

Until you have been involved in Channel swimming, no one really understands what it's like. For outdoor swimmers, it is the Olympics and more of marathon swimming. I can't believe that this summer, Aug 19th to be precise, I will have been in this 'game' for 25 years, since it was on that exact date that as a 15 year old, I became the fastest British Junior to swim the Channel. AND at the ripe age of 38, I conquered it again, this time using the most demanding stroke, the 'butterfly', with which I smashed the world record. Despite making this dream come true, there's always something out there that keeps calling me back! This year, it had to be a BIG one, and 'big' it certainly was.

I'd organised and swam in the team that got the British record for the ladies One-Way Channel relay in 2001. Although the weather thwarted our Two-Way attempt in 2003, it only added 'fuel' to our desire, the desire to do what no other female team had ever done in the history of Channel swimming, a Triple crossing: England-France-England-France, a staggering distance of approximately 80 miles. The relay works by swimming an hour each rotating in order for the duration of the swim, overcoming obstacles on the way and "trying' to catch a 'nap' on the accompanying boat, that sways back and forth. You can imagine! So here's the story...

Thurs 22nd July, 7.30pm

Amazing! This time there's no hanging around. The pilot (Reg Brickell the guy from the Channel Swimming Association taking us across the Channel in his boat) has given the go-ahead. Weather appears to be on our side. Last minute preparations, bags packed, a carbohydrate meal and a couple of hours sleep; the prospect of a LONG boat trip awaits us!

Fri 23rd July 2.30am

After the alarm at 1am, a hurried breakfast, the team get together and drive to Folkestone to get the boat. Spirits are high, despite the 'early morning'. Setting off to Samphire Hoe, beach at Dover, it is apparent that the sea is relatively calm. Only an odd seagull and the 'swish' of waves can be heard. The first swimmer, Dee gets ready...incidentally, the swimmers and order are as follows: Dee Llewellyn, Pip Spibey, myself, Liane Llewellyn, Andrea Gellan and Lucy Roper, all experienced long distance swimmers.

3.35am

The hooter sounds, as Dee sets off from the beach. For a start, the swimmer has to be out of the water and to end, the swimmer must clear the water. Drawing alongside the boat, Dee sets into a rhythm, arms and legs going, a fluorescent night stick attached to her costume, we're away...all goes well for that hour. Then, a change-over, as on the hour the next swimmer, Pip, stands on the steps, waits for her to pass and on the observer's signal drops into the water and takes over. Awesome swimming

5.35am

My first swim. The water feels great as I move swiftly into my stroke. Seeing the team from the water spurs me on. It's all about keeping focused and a positive mental attitude. Great swimmers have got out of the Channel because their state of mind has not been right. What do I see, think and feel? Never a moment goes by without some shipping going by, whether it be night or day. There's always the thought of the 'creatures' below, but no sharks, fortunately!! Mid Channel, where the two tides meet, usually there's debris-seaweed, floating wood; I've even seen a witch's broomstick!!

The sight of the next swimmer, Liane, is a welcome sight, a sight that was going to prove more 'welcoming' than I'd ever imagine, the longer the swim went on..

7.30am

I get an expected call from the local radio. It makes us all laugh when he asks me if I am near a landline-what mid Channel? Obviously, he hadn't realised we'd set off. I report on our progress. The 'gang' are doing well. There's been sightings of jellyfish in the water, but nothing at the moment to worry about. On board 'Viking Princess' the girls are either 'resting' in their 'body-bags' to keep dry, or eating down the 'hole'; not many dare go down there for fear of the dreaded sea-sickness. One un-named team member was sick from start to finish!! But, her swimming was still outstanding! Facilities on the vessel are 4* for Channel swimming...bunks, a microwave, a flush toilet (that had to be emptied a few times!), a kettle...no room service though!!

Noon-4.30 ish

After, a 2nd stint that took us across the current to Cap Gris Nez, Liane takes over from me in the water. She moves smoothly to the shore and gets out onto the rocks. She shows us the cuts and grazes from her fall after. We are only 5minutes outside our British record set 2001 (9 hours 28 mins) Way to go team! Andrea and Lucy maintain the rhythm and flow through the water. They'd already swam through a couple of rougher patches and wind, though behind us. As always, Lucy found she had a tanker to race!

5.40pm

My third swim proves frightening for me. Despite all the swimming I've done, I still carry a fear of jellyfish. I don't know why, but I do and am not afraid to admit it. I have to keep so positive and think of the team, as I swim through masses of 'jellies', all different colours and sizes. I can feel myself almost hyperventilating for the hour that I am in the water. It's relentless...they are everywhere. At times like this I realise there is someone looking after me. Everyone on the boat points to me where to go. I just want to get back on the boat, but there's still 30minutes left. I have to hang on. A nother boat circles us to try to clear them. The sun has brought them all up to the surface..finally, I see Liane getting ready. The masses are gradually subsiding...I've never felt so scared. But, I'd overcome my fear' for the team. Gosh, the best feeling in the world to be out.

9.30pm

We can see Dover clearly. There's joy in the camp, as we are definitely on for another record. It's going dark, so Dee and Pip begin the next 'Lightstick' stint. This helps the swimmer to be seen and is a safety aspect of the swim. Text messages from the supporters on shore - where will you land? One can never be quite sure until you are near the shore, as the tide can play havoc. However, Pip strokes out to the beach, at the side of the Hovercraft pier. She lands, then jumps straight back in for our final journey across the waves. Yippee!! We've broken the world record- 19 hours 7 mins, over 1,5 hours quicker than the last ladies team, a record that had been held since 1993 by a Polish team.

Overnight!

Every swim is getting harder. I feel what the rest of the team are going through. It's harder now that the darkness has settled and the night air is colder. We take it in turns to sleep, although the hooter for the take-over only reminds us that the time to our next swim is not far off. Time is going so quick. Swims come around before we know it. Then, as the

sun rises, we get another surge of energy. Unfortunately, the tide on this leg had not helped. For hours we could not get rid of the sight of the Dover Cliffs. I'd been asleep for a few hours, only to re-appear and see the Dover coast still in view!! Everyone encourages and draws on their inner strength. A Channel swim always takes courage and guts. Determination keeps us going. Through the night, there were more 'jellies'; Liane even had some eels swim under her. Though the darkness never bothers me, the thought of my last encounter with 'jellies' makes me very wary. It's when we see France that spurs us on even more. The tide has pushed us more to Calais, so we are approaching France from that side, the tide now swinging in towards the Cape. Who will land us? Will we make it or will we be swept round the corner and miss the Cape (Cap Gris Nez)?

Sat 24th July 10-11.30am

Dee puts in a very strong effort, pulling on those reserves, as does Pip when she gets in for her last time. What a glorious feeling, to know that this is the last hour each of us has to swim. By now, I realise that it will be me taking us in. My attitude is determined that I WILL make it before the Cape.

11.35am

I don't care about what lurks in the waters below. This has been a huge team effort and now I will put in my last 'bit'. I can hear the shouts of the team, as I head for the shore. The dinghy, which accompanies me to the shore, because 'Viking Princess' would get stuck otherwise in the shallow waters, is now at the side of me.

12.07 approx

With each stroke I get closer, then finally I see the ground. I stand and run to clear the water. I throw my arms in the air. What a moment. Never had I landed in France in the light before on any of my Channel swims. I could hear the hooter go for the end. After 32 hours 31 minutes, we'd finally done it. We had made history and become the first ladies team to do the Triple. This meant another world record to add to my existing 10 for long distance swimming. I got back to the boat, amidst the cheers of the girls. Until you have experienced a Channel swim of this kind, you have not really experienced truly what a team can do.

So is this the last I am asked as I get back to the UK? The last, there's never a last...plans are in the pipeline as I write this...sponsorship permitting. All I can say I'm glad for the continued support of 3M Healthcare, Endless Pools, and especially to Aqua Sphere, who came up with more money at the last minute. As always, I am very happy to do my swims for charity, this year again for Rainbows Children's Hospice

WATCH THIS SPACE!!

Julie Bradshaw