

Leaside Sports Hall of Fame

On November 15, 2019, Bob Weir was inducted into the Leaside Sports Hall of Fame. He wrote the following commentary in honour of being recognized as an accomplished marathon swimmer.

Odyssey of a Marathon Swimmer

Solo Swims of Ontario is a provincially-sponsored safety organization that sanctions all swims across Lake Ontario, or any of the Great Lakes. It appoints a Swim Master, who is responsible for monitoring a swim from a safety stand-point, not only for the swimmer but also for the entire entourage.

I was pleased to be the president of Solo Swims for 12 years. I was also a regular Swim Master and, in addition to my own swim attempts, I have acted as Swim Master and/or Coach for a total of 24 successful swims, and a few unsuccessful ones.

I, myself, have attempted around 20 marathon swims, not all of which were successful. As satisfying as it is to complete a long-distance swim, it is equally gratifying for me to help other swimmers achieve their goals. In this respect, my most rewarding experience was being the Coach and Swim Master for Paula Stephanson, who became only the second person to swim successfully across all five Great Lakes.

Solo Swims adheres to the rules and regulations of the English Channel Swimming Association. These rules prohibit artificial aids, meaning no wet suits, fins, flippers, snorkels, or hand paddles. A swimmer is allowed only a bathing suit, a bathing cap, and swim goggles.

I was very pleased to be inducted into the Leaside Sports Hall of Fame because, interestingly, I did all of my preliminary training for my swim across Lake Ontario in the Leaside Swimming Pool.

Of all my marathon swims, Lake Ontario was by far the most eventful. I completed the 54-km (32-mile) swim in August 1989 at the age of 46. I was the 27th successful swimmer at that time. Now there are 65!

Every swimmer knows that a swim across Lake Ontario means that part of the swim will be in the dark. From across the lake, if the night is clear, one can easily see the Toronto skyline and one can make out the CN Tower and the Rogers Centre. But the rest of it is just a blur of lights. If the night is cloudy, one cannot see anything. My night was cloudy.

I set off at 11:30 pm from the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, which is where the Niagara River flows into Lake Ontario. At that point, the river is flowing at about 4 kilometres per hour, a goodly pace.

So, in I go. I swam out to the centre of the river to take maximum advantage of the river's current. However, because of the configuration of the shoreline where the river enters the lake, the river is not aiming towards Toronto. Oh, no, it is heading for Burlington. So, course correction is necessary!

After an hour of swimming, it was time for my first feeding. I looked back from where I had come and the shore looked quite far away. I was about four km out. This is a piece of cake, I thought. I will be across in no time. Except that the river's current pretty much ends at that point.

There are also wind-driven surface currents to contend with. These are not a big deal for a boater but, for a swimmer plodding along, these surface currents can throw the swimmer's direction way off course.

It was about this time, after an hour or so of swimming, that I noticed that the wind was starting to build up, gently at first, but growing stronger. Within half an hour, I was in a real storm. No rain, but really strong winds, which were coming directly out of the east, i.e., from Kingston, so they had the whole fetch of the lake to build up size and intensity.

Waves on Lake Ontario are not short, choppy, and annoying. Nope, they are big, rolling, and annoying. I was soon in 6 to 8 foot rollers, so I literally had to swim up one side and slide down the other.

I had a sailboat as my lead boat because it can keep a course better at a slow speed. The sailboat also has the advantage of having a mast with a light at the top, so a swimmer can use it for direction in the dark.

Then there is a power boat, to house the crew, prepare food for the swimmer and the crew and, most importantly, be used for evacuation purposes in times of emergency.

For lifeguard boats, I used two 16-foot inflatable Zodiacs with 10 horse-power motors, with one on each side of me and as close by me as reasonably possible.

It was not easy for any of these boats in the weather conditions we now found ourselves. I tried to follow the light on the top of my sailboat's mast, but the sailboat was bobbing in the waves, rocking and rolling from side to side to such an extent that I thought I was going to be hypnotized.

I usually breathe bi-laterally, that is, on both sides. However, if I turned my head to the right, all I saw was a wall of water, or I would get a wave right in the face. The first time a wave crested on top of me, I heard a mighty WOOSH! It scared the heck out of me.

The next incident was that the lifeguard Zodiac on my right was continually being pushed towards me and often had to pull out and circle back around. As I was now breathing only to my left, I could not see the Zodiac on my right and one time it slid right on top of me. That also scared the heck out of me. I was underneath it. Fortunately, the driver did not panic because, if he had and gone forward, the prop would have shredded my feet. It was because of this incident that I consulted with another member of Solo Swims and we came up with a metal cage that could be attached to and around the motor prop.

So, I am breathing only to my left and, whenever the other Zodiac was in view, I could see either my Coach or one of my lifeguards taking turns puking over the side. Obviously, I was not the only one having fun out there.

For all of my swims, I devised a simple way to feed that was particularly effective in wavy conditions such as I now found myself, and that is to use a plastic sports bottle at the end of a 15-foot rope. The coach or lifeguard throws out the bottle, which floats. I swim over to it, pull up the nipple, drink, close it, drop it for the lifeguard to haul in, and continue swimming. Quick and easy.

My feedings consisted of warm clear soups, coffee and tea, sliced up peaches and pears that slither down, liquefied oatmeal, and my favourite, Blueberry Boost. Normally, I would not recommend chocolate because it gives you an immediate burst of energy but it dissipates quickly. However, in cold water, it melts in your mouth very, very slowly, so the energy intake is prolonged.

I was supposed to attempt my swim on August 4-5 but a big storm came out of the north on August 2 and whipped up the waves such that the thermocline, which can go down a hundred feet or more, was turned upside down. Now the cold water from beneath was lying on top of the lake. Before the storm, the surface temperature was 72F. After the storm retreated, it was 58F. Three weeks later, when I finally did go, it had only crawled back up to 63F. For my entire swim, the water temperature ranged between 63F and 65F, which is equivalent to 17-18C. Chilly! What is interesting to me is that I can tell when the water temperature changes even just one degree.

For ages, it has been the custom for a swimmer to be slathered head to toe in some form of grease protection against the cold water. Long ago, swimmers used to use bear grease or automobile lubricant, but these did not allow the skin to breathe and, therefore, could be dangerous, even fatally so. What I used on my Lake Ontario swim was anhydrous sheep's lanolin.

Contrary to popular belief, the lanolin is not designed to keep the cold out but to keep the body heat in. But after being immersed in cold water for a few hours, the body succumbs to that medium. It gets cold, and the Swim Master is ever watchful for signs of hypothermia. The lanolin not only becomes ineffective after a few hours, but also it solidifies and breaks off in chunks. I never used lanolin again, or any kind of grease for cold-water protection, but I understand where it could benefit a swimmer psychologically.

In subsequent swims, what I did use was a substance known as Ihle's Paste, which typically contains 25% zinc oxide. This is the same stuff that skiers put on their nose during spring-skiing. I am fair-skinned and I sunburn easily. Ihle's Paste is a great sun-blocker. I applied it liberally to the back of my neck, all over my entire back, and to the back of my legs. It also does not wear off in the water.

I also recommend that swimmers apply Vaseline to areas easily chafed, which would be the arm-pits and the inner thighs.

Back to my swim. Finally, dawn breaks and the sun rises out of the lake. What a glorious sight. And soon that sun will warm my cold, cold body.

Around 1:30 in the afternoon, after swimming for 14 hours, I felt a slight twinge in my left shoulder. An hour later I was unable to raise my left arm out of the water. But, what I could do was extend it straight out under the water and then I could take a stroke, without pain. So, not exactly a dog-paddle and not a normal arm stroke but I was making progress. I carried on like that for another 7 hours until I finished at 9:38 pm, 22 hours 8 minutes in the water, start to finish.

During the first hour of any of my swims, I would ask myself a few times, "Why am I doing this? Again?"

Not surprisingly, I am frequently asked that question. The easy answer is "because it is there", but it is more than that. It is a challenge! Life is full of challenges, some small, some big, and some awe-inspiring. We all love a challenge, to pit ourselves against the odds, be it running a marathon, climbing a mountain, sailing around the world, or dealing with a physical disability. Whatever! For me, I have an ability to swim long distances. So, I accept that challenge. Go for it.

The other thing I am asked about is what do you think about out there? In the beginning hours of a swim, a swimmer's mind is fully aware. We think about all sorts of things, including: why am I doing this?

I sing to myself. In the swim's beginning, I can usually sing the whole song. Around 5 hours in, maybe I can sing half of it. After 10 hours or so, maybe I can sing one or two lines.

At that point, I can no longer concentrate. I become a robot, one arm in front of the other. My mind goes blank. My brain goes into neutral. I cannot focus on anything. My wife, Joyce, shrugs and says she has to deal with me like that every day! Reaching this mental neutral state is nirvana for me because I am no longer aware of the slow passage of time. Now it is just a "mindless" swim.

You would be surprised how clean it is out in the middle of the lake, but there is stuff in the lake and, whether swimming during the day or in the night, when you take an arm stroke and touch something other than water, be it floating sea-weed, plastic, a piece of wood or cardboard, a dead fish, or whatever, it scares the heck out of you. Frightened, you recoil, which can actually cause you to go into a cramp.

Another obstacle on the lake is the large tankers, which average 500 to 600 feet in length, with the largest lake freighter on the Great Lakes being 1,013 feet. They can reach speeds of 20-22 mph or 32-36 kilometres per hour. Needless to say, they cannot and will not stop for some idiotic swimmer in the middle of the lake.

I actually had Paula Stephanson swim in a westerly direction for about 20 minutes while we let a lake freighter go by. The problem with these big tankers is that they stir up the water and bring the cold water to the surface for about a kilometre. Also, they can leave diesel residue or other contaminants that are released from their bilges on the surface of the lake. Not fun to swim through!

There are interesting creatures in Lake Ontario. Up to the 1950s, lampreys (erroneously called lamprey eels) were very prevalent. This jawless fish has small but very sharp teeth and a large vacuous mouth which attaches to its prey and then, with its rasping tongue, it sucks the blood from its victim. On my Lake Erie swim, I saw a large fish jump out of the water trying to shake off a lamprey.

These blood-suckers eventually were greatly reduced in number when a 1950s Canadian-U.S. Great Lakes Fishery Commission introduced an eradication program which was very successful until it was halted in the early 2000s. Now, the lampreys are making a come-back.

In the 1950s, there were numerous open-water competitive swims in Lake Ontario. Although rare, it did happen that a lamprey would attach to a swimmer, usually on a fleshy part being either the inner thigh or the lower back. If a lamprey had attached to me, I am sure that I would have had a heart attack. Fortunately, one never did.

However, I know of a swimmer who did have a lamprey attach to him. He calmly pressed both cheeks with thumb and index finger, which easily breaks the vacuum, and then he just tossed the lamprey off. He was pretty cool.

The other species in Lake Ontario is fish, the largest being the lake trout, which can range up to 20, 30, 40 pounds, or more than 20 kilograms. Fish are very curious and they check out everything to see if it could be food.

In order to see a swimmer in the dark, Solo Swims requires that two glo-sticks be attached to the swimmer's bathing suit. These fluorescent tubes are about six inches long and are activated by snapping the tubes and then shaking them to mix the chemicals, which glow brilliantly green, red, or orange and are easily visible in and under the water.

I know a swimmer who, prior to his actual swim, wanted to get in some experience for himself and his crew of doing some night swimming.

So, he attached a glo-stick to his bathing suit and was swimming along in the dark in Lake Ontario when he felt a definite tug on his suit. A large lake trout obviously had been attracted to the glo-stick and was checking it out as to whether it was suitable to eat. Then there was a real strong tug and the fish completely ripped the glo-stick off of the swimmer's bathing suit and, in the process, actually pulled the bathing suit right off of him.

So, there he was, totally naked in the water and absolutely exposed.

Now, every swimmer brings along a second set of gear. He told me that he swam the fastest 50 metres in his life over to the lifeguard boat to get another bathing suit before that fish came back for dessert.

Well, he really did not have to worry, because being immersed in cold water for a while shrinks everything.

Thanks very much.

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