

A short diary of The English Channel swim.

My Channel swim window opened on the 22nd June. I had been waiting 3 years for this, training multiple times a day. Completing breathing exercises and preparing my mind and body for my toughest challenge ever. 6 months before the window opened I stopped doing any sports other than swimming and tennis to make sure I was ready. I even stopped drinking alcohol to give my body the best possible chance to build itself. Also, the easiest excuse to not get up and get in the sea early in the morning is a hangover. So I was off the beers (and Gin and all other delicious concoctions that I so loved).

Some time before my window opened I was told I would be swimming on Friday the 30th June. Ideal! I took a week off before hand to ensure I was suitably rested, I stocked myself with tasty treats to feed me up and made a nest on the sofa so I didn't have to use any muscles to sit. But it was not meant to be. The bad news hit on the 28th June 2023. A swimmer attempting to cross the channel died. He disappeared under the waves and wasn't found again for nearly a month when his body washed up in Belgium. A sad day for the Channel Swimming fraternity and a stark reminder as to why, swimming slowly for hours and hours and hours is indeed an extreme sport. This added to both the stress and the worry and moved my swim date a day later.

Unfortunately the weather turned and on Saturday 31st I was told to stand down and await instructions. It can not be understated how difficult this was. I was now expect to do only small swims during the week and one medium length swim (3 - 4 hours) at the weekend so as to keep me fit but not tiered. This might have to be kept up into the next season if the weather did not improve. The mental strain of not knowing when it could happen was really difficult, I started to find even simple 3 hour swims difficult mentally and started feeling grumpy about how I looked, having put on 20kg to keep me warm and buoyant in the channel. I failed to climb a ladder on the playstation game "Call of Duty" one day and was killed, I nearly cried. I was falling apart emotionally.

Still, at 11:34 on Tuesday the 15th August I received an email from Eddie Spelling the pilot of Anastasia and the man I trusted to get me from England to France. The email asked whether I wanted to be the third swimmer in the window 17th August to the 22nd August. Needless to say I accepted immediately with little thoughts of the weather or my

readiness. I just wanted it DONE. It left, potentially, only 2 days to get ready mentally and physically.

On Friday the 18th I was emailed telling me I would be swimming on the 22nd August starting at 1am!!! I would get little sleep and swim in the early hours. Hopefully I would be ready, I cancelled my surfing holiday and began stretching and breathing exercises again, ready to get going.

On Monday 21st, the day before my swim, the head aches started. I woke up tense and worried about everything. I had already woken up in the night in a panic that I had not sent the right forms to the crew but there was nothing more I could do.

The plan was to drive down to Dover that afternoon, giving me time to scope out the area so there were no surprises in the morning. Mum, Dad and I packed the car and waited for Brenna who had managed to finish work early despite the short notice. We drove to Dover listening to Ross Edgleys audio book on swimming round great Britain. It has some excellent things to reflect on and he is a wonder of enthusiasm.

Compared to what he has achieved my little dip was nothing. It was the perfect thing to keep any worries at bay during the long drive to the coast.

We arrived and drove safely to where we would be picked up in the morning, then drove to Shakespeare beach where we thought we would set off from, in the dark at 1am the next day. I looked from the beach across the boisterous sea to France, just visible in the distance. I went quiet. The sea was much rougher than I expected and France seemed a very very long way away. The head aches started again. My crew (Dad mostly) did their best to reassure me that the sea would calm down over night but that did little for me at this time. We headed back to the rented flat and I began yet more breathing exercises to try and calm myself down. After some home made (by Brenna) Spaghetti bolognese we went to bed, at 7pm, in the hope of getting a few hours sleep before the biggest challenge of my life.

My alarm went off at 0000. I had slept well, I awoke with no head aches and immediately started doing breathing exercises before getting out of bed and heading to the kitchen to eat breakfast. I had cereal, tea and a home made protein shake (some 750 calories). Then stretched, foam rolled and set out into the dark to get picked up by the boat, Anastasia. I was nervous but ready to go.

There was a queue at the gate of the marina when we arrived just before 1am. One man waiting was part of a relay of school kids meeting their boat ready for a 6 person crossing. They got out of the van and I couldn't help thinking how small they all were, each of them enveloped in a snug dry robe. If they were brave enough to face this challenge then so was I. The other man waiting turned out to be Tony, the observer for my swim. He called Eddie to come and collect us while he explained to me the forms that I needed to fill in and told me about his hand signals that I needed to look out for during the swim. All seemed clear. I went to lift one of the heaviest bags from the floor to load into the luggage cart and everyone told me off; "you can't strain yourself now" they exclaimed, frustrated. I put the bag back down and began to walk toward to boat leaving everything behind. Someone else would have to strain themselves this morning. My time was coming.

Anastasia was loaded with our kit and we were given a short safety briefing about the boat. Little of it applied to me as I sincerely hoped I wouldn't be on the boat very much during the day. After the briefing we began to pull away from the dock. Mum stood with her toes on the very end of the pier waving goodbye and taking picture. If she fell in was it my job to save her or someone else's? After all I wouldn't want to strain myself before the big swim.

As we battled our way through the waves off Dover I couldn't help but hope, beg even, that the waves would die down. They did not. After rocking across the sea for around 10 minutes, I was given a 15 minute warning so we all leapt to action. Dad and Brenna began the task of sun creaming anything that would be in the sun for this battle against mother nature. I put my ear plugs in and began lubing up I used almost half a tub of Ocean Lube on anything that I thought might rub. I did not want chaffing to be something that took my mind off the task at hand. Any edge I could give myself to make this as easy as possible I would take. We arrived, not at Shakespeare beach as I had hoped but at Samphire Hoe. A beach slightly further along the coast but a beach that was not currently covered in water due to the tide. I shook Dad's hand and Eddie's, kissed Brenna and walked to a gate in the side of the ship that was opened by Mike. He was holding an enormous spot light and told me to hop in, swim to the beach put my arm in the air and, as soon as I was flashed, to start. I had planned to get in elegantly, by lowering myself gently down into the sea and dropping the last 50cm. Unfortunately by hands were still covered lube and, rather than lowering

myself gently, I slipped immediately and fell in sideways. I am still unsure as to whether or not anyone noticed but off I swam.

I swam to the beach but had put my goggles on without spitting into them or washing them out. I knelt in the waves bashing me around while I tried to sort out the goggles, I was being knocked backwards and forwards and my mouth was already full of salt water so I was struggling to wash the goggles correctly. I had opened a brand new pair just in case so I hoped this would be enough to keep them fog free. They also had a green water proof light clipped to the back so putting them on in the waves turned out to be extremely difficult. I eventually dragged myself out of the sea and onto the pebble beach and was relieved to be in the right spot. As I was swimming from the boat to beach I had noticed there were two spot lights shinning onto the beach. I chose the one that seemed most in line with my boat, I chose right. Everything except those two spot lights was pitch black.

I stood on the pebbles did a last minute check, turned round to the boat, put my arm in the air and immediately the spot light flashed. I plunged into the dark water, spot light in my eyes and knew I wouldn't be touching dry land for at least half a day.

Even swimming from the beach to the boat was difficult. The waves were hitting me in the face and were much bigger than I had expected they would be. Trying to spot the boat, breath regularly and swimming with a nice long, strong stroke was extremely hard. Judging the boats distance was also an unexpected challenge in the dark. One moment I was far to close so I would swim away and then suddenly all I could see was the spot light. I zig zagged left and right and forwards for hours. Unfortunately I couldn't see my support crew. They were stood directly under the flood light shinning into the water on the port side of the boat where I was swimming. This meant every time I looked up I was dazzled by the light rather than seeing their face and/or hand signals. Brenna later told me she had been doing extra big smiles while it was dark to keep me going, unfortunately I couldn't see any of it.

The first feed went well, a glow stick was gaffe taped to the side of the bottle so I could see it and it was dangled off the edge of the boat. I remember thinking how fast the first hour had been. I had been so busy keeping track of my swim stroke, distance from the boat and trying hard to enjoy myself that the first hour sped by. When I stopped I was told by the crew that everyone was impressed with my swimming

stroke, this was great to hear as I was pretty unimpressed with how I was swimming in the difficult conditions.

Unfortunately, the second hour did not go so fast. My zig zagging was making it hard to get a good rhythm going, I was only able to breathe on one side due to the waves and I was still unable to see any of the crew in the spot light.

Half way through hour two the sun's rays were showing over the horizon. This was great as I had shivered a few times in the dark water. It was nice to be able to see the crew, and seeing the boat a little more meant I was no longer zig zagging around. Things were looking up. When the sun finally rose above the horizon, and I was given my 4th feed, I knew I was 4 hours in. I was swimming quite well although it was much harder than I expected in such big swells. I knew I had trained well but I did regret the lack of practice swimming directly into the waves. I had always practiced swimming along them at Bournemouth beach.

I did not enjoy hour 4 despite the sun being up. So, from the water, I asked Brenna to feed me "all the pills" when I next had a feed. She fed me paracetamol, ibuprofen and caffeine to keep me going. I loved the swim between hours 5 and 6. The sea flattened out slightly, I created a youtube channel in my head and ran through episodes and what I could do to promote it. I was enjoying myself.

Incredibly, sometime after 6am, a large school of dolphins appeared on the starboard side of the boat. Brenna acted out a dolphin to me but I was not doing brilliantly at charades from the water. Also they were on the wrong side of the boat so I couldn't see them at all. It was clear something was happening however because the whole crew was staring in the wrong direction. They were so distracted watching these dolphins leaping from the water that I was left behind. The boat kept pulling ahead and I couldn't keep up. Brenna said that she suddenly noticed no one was looking out for me and her heart leapt that when she looked along the side of the boat and I wasn't there. "Oh shit" said a member of the crew as they realised they had left me behind so slowed and waited for me to catch up. A short while later I could hear the clicking and squeaking of dolphins in my ears, I pulled my head from the water "Dolphins dead ahead" I shouted as I saw their fins breach the surface. I put my head back in the water just in time to see two grey rockets swim under me. I am glad I knew they were dolphins. It was like

they had come onto my side of the boat to cheer me on. I had swum with wild dolphins.

I realised that I hadn't reached the separation zone yet. Everyone I had spoken to said this was one of the worst bits of their whole swim. Everything gets stuck in the separating zone, sewage, floating debris and... Jellyfish. I was not looking forward to swimming through the jellyfish soup.

As I was coming up on hour 6 and had still not hit the separation zone I began to reconsider the swim. I had been hoping my crossing would take 11hrs 20 minutes. Maybe 12 if I was getting tiered. I swam along in my own little wet world, coming to terms with the fact that this swim was going to take much longer than I had planned. I reminded myself that I would make myself swim until the sun went down again, and only then was I allowed to consider the idea that I was not going to make it. So I realigned my expectations for a 15 hour swim instead of a 12 hour swim and kept on going. Luckily, at feed number 6 I was told with a cheer from Brenna and Dad that I had reached the half way point 2 minutes ago! I was back on track AND I had missed the horrible stuff getting caught in the separation zone. A weight off my mind. The next problem; my eyes were beginning to droop, I was sleepy having had little sleep and been working hard for hours and hours. I requested more caffeine, Brenna was on it.

So I kept battling on, Brenna and Dad had started feeding me rice pudding or tinned peaches along with my feeds to line my stomach. The rice pudding didn't go down well but the peaches were amazing. At one point I couldn't get the pieces of peach out of the milk bottle they had been passed to me in. One has got stuck at the top and I couldn't get it. Passing the bottle back to Brenna she shook and held out her hand. She was far too far away to pass it to me so instead she threw it to me. I dropped it of course and it fell into the sea. That was not going to stop me, I used both hands to scoop it up out of the sea and ate it sea water and all. I needed those calories.

I started the count down in my head "6 feeds to go and I could be there". I also remembered some solid advice from Brenna's friend Tom, who had done a relay across the channel. He said "when you reach the separation zone you know you're half way. Half way in distance, not necessarily in time". I kept this running through my head as I plodded on.

My mouth was beginning to hurt, my tongue was swollen and uncomfortable and I had constant seawater up my nose, breathing was becoming painful simply because of my salty sinuses. I had also started making odd little noises. As I was holding my breath (the recommended thing to do when your face is in water) and straining with every stroke to make it as efficient as possible I had started letting out odd squeaks and moans as I swam through the water. I was telling my self to stop as it was oddly off putting. I started to imagine Mer people in the darkness of the water squeaking at me. It was an odd time. I suppose staring into the abyss was starting to get to me.

The next few hours, had little to talk about. The waves picked up again, I could no longer breath normally due to their size. I had to rotate almost all the way over onto my back to get my mouth clear of the water. That also meant that I had to use my legs to stabilise myself and stop me going all the way over onto my back. Dad kept shouting encouraging things when ever I stopped but I showed my first sign of weakness. I said "I am tired" as I stopped for a feed. Dad jumped to action "remember the 40% rule". Yes I replied, I hit 40% 20 mins ago. Still I swam on.

For anyone that doesn't know, the 40% rule is something the US Navy Seals came up with. They state that when your mind starts telling you you're done, you're only actually 40% done. You still have 60% left but your mind is trying to protect your body. It is a really important part of ones training to learn to turn that voice in your head down.

I started skipping real food and just focused on the feeds. I was feeling sick and full and regularly throwing up into my mouth and pushing it all back down. I knew I needed to keep swimming. Around this time my stroke rate slowed down. I had been swimming for perhaps 10 hours and was aching and chaffed. I had been stung by one big jelly fish on the shoulder that really hurt and 4 or so littler ones on my elbows, legs and bum. When I took a jelly fish to the face (luckily the non stingy end of it) I pulled my head out of the water in shock. "So many Jelly fish I shouted", I was bracing myself for the worst. Perhaps this was the swarm I had been mentally preparing for for 3 years. But it never came.

I think it is important to note at this point that despite my constant complaints about my mouth and the chaffing, this is nothing new to any long distance swimmer. Chaffing is a constant battle in training and

during the real thing, so is salt tongue, although this was reaching the next level. The jellyfish were off putting but I was in their house, not the other way round. I share these complaints as a way for you all to know how I felt, not to try and make out I was having it any harder than anyone else.

What I did find a little distracting when swimming the channel is that you have an observer. Mine was Tony. Tony was a lovely man, he even had a hand signal for “I am here with you” to show you support in your low moments. I felt he wanted me to succeed almost as much I did. But every time anything happened Tony reached for his folder and began writing. I had a large sneezing fit and did breast stroke until it was over. I was sneezing into the water and I could hear Brenna laughing. Out of the corner of my eye I could see it, Paul writing it down. My jellyfish to the face, Tony wrote it down. Although it was slightly disconcerting, it was his job and will be fascinating to read his observations of my swim. But having Tony take note of every moment of inactivity was amazing. I didn't want to see him writing anything so it became a game, if I needed to sneeze, I would hold it until he look away then sneeze without him seeing. It was just one of things I used to keep my head down and my arms turning.

At this point I realised that half a tin of lube had not been enough, my arm pits were rubbing, the lube had been washed off by the sea and the estimated 22,000 strokes I had take so far. I could feel them becoming more and more raw but it was important not to let this stop me. I had to push it from my mind and ensure I kept going. Unfortunately I began notice yet another sore patch. My neck! This had never rubbed in all my training over the last three years. It seems that due to the poor conditions and the fact that I kept looking forwards to spot jellyfish ahead of time, or keeping half an eye out for France, that I had been looking forward far longer than I had ever done in training. Both sides of the back of my neck were becoming red and raw, particularly the right side where I was having to look up to see the crew on Anastasia. I told myself none of this mattered it wasn't going to make me stop.

I was not having much fun and couldn't wait to get it over with. Luckily at no point did I think “I cant do this”. I spent a lot of time thinking “I wish I wasn't doing this” and then I carried on. I kept reminding myself that I had promised to swim until the sun went down again. I kept smiling underwater, a mental trick that I find really helps. It helps because in the same way that our face displays our emotions, our

emotions can be guided by our face. If you ever feel down put a pen in your mouth, it forces your face into a smile and can often make you feel much better. Brenna was doing a great job of smiling at me (another trick that has been proved to be a very effective way of reducing an athletes perceived pain and fatigue) every time I looked at her and she was also blowing me kisses or pretending to hide from me. It was a fun game and kept me going. Anything to distract my mind.

France was in sight. I lost track of the time but I could see France. The tide and the waves were strong I felt as though I wasn't moving anywhere I started trying to swim stronger, dragging myself through the water. When I stopped for a feed I said "I don't think I'm going anywhere". Brenna, Dad and Tony all said I was definitely moving forwards I just needed to keep it up. There was a vague tension on the boat. I was told to speed up my feeds as we were in the teeth of a strong current. Then it happened. Mike came up from down below and said "you need to swim fast and swim fast now". I stopped wasting my time and began swimming hard. Long distance sprint speed, pulling hard breathing regularly while ensuring I wasn't using my nose. My sinuses really hurt at the point. France still wasn't getting closer but I could see we were drifting sideways. I kept trying to check how much of France was left for me to hit. There was a tension on the boat. Everyone was making my feeds as fast as possible working to keep me moving.

I had been sprinting hard for some time, I was looking at Brenna in pain. I wanted her to tell me how far I had left. How much longer it would be, I wanted to know that it would be over soon. Dad was giving thumbs up when my stroke was good, double bicep poses when I was pulling hard. I kept going. Then I skipped my first feed, it must have been hour 12 or 13, I had lost track. My stomach couldn't handle any more. I knew it was important to keep my body fuelled so I shouted to keep it near by but I had already been throwing up into my mouth for some time and my stomach couldn't keep it down any more.

During one of my breaths I took a wave to the face, not for the first time. However this one hit the back of my throat. I flipped onto my back and began backstroking, I wanted to keep moving even if I couldn't breath. I was coughing up sea water and then suddenly emptied my stomach into the sea. Not once but twice. At the point I was still "sprinting" towards France, afraid that I might miss France and be pulled from the water by the boat who might have lost confidence in me.

As I threw up I shouted "I've still got this, I just need a second" and wretched again. I heard Brenna shout from the boat "quuuuick its chasing you". This was a throw back to Ross Edgley who threw up and found to his dismay that his sick kept up with him in the current going the same direction as he was. These little moments of levity really help to lift your mood but I was by no means done.

I got swimming again, picking up pace, I felt at this stage like a man possessed. Tony later joked that I picked up the pace so significantly that my stroke rate had shot up and he had had no idea where I was getting the energy from. France was still racing by sideways and apparently not getting any closer. After half an hour or so I suddenly became fatigued. "Food" I shouted between breaths. Brenna got to it. As soon as it was ready I stopped swimming, downed it, threw it away and quickly swam on. I was in the zone. They were not going to stop me and neither were the waves or the wind. I had been promised that at my next feed I would be out of the waves... This turned out to be incorrect, the waves kept fighting me and I kept going sideways but I began to be able to make out things on the beach, people and umbrellas etc. I could also see that Anastasia's crew were preparing the motorboat. This meant that the big boat was about to wait off the coast while the motorboat brought me in and then picked me up. This gave me a new another new lease of life. I knew that they were confident I would make it. I felt awake, certain for the first time that I could do this. Brenna called from the boat "swim to the **beach**, get clear of the water and wave. Then swim back".

I powered on. I remember thinking, "she must have meant swim to the motorboat that is going to come and collect me, that must be it". But I couldn't see the motor boat anywhere, I had expected it to be along side me as I swam into the beach but not to worry. In fact it was a huge release when Anastasia dropped away. I was free from all that sighting that was chaffing my neck. I was able to swim in the direction I wanted. Straight to the beach, swimming slightly into the current. This is a bad idea across the whole channel but when I could so nearly touch it I knew I could make it.

I began to see yellow at the bottom of the sea rather than murky brown/blue. I reached my foot out and tried to touch the bottom. No such luck. I swam on, reached for the bottom. Still no luck.

On the third try I reached the bottom. I was still chest deep in the water but I was done with swimming. I walked into through the waves and

surf, until I was knee deep at which point I broke into a sprint. Sprint finish baby.

I ran onto the dry sand of the beach and threw my arm into the air as I touched the dry sand. The boat didn't react so I turned and threw both hands into the air. I saw Brenna in her bright orange jumper coat waving back. I had done it. It is hard to describe how I felt in that moment. Mostly I think relief that it was over but certainly a huge amount of pride. My belief in managing to finish had gone up and down a lot, particularly in the last hour and a half as I sprinted forwards but finally, finally it was all worth it.

A young boy stepped up to me and said "you", he acted swimming. "you... from....".

"I swam from England" I smiled. Two ladies stepped up and said "wow from England. How long".

At this point I had no idea, so I guessed at 15 or 16 hours. "How do you feel". I thought about this and then said "Not good. I have been sick a lot and I'm exhausted:". They nodded understandingly. "And now I have to swim back to the boat. This one seemed to really confuse them, but I grabbed a nice flat rock from the beach, shoved it into my trunks and began walking back into the sea. My shoulders hurt. My legs were sore. My tongue was in tatters and my nose was full of salt water, but I had done it.

I walked as far as I could then broke into breast stroke. Then back crawl. Then finally I put my face back in the water and crawled back to the boat. I climbed the ladder to cheers and applause. Brenna kissed me and I sat on the floor. Exhausted. Brenna took the least flattering but most real photo of me that has ever been taken. It shows how I felt, sun burnt, exhausted, unable to think or even know how to sit.

As I slumped on the floor, half dressed and broken Tony came up from down below with a circle of a tree trunk. "This is for you" he said. He had made me a commemorative plaque stating my starting position and time, and my finishing position and time. It was a really nice gesture to mark the moment when I was in so much pain I couldn't even manage a beer.

I swam across The English Channel in 13 hours and 44 minutes. It took around 42,000 front crawl strokes.

I think I enjoyed about 1 hour and 45 minutes of it.

It takes a couple of hours to get back from France so I had time to dress as we chugged along. I say I dressed, Brenna had to do most of it. I managed my shorts and t-shirt but everything else either required too much bending or was simply too confusing so I lay there as she looked after me.

As we pulled into the harbour my Mum was waving for the marina wall. Next to her was a friend of mine, Mike. I had had to cancel a surfing trip to make the swim but that meant cancelling a group of friends surfing expeditions as well. He had driven all the way from Reading just to celebrate my swim with me. He even produced a balloon with a giant "13" printed on it. Next to the 13 he had written "hours ish" indicating the length of my swim, roughly. It was an awesome celebration. He had brought a card from another friend, also called Mike(ey). And we stood by the marina and had a beer.

It is a huge achievement and I am really pleased I did it, but at no point do I remember thinking "oh yea this is great". Seeing the dolphins was amazing, but that took 2 minutes. My one hour of incredible swimming was just a small hour. I enjoyed looking at the stars as I set off but every time I did, I squeed towards the boat so I couldn't look up. I was really really pleased with how I mentally dealt with everything, I did better than I thought I ever would and I am proud of how my body and mind survived. I am proud of how my crew operated and most of all I am pleased that I can get back to doing what ever I want while calling myself a Channel Swimmer. I no longer have to worrying about if I hurt myself for the swim, not worrying about the kilometres I have put in this week, just doing what I want.

Brenna was amazing, she has spent hour after hour sat on the cold beach looking after me. Researching stuff to do with the swim that I needed to know and giving me so much time that could have been couples time. I couldn't have done it without her support. My parents and brother were also awesome. On my Mums birthday, I was swimming the 6 hours of the 7x6 weekend. They came to the beach to watch me swim and my brother even bought me my feeds on a paddle board. Sometimes on his own, sometimes with Brenna or Dad. The Durley Chine swimming group is also amazing, such experience support and advice that can't be found just anywhere. Sarah Liles was a constant source of information, encouragement and support. Sarah also spent hours sat on the beach keeping an eye on me, making feeds

and making sure I got out again. Not to mention all the messages when I needed advice or to be told to get on with it. She is an absolute BEAST when it comes to swimming and what a mentor she was, whether or not she knew that she was one.

It turned out that the forecast on the 22nd August of winds of force two (4 - 6 knots) turned out to be winds of force four - five (11 - 21 knots). So a huge difference in expected effort levels and conditions. Something else I also only found out about after my swim is that I had the honour of sharing The Channel with a world record holder, although no one knew it at that time. While I was battling the waves using my arms and legs to push through, an athlete who is confined to a wheel chair in normal life was also battling through, but she was only using her arms! No leg support for her. I had thought that my 13 hour and 44 minute swim had been hard enough but Sophie Etheridge battled the waves for 29 hours and 4 minutes to complete the longest ever channel swim. It is amazing what one can achieve.

By William May-Miller

Before:



After:

