compete in the high-dollar swimming events popular in the late 1920s. These races made wealthy men and women out of brave souls who were willing to strip naked, cover themselves with axle grease and compete in the cold-water events.

Keating was not considered a prime contender, according to *Time* magazine, because he lacked “the fatty layers that blanket lean muscles against numbing water.” But Keating did win, in 18:47.18, and finished nearly 11 miles ahead

of his closest rival, Ernst Vierkotter. A year earlier, the German swimmer had swum a solo swim across the English Channel (about 21 miles) in 12:38. In the Lake George race, however, Vierkotter “was forced to withdraw when he was seized with a cramp.”

Keating’s \$5,000 would have the buying power of about \$58,000 today. Prizes that big and bigger firmly establish Keating’s era as the Golden Age of long distance money swims. One month after Keating’s victory, the inaugural Canadian National Exhibition/Wrigley money swim awarded \$30,000 to the winner of its course, a seven-mile triangle completed three times. And the winner? A cramp-free Vierkotter, who finished in 11:45.

Today, money swims still attract hardy swimmers like Keating, but the prizes don’t compare to those of times past.

“It’s amazing that the prize money hasn’t gone up over the

years,” says Mike Giegerich, volunteer director of the Atlantic City Around-the-Island Marathon Swim, which was born in 1953. “Because the Atlantic City race is a FINA event, we have to pay for doping tests, FINA officials (and their hotel rooms) and doctors to supervise. It’s expensive—and it’s really tough to come up with the prize money.” In the most recent Atlantic City race, the top male and female swimmers won \$3,300 each.

Giegerich believes people participate in his prize money swim for the challenge: “It probably is the hardest swim in the world. The swimmers like the money, but they don’t get a lot of money.” What they do get is the sense of fulfillment that comes from testing their swimming strength and determination against Mother Nature. And like Keating, Vierkotter and others that came before them—the satisfaction of finishing the course. <<<

NOTABLE FACTS

>>> Chewing-gum tycoon William Wrigley christened the idea of big money swims in 1927, sponsoring the first such race, the Wrigley Ocean Marathon, in January that year. Wrigley challenged 150 swimmers to race 20 miles from Santa Catalina Island to the California coast. Canadian swimmer George Young, 17, the only person to finish, won the \$25,000 prize.

>>> Edward F. Keating planned to give part of his \$5,000 Lake George prize to his mother so she could enjoy “a much-needed summer vacation near the scene of his triumph.”

>>> Because early 20th-century bathing suits often were wool, which slowed swimming speed, prize money swimmers frequently swam naked—both men and women. Swimmers would rub axle grease over their bodies to shield against the cold water.

>>> Although she did not win, Toronto native Marilyn Bell distinguished herself in 1954 as the first woman to finish the Atlantic City marathon swim. She was 16. A few weeks later, Bell became the first to swim across Lake Ontario. The Canadian National Exhibition awarded her \$10,000 CDN.

>>> Contemporary elite prize money swims are Canada’s Bell Grand Prix/Mel Zajac International, \$1,500 CDN, and the FINA 10K Marathon Swimming World Cup, \$2,500. This year, the FINA 10K is scheduled for a variety of locations, including Brazil, Portugal, Great Britain, Austria, China and Singapore.

>>> Founded in 1999, the RCP Tiburon Mile Open Water Swim is staged in the chilly waters of Raccoon Strait, a half-mile channel in northern San Francisco Bay. Male and female winners each take home \$10,000.