

Positively OBSESSED

David Barra

PASSION, PERSEVERANCE, *and paying it forward*

BY SUZANNE SATALINE PHOTOS BY HEATHER PERRY

In 2012, Kent Nicholas of Mesa, Ariz., put together an exploratory team of about 30 top-tier swimmers to see if it was possible to swim four manmade reservoirs along the Salt River: Saguaro, Canyon, Apache, and Theodore Roosevelt. Dam to dam, it would be a 41.7-mile staged swim.

There were many unknowns, including how to reach some of the rugged remote spots where the swims would start. Getting to Saguaro required driving down a dirt road and then hiking

through the brush to a narrow, water-filled canyon. The group would have to tote four kayaks.

The first morning, David Barra—a native New Yorker—grabbed the front end of one vessel and stepped down the steep, unmarked trail.

“Given that he was from New York, I was having visions of the classic movie ‘City Slickers,’ starring Billy Crystal,” Nicholas says. Nicholas had sent out emails, warning participants not to wear flimsy shoes. Unfortunately,

David Barra, middle, is a guide for SwimVacation trips to the British Virgin Islands.

Heather Perry



the flip-flop-wearing Barra missed that instruction. One foot skidded on loose gravel and Barra landed on a kayak. He dusted off his Speedo and continued on. Barra swam two of the reservoirs beautifully, Nicholas says. It was months later that the organizer learned his guest had broken two ribs in the fall. But why mention that and ruin everyone's good time?

Besides, Barra says, "It only hurt when I breathed."

PASSIONATE PERSEVERANCE

Barra is not one to let a trifle like broken bones scuttle a good swim. The same can be said for such inconveniences as a heart defect, cold temperatures, and strong currents. He's persisted through them all to become one of the

country's most admired and prolific amateur marathon swimmers.

Barra is perhaps best known in the marathon swimming community for his legendary 2010 season, in which he swam 129.6 miles of epic marathon events. Then 45 years old, Barra completed the Tampa Bay Marathon Swim; solo crossings of the English, Catalina, and Maui Channels; the Boston Light Swim; the Ederle Swim; and the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim, all in a few months. Such is the respect that the marathon swimming community has for Barra that in 2012 when the nascent Marathon Swimmers Federation developed an annual awards program, they named their ultimate prize The Barra Award. The award—a versatile titanium

spork—goes to the swimmer with the most impressive body of work—including swimming, organizing, and supporting other swimmers—in a single season, as voted by his or her peers.

After that, Barra might have rested on his laurels.

Instead, he added pioneer, volunteer, and organizer to his aquatic résumé. He devised and swam the seven-stage, 8 Bridges Swim, a 120-mile adventure swim event down the Hudson River that's now in its fourth year. He became active in promoting open water safety measures. He also contributed to the development of the Marathon Swimmers Federation's "Rules of Marathon Swimming" released earlier this year. And when he's not planning or swimming his own events, he can

be found buzzing around on his Zodiac, *Agent Orange*, providing support to other swimmers during their marathon attempts.

"He is a gentleman, a philanthropist, a tough-as-nails swimmer, and the guy you want on your crew if you're going to attempt a monster swim," Nicholas says.

THE DRIVEN LIFE

Compulsion underlines

Barra's every move. (He acknowledges as much in a coda attached to all his outgoing email: "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing!")

But he's not driven to go faster or longer than the next person. Rather, Barra is propelled by a deep desire to live. "You need to have a sense of adventure and

BUILDING A COMPULSION

Barra grew up minutes from the ocean in the Italian enclave of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. The swim coach at New Utrecht High School recruited him onto the high school team during phys ed class. Not that competition was stiff. “It was the ‘Saturday Night Fever’ era,” Barra says. “And most people were afraid to get their hair wet.”

At age 16, he started life-guarding at Manhattan Beach in Brooklyn. Rescuing waders and prepping the beach for hurricanes developed his appreciation for the ocean. But it took leaving Brooklyn for swimming to overtake his life.

In the late 1980s, Barra and his wife, Clare Kelly-Barra (whom he’d met at Coney Island) moved to the Hudson River town of High Falls, N.Y. He and a business partner started a granite installation business. One year while Barra was recovering from a back injury, some swimmers invited him to join a local Masters group in New Paltz. One practice, and he was hooked.

He soon crafted a circuit of open water races he’d swim every year. Nearly every summer Saturday for 10 years, Barra would drive 3 hours, zip off a 1- or 2-miler, sleep in the car, wake the next morning, and drive 4 or

5 hours to another race. “Clare,” he says, “is quite used to this obsession.” But it was about to build even greater.

In 2008, Barra heard that Antonio Argüelles of Mexico was planning to swim the Triple Crown—the English and Catalina Channels and the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim—in one year, for his 50th birthday. Barra thought that sounded neat, and he already had an English Channel booking. If you’re Channel ready, he figured, you’re channel ready. Why stop there?

Alas, his heart wasn’t quite up for that big challenge at the time. Barra’s doctor diagnosed an atrial septal defect, an opening in the heart’s upper chambers that had failed to close at birth. Left untreated, one side of the heart could have become dangerously enlarged and, perhaps, have failed.

The doctors sealed the gap and soon Barra was back in the water. During the recovery, he started planning his 2010 season. He began building his mileage, swimming up to 40,000 yards weekly for two years. He increased his tolerance to the cold by training in Brooklyn and “lake poaching,” hopping into upstate freshwaters of 50 degrees or colder.

The path to enduring the 12 soggy hours each week was

evolutionary. “You have to get beyond a pool swimmer mentality,” Barra says. “If you can get beyond looking at 100 x 100s as being penance, then you’re on your way. That’s part of the mental tenacity that’s required to do long swims.”

It helped to have a gang to train with in the ocean, too. “It’s hard to find people who are obsessive-compulsive in New Paltz,” Barra says. “Whereas Brighton Beach is full of them.”

A LEGENDARY SEASON

In March 2010, Barra kicked off his megaseason by swimming the 9.6-mile Maui Channel. A month later he placed second in the 24-mile Tampa Bay Marathon Swim, and two months later, he swam the 28.5 miles circling Manhattan Island.

In July, Barra jumped off a boat at midnight to traverse the 21 miles across the San Pedro Channel from Catalina Island to mainland California. Barra figured it would take him 10 hours to complete the swim, but other swimmers that month had faced swells and unpredictable currents. “Ignorance is a good thing,” he says.

About 12 or 13 hours into the swim, his crew still couldn’t see land, and Barra was stuck in an endless pool of oncoming currents. “It got a little dark

you have to be able to define your position when your arms hurt and everything hurts and you’re tired and achy, and maybe nauseous, and maybe you ate some jellyfish, and you’re sunburned and you’re only halfway there,” says Barra, who’s now 49.

“You have to flip the negativity over in your mind and think, what a privilege to be doing what you’re doing, because it’s truly a privilege when you think about the resources to train and have support to do these incredible long swims. It’s not something available to 99.99 percent of the population of this planet. What a joy to be out there staring up at the stars in the middle of the English Channel. So what if you’re puking your guts out?”



David Barra readies his Zodiac, *Agent Orange*, to support Mo Siegel on his 19-mile Cape Cod Bay Swim in August 2013.

Elaine K. Howley



Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's David Barra leaping off the charter yacht *SV Promenade* during a SwimVacation trip to the British Virgin Islands.
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for a moment. Then I started laughing. It seemed like theater of the absurd,” Barra remembers. He told himself, “I’m just going to keep swimming and they’re going to pull me.”

Crewmember Tobey Ann Saracino, a marathon swimmer from Port Chester, N.Y., remembers no complaints. “Dave is a very positive person,” she says. “There’s no negativity. It’s more, ‘This is my goal and I’m going to do everything in my power to make it happen.’”

Barra finished in 15 hours and 37 minutes, the longest swim he had completed. If he’d had an inkling of the epic stretch before he started, it “would have totally broke me.” After Catalina, September’s English Channel swim seemed a comparative breeze at 14 hours, 27 minutes.

Barra says that every marathon swimmer has dark moments. “It takes a little bit of grit to get past those. And you just have to remember that they pass,” he says. “You know the

joyous moments are stronger, and they last longer.

SPREADING THE JOY

Although Barra has long been known for swimming massive distances, he’s more recently started gaining renown as an event organizer and supporter who helps others achieve their swimming goals. And it all started when he was installing granite in a house overlooking the Hudson River. He noticed he could see both the Rip Van Winkle and the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridges and it sparked an idea.

Using Google Earth that night, he studied the river and discovered that the other Hudson bridges were fairly evenly spaced, between 13 and 20 miles apart. Because the Hudson is tidal, he figured that would give a swimmer six hours of favorable conditions to swim between bridges. Could he swim 20 miles in 6 or 7 hours? Could others? “It seemed pretty ideal

for an epic, week-long swim event,” Barra says.

So, in 2010 he and Rondi Davies, a Manhattan Island Marathon Swim record holder who has a doctorate in geology, studied the river’s currents and depths, trying to pick the ideal summer week when people could swim downstream on consecutive days.

The result was the 8 Bridges Swim, a fundraiser for several nonprofits, including Coney Island Brighton Beach Open Water Swimmers, an open water USMS club for which Barra is a board member.

Barra has also become a major supporter of other swimmers’ events. Last summer, after flying back from a vacation in Australia, he slept a few hours, then tugged *Agent Orange* from New York to Massachusetts to accompany Mo Siegel of Piermont, N.Y., as he swam the 19-mile “American Channel” in Cape Cod Bay.

A few weeks later, Bob Needham of Lake Oswego, Ore.,

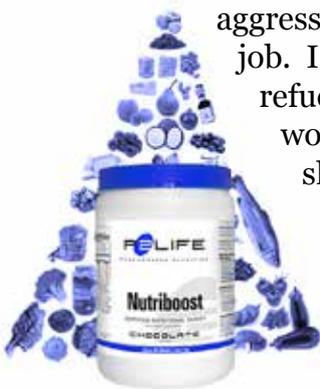
posted a message on the Marathon Swimmers Forum asking if anyone was available to crew his second English Channel attempt scheduled a mere 10 days from the date of the posting. Already heading to England for a wedding, Barra was game. He arrived at Heathrow, hopped a train to Dover, and was on Needham’s boat the next day, bleary-eyed, leading the crew. Needham swam for 15 hours before the swim was terminated. “It was the best crew I ever had,” Needham says.

His efforts to help others have been heroic, but Barra says he just feels an obligation to help other swimmers, as he has been helped.

“I think part of it is to payback the community for all the support they’ve given me,” Barra says. “I guess I’m a little obsessive when it comes to things. It’s a way of expanding that obsession, and a way to share that experience with the community.” **S**

“Being a masters swimmer adds additional requirements...”

“While I think my diet meets the nutritional needs of the average adult female, being a masters athlete adds additional requirements. I workout aggressively and go straight to my job. I believe the body needs to be refuelled with protein shortly after working out. P2Life’s NutriBoost shake is the perfect solution. I drink it right after workout and a couple times during the day and it tastes amazing!”



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