

Changes in thinking about the English Channel

Mike Oram (14th Feb 2004)

Dear Ahelee,

You missed pilots off that list requesting comments.

From what I remember Suzanne did have a "fantastic shape" -- but in those days there was not a lot of "special training" just the regular plods with a few sprints to liven things up.

It was the beginning of the birth of "TBC" training (total body confusion) for Channel swimming and getting to analyse and know how different it was from the "norm". It was also a period of rethink for the piloting side of the swim and a period of change in the piloting methods.

There was a sudden upsurge of people wanting to swim the Channel in the 1980's and a lot of them came with a target in mind. We studied the swimmers and the piloting closely and because of the results we changed our piloting and started to "navigate the swim" in an effort to get the quickest time for a crossing.

When Angela and I started piloting in 1982 everyone left Shakespeare beach about an hour after HW on Neap tides and pointed at France - the landing area was in Wissant bay and down towards Calais (sometimes the other side of Calais).

This was illogical for performance swims as everyone swam at a different speed. It was pot luck if you had a good swim or where you finished - even if you finished.

The thought at the time was that you needed to be North of ZC2 buoy when the tide turned - which meant only the fastest swimmers could land at or near Cap Gris Nez. If you missed the tide you swam for at least an extra couple of hours or more to reach the French shore around Sangatte through to Calais.

The logistics of navigation said that the best method of plotting the course was to start at the finish and work backwards working out the different start times and the different courses. In those days we did not have computer programs to help and had to do the calculations by hand (or write our own programs that did not always do what we wanted and usually took longer than the traditional methods). Suzanne's swim was one of the many new starts we tried on paper and she decided to "have a go". (She was a great girl and a great swimmer.)

The outcome of all this was the new courses and different start times (and places) that we use today. It also showed that if the weather is good Spring swims were a possibility and that they could be faster. (Another thing we have proved over the years).

Almost any pilot could start a swimmer around HW and point them at France and get them there with the simplest of training. (some still do that).

To do the job properly however the pilot has to work hard - continually adjust the course - have a lot of luck - and have a good guess at what the weather and tide are going to do (sorry I forgot - a lot of people have told me this is a "precise art" that can be calculated from all the information available and is easy)

Like the swimmers striving for speed the pilot strives for the "perfect" swim.

The most important thing you can do to get a fast time is work with your pilot. The information you give him needs to be "honest and true". Over estimating your swim speed by even a few yards causes a lot of trouble for the pilot on the water. Remember you are crossing 19 nautical miles of water and aiming to land in an area that is only 1000 yards wide.

It can be done however as was showed by Alison's 32nd swim when she became "Queen of the Channel". We swam from France to England and finished the swim by coming through the Western Entrance of Dover harbour to a reception committee planned on the beach in front of the Churchill Hotel. (At that time I know how Alison swam and could judge her mood when she got on the boat - can not do that with her now though).

Blaming the weather or the sea conditions or the pilot are not the answer to the swimmers problems. If you want to swim in flat calm water and not have the problems of the fickleness of the tides- stay in the pools or lakes.

Bilateral breathing is "a must" not an option. It enables you the choice of the best swim area and spreads the strain over your muscles and body. Good fast feeding is also very important. You need the right feed and a well tried feeding pattern - it will save you time - a lot of time over a 10 hour swim. Remember that you need to swim into the boat and then get back out and into your rhythm each time you stop. This time is not measured in the conventional feed timing (which is only the time you are actually feeding).

How often should you feed?

3 x 20 min feeds compared to 2 x 30 min feeds could cost you an extra 3 mins of swim time. Hourly feeds for the first 3/4 hours is another option to be considered.

(If you swim at 1 nm an hour - that's slow, 2000yards - you are doing 33.3yards every minute) That's at least 100 yards lost every stop by the time you swim into the boat and out again. OR 300 yards an hour per feed. That's for a slow swimmer swimming at 2000 yards an hour. The average is 1.5 nm - 3000 yards - and the fast swimmers are doing 2nm plus - in excess of 4000 yards.

Work out your loss at your swim rate –

The average swimmer at 3000 yards hour feeding every 20 mins could be losing 450 yards each feed during the hour. Dropping the extra feed and doing 30 min feeds saves 450 yards (getting on for 2 miles on a 12 hour swim)

I usually estimate a loss of 15% on the time the swimmers give me for their pool distance over an hour. Frightening isn't it. For those of you out there saying "Bullshit" we have a very good example for you to think about.

In 2002 we had 2 swimmers over from the USA Annette Holmgren & Julie Peterson. They are good friends and trained together for their Channel swims. They both swam at the same rate and said they were very well matched during their training.

Annette swam with Lance on Sea Satin in 11 hours 27 mins.

Julie swam with me on Aegean Blue in 13 hours 23 mins.

Both started their swim from Shakespeare and entered the water at 0437. (Neap tides) Their courses were identical all the way over and they both landed 1/2 mile to the west of Fort Mahon at Ambleteuse (3.5 miles South of Cap Gris Nez.).

The feed patterns were the same - hourly to start with then down to 30 mins.

The difference was in the feeding - Julie stopped to feed and treaded water - Annette rolled on her back and kicked her legs while feeding. The difference showed clearly on the hourly plots with Annette pulling away by 400/500 yards or so every hour.

That saved her 2 hours (well 1 hour 56 mins to be exact) on her 11 hour 27 mins swim. OR about 500 yard every hour. Makes things like speed suits and clipping a second or 2 of your lengths time look insignificant doesn't it.

I'm not saying that you should not perfect your stroke and striving for a good speed is good mental conditioning. What I am saying is that Channel swimming is different - it needs a different understanding and a different approach.

Strokes are different (head higher and be prepared for no water to pull through when riding the waves or in a choppy sea.) Your mental state needs to be positive and motivated - no negative thoughts and no set limits.

Speak to Phil Rush - Alison Streeter - Chad Hunderby - Marcy McDonald - Marcia Cleveland- John and Tammy Van Wise - the list is never ending. They will all tell you that the getting there is what matters "everything else is a bonus".

A lesson most of them have learnt in the Channel.

Mike