

The Diabetic in the Channel

Mark Blewitt

The first recorded completed English Channel swim was in 1875. At least 6,000 people have attempted since then this amazing feat of swimming the 21.7 miles in treacherous conditions, with only approximately 600 of those succeeding. It's cold, currents are unpredictable and the sea is has hidden dangers like jellyfish and visible hazards like cargo ships. However, Mark Blewitt, has successfully completed this challenge, in addition to many more record-breaking marathon swims.

I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 1980, aged 13, since then the treatment of diabetes has changed enormously. In 1994, working in PR, I realised I led an unhealthy lifestyle, entertaining journalists several times a week meant too many rich, fatty meals and too much alcohol. Having to travel with my job also meant I had little time for physical activity. About this time I saw a table showing participants in the London marathon by profession with top of the list Firemen, Police and Postmen and bottom of the list Marketing and Public Relations employees. It forced me into thinking that I needed to do something about my own health. As a result I started to casually swim at my local pool and as a result my fitness levels increased dramatically. I remember the first time I could manage 4 lengths crawl without stopping, then 8, 32 and 64 lengths and then finally the magic mile! The pool closed which forced me to find a neighboring pool; which had an open water-swimming club 'Howe Bridge Marlins'. Through training there got I fit enough to swim 2 miles in Grimsby Docks the following June. I was hooked. I was determined my diabetes was not going to stand in my way – I always compared my performances with able-bodied swimmers.

I tackled longer and tougher swims. In 1998 I swam in the premier championship 10.5 miles Lake Windermere and finished 4th. In 1999 I faced up to the longest swimming race in the world - 28.5 miles around Manhattan Island. British Airways sponsored flights for my coach and I, and Airtours paid my race entry fees. Entry is restricted to the best 30 that apply. This swim started at 6am and finished 8 hours later. My performance was fantastic. I felt on top of the world. My coach was so pleased and couldn't wait to tell our supporters back home in the UK about my success.

In 1999 I was taking Actrapid and Ultratard and on the day of my race I just reduced my Actrapid dose. After my success in New York I thought it was time to start training for the Channel. In 2001 I entered but a problematic sea swim and a new job, prevented me from training each morning, so I was forced to pull out. Suddenly I had a big void to fill- I had trained hard all winter and spring and now nothing to aim for. At that time I was invited to swim Two-Way Lake Windermere (21 miles)-the longest lake in England.

Before a race I would cut down on my insulin dose, take glucose drinks and bananas. It seemed to work and I did not give it much thought other than to advise the race safety officials of my diabetes, and to make sure I topped myself up with carbohydrate during my swims and keep a waterproof packet of glucose tablets in my swimming trunks. During a swim fluid and chocolate bars were passed from the mandatory escort boats.

Back then I used to take additional food and drink every hour. No matter what I consumed or what insulin dose I used my blood glucose levels were always rock bottom at the end of a swim –1.0mm/l or less. Testing during a swim was impossible as touching another person would mean disqualification, and I was submerged up to my neck in water so blood glucose testing was out of the question.

For my Two Way Windermere Swim I set off at 7pm in August sun after a teatime meal of soup and baked potato. I had cut down my Novorapid dose. My support boat took my flasks of tea, coffee and Ribena plus my usual chocolate and bananas. I had thought about my evening dose of Ultratard, but thought, as I wouldn't be doing so much physical activity an injection wasn't necessary!

Needless to say 10 hours later I was in trouble. I had started to be sick and everything I tried to eat made me vomit even more. I had started to slow down considerably. I realised that I had not been able to eat properly since just after midnight. With 17 miles completed and 4 to go I told my boat crew I was struggling. My pilot said he was watching out for me. I stayed in and I finished in 14hours 20minutes after starting and came third place in the men's section.

I was carried from the water and patted dry. The Independent on Sunday had written a piece about this race and had described the terrible condition my body was in. I tested my blood glucose levels; the meter barely registering 1mmol/l! Later I would realise that if the reading simply could not be true else I would not be capable of testing my blood let alone swimming and walking out of the water. An ambulance was called and I was admitted to hospital. The president of the BLDSA visited me in hospital to present me with my certificate and to see that I was ok. Fortunately, I was and after my lunchtime dose of Novorapid I was released from Kendal Hospital. I was delighted, with my excellent time and my swim was short listed for the BLDSA swim of the year.

At this time I was training with and swimming for Haslingden Swimming Club. In recognition of my swim my club invited me to present the annual awards. Each year they get a celebrity swimmer to come along. I was delighted when they told me that this year they did not have to look beyond their own club. This is one of the highlights of my swimming achievements.

At this time my training partner Peter Mulderigg put me in touch with a friend who is a diabetes specialist nurse Judith Campbell. To swim such a length again would require much more medical input, however, at this point I was not sure if my body could be put through such a punishing ordeal but by the start of the next season I was back. But I was planning on an easy year.

The opening swim of the racing calendar is the Budworth 1 mile handicap. You predict your finishing time, swim and the winner is the one closest to their predicted time. At 1 second inside my predicted time I won the race easily. Once again I felt on top of the world. I remembered that I had paid my deposit to swim the Channel last year therefore decided that I would train and have a shot at the channel later that summer!

May and June were filled with training, lots of outdoor swimming, lots of discussions with my doctor – Dr I O'Connell at Wigan and Leigh Infirmary, my nurse friend Judith and Dr Brown, my girlfriend's mother. Dr O'Connell had always supported my swimming

and I have a special respect for him, as it was he who signed my medical release to say I was fit to swim in cold water for hours on end.

After my experience the year before the doctors and I knew we had to reassess my insulin and nutritional requirements to ensure I didn't run in to trouble again.

In hindsight I now know I had been consuming insufficient carbohydrate - a third of what I should have. All I had ever eaten while swimming was 30grams of carbs per hour, consuming foods like bananas, chocolate and yoghurt drinks whereas I needed to take 1320 grams of carbohydrate over 16 hours or 95grams per hour!

Judith recommended Glargine but as it was not yet available on prescription from my health authority (it was 2002) this was therefore not an option.

After a discussion with Mike Oram, my pilot for the swim and one of the most successful channel pilots on the scene, I discovered I was consuming insufficient carbohydrate, calories and the type of fuel I was taking was incorrect. I learnt I needed to drink hot high energy drinks and Mike swore by Maxim, Maxim and more Maxim. Maxim is a high-energy drink similar in calorific and nutritional value to Lucozade but instead of being fizzy it is flat and importantly Caffeine free. I learnt that I should be taking this drink hot, as hot as I could, 600ml every 30 minutes. The benefit of this drink is that it is absorbed straight into my blood stream, with minimal digestion therefore meaning I would not be wasting energy digesting the drink. Being hot also helped to ensure I would be retaining all my internal body heat.

And all this information less than a week before my swim! A quick call to Judith to tell her the bad news - the carbohydrate figures we had been using for my swims were totally wrong.

I contacted my doctor and came up with a new regime. Dr Brown also spoke with Dr O'Connell independently. It was the worst possible preparation as this was all still being discussed over mobile phone on a fraught drive down to Dover. I was caught in the middle; I had increased my carbohydrate from 30grams per hour to 95, but planned to take the same amount of insulin. And I should have been resting.

My swim started on the 18 July at around 7am. I felt great until my first feed, then I felt awful and eventually I started being sick and started to complain. My pilots said give it another hour. I did and did not bother to complain again. I was enjoying my swim. My crew was giving me all the encouragement I needed especially Andie my girlfriend who was shouting on every stroke. Perhaps it had been going too well, I had that invincible feeling you get when a little drunk (with hindsight hypoglycemia) and felt on top of the world. After 9 hours in the water disorientated and confused I aggressively requested more insulin, then carbohydrate though I had enough emergency gel (Maxim - it is like Hypostop) to stop the worst hypo. I took a slug of the gel and started swimming again but as I was not responding to the instructions shouted from the boat I was retired on medical grounds. On the boat it became obvious to my crew that I was not hypothermic but hypoglycaemic. My attempt was over and with France in sight the boat was turned around back to Dover. On checking my kit later I discovered I had barely touched any of the gel!

Before we got back to port I had decided to try again. Learning from what I had done wrong, I knew I could do the swim through tweaking my dosage of insulin down, eating more and being less sick! I trained in earnest feeding properly on this hot high energy drink, solo swims with my coach Matt Simpson on Lake Windermere and races every weekend. A special visit to see Dr O' Connell, much discussion with Dr Brown and of course Judith. I had managed to get a slot on the 16 August a month after my first attempt. As a rule the weekend slots get booked up well in advance and if you are prepared and able to swim in the week you stand a better chance of getting a slot. I gave my Doctor Judith the dates and she moved everything to be there and support me.

Jude and I drove down to Dover on the Thursday, just the day before my swim. Friday came with an early start and I started swimming in the dark at around 5am. At one feed I felt myself drifting round so I would be facing back to Dover. I knew to see the white cliffs would not be good psychologically so I resisted. The day turned into a milky day, as if I was swimming in a giant Tupperware box. I was sick, stung by jellyfish but was determined to continue.

Before my swim I had received encouragement from Alison Streeter MBE who has swum the channel an amazing 42 record-breaking times however now she was on the boat as the official CS&PF Observer!

As the day drew on I started to tire – I knew exactly how long I had been in, feeding every hour, taking X amount of carbohydrate. As many with diabetes will understand the normal diet for sportsmen with Type 1 diabetes is high in carbohydrates, as such my body has a high carbohydrate tolerance the normal trick that an athlete will do of carb loading is less effective. I knew that my glycogen store would be optimized yet called upon quite early in the swim. As a rule it is best not to ask the distance you have swum, as the reality might be less than you thought. Then I caught a glimpse of the lighthouse at Cap Graz Nez, the closest point in France to England, but then nightfall and the image disappeared. Then at last I saw light, I could see windows illuminated in houses, curtains being drawn, car lights! Alison, the official observer, got in the water to swim along side me and guide me through the last little bit. Then I was told to stand up but after all this time in the water I could only swim! I managed to stagger up the beach and I was not able to receive assistance or I would be disqualified. Eventually I cleared the water. I had made it! Some French lads came to congratulate me. Back on the boat I was wrapped up in a blanket and offered a cup of sweet tea. My doctor, Judith, was keen to check my blood glucose level – 10.4, RESULT! I was violently sick bringing up lots of awful stuff that I don't remember eating. We eventually managed to find somewhere to stay for the night and I checked my blood glucose levels at regular intervals. They dropped throughout the night and the next morning were 5.6. I lost weight over the next week, my face became gaunt and eyes sunken. My bloods were continuously on the low side for the next ten days.

In 2003 it was time again for the two way Windermere swim which is held in alternate years. This swim is usually cold but this year I had noticed it was seasonally a little warmer and I thought maybe I'd swim breaststroke, a slower, less energetic stroke, not suited for cold overnight swims. This time I was also determined to finish in style after my last two way swim in 2001. The race was held in August. I set off strongly and was determined to do my best, then maybe ease off a bit later. There were others competing but nobody came close! I led the first wave from start to finish except for a brief period around 1am after a bad feed. I had taken an electrolyte drink. I had called for the

isotonic drink thinking that I needed to top up on electrolytes. Perhaps it was the absence of carbs or was it my body converting fat? I completed the course and set an inaugural men's breaststroke record, smashed the overall breaststroke record and became the first person ever to swim the course using two strokes. This time I swam on Glargine (it was now available) and Novorapid. The Glargine helped in that it is a longer acting insulin that I could take once and get through the whole swim without taking another shot, however, I took several small shots of Novorapid and a reduced Glargine shot around midnight so my routine the next day would not be shaken too much!

In 2004 I became the first person to swim the length of Loch Lomond using breaststroke. It had been a cold year and it was a cold swim. Compared to the others I was far more prepared mentally which was just as well as it took me 17 hours 50 minutes to complete the 22 mile course.

You may be wondering what my next plans are. Finances permitting I will do it again, or attempt the channel breaststroke? There are so many nice swims out there-anything is possible. But remember what and who are important to you. Live your dreams!

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