

Swimmer: Mark Blewitt  
Swim: Manhattan Island, New York, USA  
Distance: 28.5 Miles  
Date: 12<sup>th</sup> June 1999

Whilst working in public relations **Mark Blewitt** questioned his 'healthy' lifestyle of lunches and endless round of entertaining. He took up swimming for pleasure at his local pool in Warrington. But his regular swims became more than a weekly dip and last year (1999) Mark competed in the world's longest annually held swimming marathon the gruelling 28.5 miles around New York's Manhattan Island.

"So are you going to win?" was a recurring question from friends and work colleagues. The answer of course is YES - it's you against the water and when you go the distance you are a winner. Of course some would argue that there is the little matter of the other 29 competitors to consider. I was there swimming in the same heat as the Queen of the Channel, World Champion/Cook Straight record holder and the Mexico/Cuba swimmer.

The race took place on June 12<sup>th</sup> 1999 but it really started back in September the year before, the Sunday after completing Lake Windermere. What next? - for me the answer was Manhattan. The swim had the appeal of being a step up in distance from Windermere (although officially 28.5 miles there is some assistance from currents) and in warm, Mmmm, 65o waters. I began to plan the swim the two largest factors being physical preparations and financing the trip for my coach and myself.

The real goals and rewards were repeatedly knocking seconds off my 1,500m and 5,000 times. Running and skipping complimented the pool sessions. Outdoor training included cold Sunday morning dips in the Albert Dock, Liverpool. Next, a couple of small races. By January my training was on course. My employer Tradewinds covered my entry fee and British Airways kindly offered flights for my boat crew Cliff Kelleher and myself.

On Saturday, June 12<sup>th</sup> the race started at 6.45 am at the Battery south Manhattan. Imagine swimming for the next eight or nine hours with quick refreshment breaks on the hour. I look at it as if it is a typical day at the office - I drive the 28.5 miles from home to Accrington, start work at nine and finish over eight hours later.

By the time I had reached the Brooklyn Bridge my escort canoe and boat had found me. By the Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges I was struggling to get into the swim, it felt cold and my mind was on the pain not my stroke. At my first feeding point my boat crew suspected something was wrong when I scrapped my feeding strategy of banana and high energy drink for a banana and a cup of tea to the amusement of the American's on my boat.

The second and third hours were better; I was sharing my swim with a couple of other swimmers acutely aware of each other's positions. Entering the Harlem River I felt good with a stroke count of 74. I was thinking of what my friends and family would be doing back home and how two or three would be worrying about me. I was now definitely swimming on my own and not knowing whether the two swimmers near me were in front or behind.

Past the Yankee Stadium the whole pace of the day had changed, no more rough waters and a little flood tide to contend with I was now counting down the bridges to the half way point at the Columbia University 'C' painted on the river cliff face.

There are fourteen bridges to go under in the Harlem ranging in style from the fabulous blue Henry Hudson to the adjacent Amtrak swing bridge, which heralds the majestic Hudson River. Turning left into the Hudson you are immediately in awe of the George Washington Bridge spanning the great Hudson River. The bridge is so high and so wide that it never appears to move closer, despite this being a relatively fast part of the swim.

The river holds secret cold patches, which you try to loose as quickly as you find them if the cold is starting to get to you. They say that the colder the water the faster the currents. With about six miles still to go I switched back to tea at my feeds every 45 minutes. My crew was not overly concerned as my stroke rate had not dropped below 70 and in their opinion "My stroke was good".

The last part of the race is the most exciting, you must hug the river's edge by the World Trade Centre, here the currents are extremely fast and to swim here is a never to be forgotten experience. Then before you know it, it is all over past the Jewish Museum and to Battery Park and out by the same steps from which you entered the water. Eight hours, ten minutes and two seconds after starting.

Crying in my goggles I was quickly wrapped in foil and congratulated. Alison Streeter, other swimmers, organisers and the Brits all found me with warm congratulations. I remembered that I am a long distance swimmer and this is my extended family. Now I was happy.