



**TIPS AND BITS FOR YOUR CHANNEL SWIM - BY CLIFF GOLDING**  
**(Updated March 2015)**

Hello aspiring Channel swimmers. About seven or eight years ago both Channel swimming governing bodies started to receive more and more enquiries from swimmers wanting to make solo Channel attempts. The Channel Google chat group also noticed an upsurge in questions about training, pilots, feeding and all things Channel swimming. To help answer those questions, and in an attempt to demystify arguably the world's most prestigious and romantic open water swim, I wrote this document. I hoped to get across that there is no such thing as a dumb question pertaining to the mechanics of a Channel swim (apart from "Where do you put your passport?"). Feedback since is that swimmers are relieved to be able to pass the document to their crew and delegate instead of micro managing everything about the swim thereby freeing them to concentrate on training and mental preparation. Of course these Tips and Bits are also applicable to other open water swims - adapt the content to suit.

Each year I update the document and make it freely available to anyone and everyone. Here is the 2015 version.

This is not a definitive list of dos and don'ts but, in no particular order.....

### **Boat**

Check out your boat. Try and meet your pilot in the in the months leading up to your swim or, if you are from afar, when you arrive in Dover before your swim. That gives you a chance to put a name to a face, and see the boat, while you are relaxed. You can also familiarise yourself with facilities on board and the meeting place on your swim day. (**Note:** Find out where your boat is based. During the swim season all the CS&PF boats are berthed at Dover marina, whereas a few of the CSA Ltd boats are moored at Folkestone Harbour). \_

Look at the layout of the boat and the logistics - where things are and how your crew will move about during the swim, especially at night when the pilot won't want all the lights on. During the swim, your team need to know how to get feeds down to you. \_ So, are the sides of the boat high? When you feed are they going to reach down or pass drinks on a pole or line? Preferably they should work this out in the days leading up to the swim, or the hour leading up to your first feed, not during the feed!

## Kit for Boat

Avoid huge containers full of stuff. It would be better to break your kit down into two or three medium size polythene boxes (if you are travelling from overseas these boxes are available cheaply at several places in Dover). It's a nightmare for your support team to have to keep separating their stuff from your bits during the swim so, have one box for food for your support crew, one for all the stuff you need for yourself and another one for your drinks. Take lots of water but restrict yourself to the 1.5 or 2 litre bottles, (the big, 5 litre ones might look practical but they are unwieldy on a rocking boat).

Avoid taking enormous amounts of food as your crew won't eat it all. Lots of soft bread rolls work well with easy to spread fillings. If you take cheese buy the pre sliced variety. This will save your team having to cut slices with a sharp knife on a moving vessel resulting in the certain loss of digits. Trying to find someone's finger flapping about on the floor in the dark is a nightmare, not to say distressing!

Packet soups are excellent. Take lots of savouries too - Chedders, Hula Hoops and crisps, as well as the makings for any hot beverages (including milk - if they nick your pilot's supply they could be walking the plank!). If you are swimming with the CSA check with your pilot but all the CS&PF pilot boats have heating and cooking facilities on board (and toilets/bathrooms/dunnys/kharsis/loos) so, if tummies are strong, and you are behaving yourself in the water, your team might like to knock up a hot meal. Make sure you instruct them to ask the pilot if it's a convenient time to cook. Having said that, my experience is that support teams rarely have the inclination, or the time, for hot food preparation. **Most important though:** Remember to tell your team to keep the boat neat and tidy - especially the kitchen area and toilet. Your pilot and his crew want to take care of you and the swim not clear up after your helpers. (Note: They won't clear up after you, but they will berate everyone loudly until someone else does!)

Once you know you are going think about your feed preparation. Freda Streeter (Dover Beach General who eats nails for breakfast and cracks walnuts in her bare hands!) advises that whatever carb drink you take should be premixed the night before a swim. During the swim a good idea would be for your crew to have one or two flasks (the large, pump action ones are best) constantly full of hot water so they can quickly prepare a feed. It's a pain when, with five minutes to go to a feed, everyone's just had a tea run and the kettle's empty!! (Tip: Take bungees on board to tie down boxes and flasks if they are on deck).

## The Trip from Dover or Folkestone to the Start

If you are doing a CS&PF governed swim, or a CSA governed one where the boat is moored in Dover, you will convene at the marina in Dover. If you are parking a car there go to the marina office - manned 24 hours - and part with

a few pounds in exchange for 24 parking permit. Once you have done that, and everything and everyone is on board, your pilot will gun the engines and motor out of the harbour entrance, turning right towards Shakespeare Beach where your swim will start. Or you might travel a bit further round to Samphire Hoe (Abbot's Cliff) if the pilot wants to start from there. The journey from Dover marina to Shakespeare Beach takes about 15 minutes in all and approximately 30 minutes to Samphire Hoe depending on the start time. For CSA Ltd swimmers meeting their boats in Folkestone, the journey from the harbour to Samphire Hoe is about 30 minutes and around 45 minutes to Shakespeare Beach.

The journey to the start can be a real nervy bit but you just need to stay as calm as you can. You might want to take a sea-sickness (non drowsy) tablet for this journey, just in case. You should have already applied lots of sun cream and now, with about 5 minutes to go, your pilot will tell you to grease up and prepare to enter the water.

The pilot will get very close to the water's edge, turn the boat round tell you to that it's time to get wet. Last minute handshakes and careful kisses (you will be glistening with Vaseline or grease so big hugs are not to be recommended!) and then you are in with shouts of, "**Way to go, you can do it, swim to France**" ringing in your ears. Swim to the shore, clear the water, turn around, raise your hand and wait for the whistle or klaxon and then start swimming. Possibly there will be several other boats milling around at the same time with a swim, either a solo or relay, about to start. Get the line of your boat, swim your own swim - **and enjoy!**

## The Swim is Underway

**Support team:** Your swimmer is underway. Time to put the plans into action. What plans? Read on! First clear away any grease pots and gloves. Pilots quite rightly get frustrated if every surface on deck is smeared with Vaseline or Channel Grease. Next, collect all the clothes together your swimmer has said they need for after the swim and fold them. Attend to the small stuff. (**Tip:** If your swimmer kicked their trainers off untie the shoe laces! Laugh if you will but try undoing tight laces at three in the morning on a rocking boat or try putting tight running socks on cold, clammy feet!). Put all these clothes, with towels, neatly in one sports bag. Put nothing else in the bag! Tie a torch to the strap for ease of access during night-time. Stow it where it can be got at quickly.

**Swimmer:** It's a good idea, pre-swim, for you to prepare a large wash bag with your vital bits in. These include Vaseline/grease, antihistamine, painkilling tablets, spare goggles (**including clear ones for night**), spare cossie, a face flannel or small hand towel (if you rub badly during your swim, and want to apply more grease or Vaseline, you have to do it yourself as you can't be touched by anyone on the boat. A wet face flannel or hand towel will

be ideal to get the stuff off your hands before you continue), spare hat, small torch, spare light sticks (including safety pins), earplugs, etc.

All these bits and bobs should be easily accessible to your team. If you suddenly shout, "new goggles" or "hat's split", and replacements are to hand, there won't be a mass panic on board (especially at night) with everyone scragging around looking stupid and making the pilot laugh. (To scrag: the art of looking utterly clueless in the pursuit of something you can't find, in the dark!!).

## Feeding

Feeding is a crucial part of your Channel swim and it's important to get it right. The single most important thing about feeding is that a feed is a feed and not a rest. If you can neck your drink in just a few seconds and crack on it will be hugely beneficial. I think you should aim for around 10-15 seconds for a drinks only feed. The reality is that you will have to show strong discipline to maintain this as the swim progresses and you get fatigued. Christoph Wandratsch, on his world record breaking swim in 2005, was taking about 3-5 seconds on a feed!!! Some people take 2 or 3 minutes!! It's their swim and they can do what they like but, to my mind, that's plain crazy! Think about it. Let's say you're on for a 12 hour swim (that would be nice!) and, feeding every half hour, you take 2 minutes on a feed. Well, as our American friends say, "go figure - you do the math!!" If you are a 16 hour swimmer long feeds will add even more time to your swim.

Time your feed from when you take the cup/bottle until when you let go and swim on. You and your support team need to be 'trained' to keep things tight. Whatever feeding pattern you use your team should make sure they are on the button and on time and you should drink or eat in double quick time.

Now, you might say - "but I am a really slow swimmer and I just want to get there, however long it takes, and this doesn't apply to me!" Well, fine. But I would disagree with you. The same rule does still apply. The longer you take feeding the longer your swim will last. And your tardiness might result in you missing a run of tide a mile off France adding hours to your swim, not minutes.

Some swimmers like to have a five or ten minute warning before a feed (if you are knackered and wondering where the next feed is it can give you a boost to know that your crew are working for you). If you take on chocolate or banana your feed will last a bit longer. Tinned peaches are delicious and easy to swallow. Kevin Murphy eats prunes (yuk!). **Note:** If you request a warning five or ten minutes before your feed instruct your crew to hold up a wide hand or hands to notify you. You **MUST** acknowledge - however tired you are. You don't have to stop (in fact **DON'T!**) but a nod will suffice. Tell your crew not to lower the hand until you have responded. After many hours of swimming, when it can get quite tense, in and out of the water, your crew will be really encouraged and pleased that you are still cognizant and 'with' them.

**Amount of liquid feed to take:** Look at the smallest, slimmest swimmer in your open water group. Now look at the tallest, largest swimmer. Which group would you be in (or somewhere in the middle, perhaps)? How much liquid do you need to remain hydrated and fed? If you are big you'll need more than someone who is slight. Stands to reason. This is something to work out in training but your team should be prepared on the day. If you hit a wall suddenly, and seem drained and appear to be struggling compared to a few minutes earlier they need to act by throwing the timetable out of the nearest porthole and bumping up the carb drink you are feeding on. Similarly, at some point during the swim, your grizzled, weather beaten pilot might advise chucking in some more scoops for the next two or three feeds to give you a boost. Your team should heed that advice. The pilots have seen it all before. They know the drill. And it really doesn't matter if you chuck up an hour or so later if it has got you through a bad patch!

**(Note:** There are lots of carb drinks on the market. The main constituent of most is Maltodextrin which is a corn starch derivative. The advantage of these drinks is that they give you quick energy. The main disadvantage is that you soon get fed up with your crew shouting, "drink it all, you know it makes sense!" as you are getting more and more bloated and feeling like you are going to chuck! Maxim was the crowd pleaser for the Dover crowd for many years and, due to supply issues, this has now been replaced by another brand. There are other many brands on the market and it is very important that you know what suits you prior to your actual swim. Practice with your feeds in training. \_

**(Note:** When I say chuck more scoops in (above) I am specifically referring to the carbohydrate drink **not** any electrolyte powdered drink you might have. You don't want to be piling scoops of electrolyte into your swimmer as a means of giving them a boost. Read that label carefully and beware if manufacturers have similar packaging on their carbohydrate tub as they do on their electrolyte tub. That can get confusing, especially at night).

**Frequency of feeding:** The more often you feed the more time you also add to your swim. Some swimmers feed every hour. Many feed on the hour and then change to every half hour after 3 or 4 hours. Others feed every 45 minutes from the start to the finish. Yet more favour every 15 or 20 minutes. Personally, I would question 20 minute feeds for the majority. If you are a champion swimmer chasing records, can take a small cup, and drink in a single gulp, in a sweeping motion, which doesn't alter the flow of your stroke (amazing to watch) then great. But most of us don't or can't do that and, therefore, what are the benefits? All that stopping will add loads more time to your swim. Whatever you decide allow for instant revision where necessary.

You might have a situation where you, or a swimmer you are supporting, starts throwing up and continues to do that for an inordinate amount of time. That can be very distressing all round. You need to calm down or, if you are crewing, calm your swimmer down. Your crew will have been briefed, or the

pilot might suggest, that a swig of mouth wash and a cup of warm water with a few encouraging words might be a good idea followed 15 minutes later with a weak carb drink before returning to the normal feed pattern. As a swimmer this is where you have to let go and trust your crew. As part of the crew this is where you stay calm and do your work.

**(Note:** I haven't got all technical about feeds (calories expended against calories ingested, etc.). I am not a nutritionist. However, there is a ton of stuff on the Channel Swimmers chat group and other sites about this subject (see some of Mike Oram's archived emails). Do study nutrition and establish what works for you. There are a lot of good nutrition for extreme sports books on the market. Crucial is to have an idea of how many **calories you are expending in a given period and making provision to replace as many of them as your body will allow on your feeds.**

**It's your swim - treat yourself!** For example, you might tell your team that, on the next feed after this one, you want some chocolate or banana. If you decide in between feeds that you want something make sure someone is paying attention and, taking a deep breath, shout out, "banana please", or whatever takes your fancy, without breaking your stroke, and they will have it ready for you. Resist the temptation to shout - "banana, dog breath - NOW!" as this will make your crew cry and say bad things about you!!

Don't get to a feed and suddenly ask for painkillers, or something else, as this will waste time. Give them a bit of warning and they will respond for you.

Make sure **all** your support team are fully cognizant of the feeding procedure. This is so crucial, especially if your 'team leader' is also a swimmer and is in with you when a feed is due or, worse, isn't travelling well in a bobbing boat. (All the pilots will tell you about support crews who go AWOL through sickness a mile into the swim and spend the rest of the day in the horizontal position! It happens to even the strongest so - practice role swaps within your team and have contingency plans).

If you feed off a reel with twine make sure you take the feed by the sliding door part of the boat (middle) or, if your boat is an open boat in the middle of the boat. Stay clear of the boat. When you have finished throw the bottle ahead of you and away from the boat. Your team can then reel it in safely. This is most important as a piece of cord wrapped round a propeller will seriously upset your pilot as well as jeopardise the swim. If you take solids or painkillers at the same time as a drink get your feeder to pass them down on another piece of string in a cup. Eat first, drink second (easier to wash down).

**Important:** Your crew, in their excitement to encourage you and spur you on, will be tempted to all shout at you at the same time when you feed. They will ask you how you are and try to give you messages. This is natural, and they have the best of intentions, but it can get very irritating. If this happens well into the swim you will be tired and, possibly, distressed and you simply can't take too much in. The answer is that, whilst general 'well done's' and 'way to

goes' as you swim off are great, only one at a time should speak to impart information. \_(See also 'whiteboard' under 'miscellaneous').

### Painkillers and Antihistamines

In recent times it has become apparent that some swimmers have taken to dosing up on painkillers in the hours before their swim to fend off pain and sting reaction. I am not a doctor but I think this anticipatory action could be a dangerous practice and I would advise against it. Painkillers are, or should be, taken under strict medical guidelines displayed either on the packet or on the advice of a doctor. I don't think swimmers should factor in the predetermined taking of painkillers either before or during a swim, just in case it hurts. (Let's be honest, you are attempting to swim the Channel not 40 lengths in the pool (which, btw, is still noteworthy if you are a learner or beginning a fitness programme!) so, at some stage it WILL hurt!). Wait 'til you get your pain and then deal with it. There have been several informed posts on the Chanel Swimmers chat group specifically regarding this subject. Seek advice but be careful. The same applies to antihistamines. Anyway, getting stung is cool - it wakes you up and takes your mind of other things. Actually that probably isn't true of the North Channel but in the English Channel the jellies aren't so bad.

### Night Time Swimming

Your start time depends on what position you are on the tide and your ability as described to the pilot (Note: Be honest with your pilot. He will ask you how fast you swim. If you can swim two, three or four kilometres in an hour in the pool tell them that by all means but do say that is in the pool. Of more relevance is how far you cover in one hour in the sea - after four or five hours). So, you might start in early daylight and complete your swim before it gets dark. Good luck 'cos that would be great, but you have to plan for any eventuality. For various reasons your pilot might ask you to start at night: For example, there might be a good weather window forecast but only for 24 hours and, if you wait until morning, you could come unstuck late in the swim if the weather kicks up. Or you might be on time constraints with the tide disappearing and your plane tickets non transferable. What do you do? If it's offered, you go at night that's what!!

So, if you go at night, you have to plan accordingly. It's no good hoping for a long day swim or nothing or deciding you are scared of the dark!! Factor in some night swimming in your training. But **do not do this alone!!** Make sure you have lightsticks and someone on shore as support. A boat or kayaker alongside would also be an asset.

Starting at night is great. The water is not colder just because it's night-time (you will be surprised) and swimming into sunrise is a wonderful experience. Swimming into night is a different animal. You might be a fast swimmer finishing in daylight but, if you aren't, remember, understand and accept that,

having swum all day, you will be tired. Very tired. The swim will take on a whole different emphasis. Your pilot and his crew will be very alert. Your support team will be working hard for you - be assured of that. (Working the dry side is utterly exhausting. A long day giving way to night will be tough on your team. They should work smart and take rests whilst ensuring that someone is still on point for you).

**Light sticks.** There are two types. The traditional chemical one (the ones you see at concerts) and the battery operated waterproof type - which most pilots have declared as essential for their Channel swims as they are much easier to see from the boat. They take the form of a small, strobe light which fixes on the back of the goggle strap and a 5/6 inch version for the back of the trunks or costume. The light can either flash on and off or remain constant. Generally the smaller one will be set on flash mode and the longer one on constant. The battery life is up to 250 hours before replacement and, crucially, can be seen from a long way off at night (unless it's foggy!). The one worn on the back of the costume also floats. They were developed for military use but Freda Streeter has previously sourced directly from a supplier and, if you are UK based, you can purchase them from her in Dover during the season or search on line if you prefer. Sharing/borrowing is also good. If you have trouble sourcing these vital tools ask your pilot or enquire amongst other swimmers.

The preferred colour is green. By common consensus the green ones are easier to see at night. If you are a guy use a safety pin to attach one to the back of your trunks. If you are a female swimmer you might choose the same place on your costume or higher up. If you start at night you will obviously use a light stick from the beginning. Attaching the strobe to the back of your goggles and activating it is a good idea anyway. If you start in daylight, lattach a light stick to your trunks or costume at the start of the swim. You don't feel it there and it's easier when you are tired not to have to scrag (refer above!) around in the dark pricking yourself with a safety pin making it not very safe at all! (Most important, and I repeat, have clear goggles for night swimming).

**You have a massive personal responsibility when you swim at night!!!!** This cannot be over emphasised and is especially relevant when you swim into night. You will be tired, you will have gone through several crises, (see mental stuff below) you might feel disorientated, lonely, dejected, unable to see your crew properly (the pilot will be on night lights) and you might think France is never going to appear. Crucial to the success of your swim now is that you maintain the line of the boat. Try to swim no more than 2.5 to 4 metres away from the boat. Conversely, avoid getting too close. You will scare the hell out of everyone on board if it looks like you are going under the boat! Prearrange for your team to tie three or four green light sticks (the chemical ones are fine for this) to the side of the boat at deck height in line about a foot apart. It will help you keep good station and, bizarrely, they are very aesthetic to look at while you are swimming. On feeds tell your team you are OK. Listen out for warnings. Your pilot might aim a searchlight along the

side of the boat, to alert you when a feed is ready, or to warn you of a hazard, so - pay attention!

None of what I am saying here is meant to scare you but you can't be blasé or gung ho about swimming at night. It can be a wonderfully cathartic and enlightening experience. It can also be a pig (especially when you forget your clear goggles because you had to wait seven days to swim on the tide, due to bad weather, meaning that the start time moved from 4 am (and, therefore, I won't need my clear goggles, will I?) to 10 am, as I did in 2003 on my second Channel swim. Mike Oram's skill, my team's hard work and my 10 years plus experience got us through but it took longer than it should have and I nearly stuffed my own swim up through stupid negligence! (And that's why I've mentioned clear goggles five times now!)).

### Mental Stuff

***("Channel swimming is 80% mental, 20% the rest". Alison Streeter, MBE, Queen of the Channel)***

Now the heavy bit!

There will/might come a stage when you are way out of your comfort zone, having exceeded the longest time previously spent in the water, and think the task is now beyond you. Or you might think this early in the swim. Or it might happen when a lot of swimmers hit a rough patch - around the 5-7 hour mark. **This is normal. I say again - this is normal!!!! Oh yes, this is so normal!**

I have two, hard learnt theories pertaining to Channel swimming. OK, this might be a broad and bold statement but the first is that women are inherently mentally tougher than men! I know I am generalising, and maybe it's a primeval, genetic thing but, when a man goes to the edge and topples over, he can fall into an abyss of despair and stress. If others have witnessed this mental implosion the situation is exacerbated ten fold as far as he is concerned. If a man boos his leg off and calls for his mummy then it can be game over! I never boomed or cried for mum in my early days of Channel swimming but I did implode mentally in spectacular fashion and this mental falling apart was, for me, shameful and insurmountable (mad, hey?). Women, on the other hand, are different. Not always, but, in most cases, when a woman falls over the edge, she boos and boos and then gets on with it with a, "So what, never seen a girl cry before?" defiance.

The point is - **fear is normal**. Accept that it is OK to be afraid. Don't fight it. Embrace it. Toppling over the edge does not mean it's over. It's over either when your pilot says it is for safety reasons or you run out of sea and become a Channel swimmer.

The shame and insurmountable odds I referred to lead to the second theory, which applies to both men and women. I believe we all have secret doors in our heads. When we do long, meaningful swims in training or, during our

Channel swim, we can crash headfirst into these secret doors when our task seems beyond us. They are double, triple bolted and have huge mounds of debris in front of them. This debris is not the debris of the swim or the day but of our other, day-to-day, life. It took me 5 years and 6 Channel attempts in the early nineties (doh!) to realise that I could shift this debris and break down the doors.

The first time I pushed through the 'secret door' was one of the most empowering, most enlightening experiences of my life. My whole world, my whole existence, seemed calmer and friendlier. It was then that I realised it was OK to be shit scared, that this gut wrenching paralysis **was** surmountable. Indeed, this is when I realised that, instead of fearing fear, it was actually something to acknowledge and embrace and respect. And, guess what? You **CAN** go beyond your previous limits and succeed - 'cos, if I did then.....!!!!

The reason for this quite revealing section is to tell you that when it hits you (some people deny ever feeling scared or mentally bereft during their Channel swim but I don't believe a word of it!) let it happen. And don't be surprised if it hits you early on and more than once. If it does, just move the debris again and open the next secret door.

Each swim I do I get hit by the demons again. They don't announce their arrival, it can be after 1 hour or 6, but once they hit me it's full on. They burrow and forage and worm their way in, feeding on my fear and trying to get me to quit. And they talk to me!!! "Go on", they say. "The ladder's just there. Touch it, feel the warmth of a helping hand. We have hot soup and warm clothes and a bed for you to sleep in. Come to us. You can't do this, you know you can't. Quit and fail. We win, you don't." They're buggers the lot of them. I despise and hate them. Sometimes they gain ground and I have a torrid time but at least I know what to do now.

Be assured, you will be scared - in training, in the lead up and, especially, on the day. Slow or fast, young or old, you will have doubts and wonder what ever inspired you to take this crazy gig. But, crucially, you are not alone. Everyone, to one degree or another, is going through the same angst, I promise. You **CAN** push through the pain and self-doubt. Just unlock the secret doors!

**Note:** Of course, I need to clarify. I am talking about when you want to quit, when you get the mental implosion. I am not referring to when you are dragged out for your own safety, screaming and kicking and wishing plagues of boils to descend on your pilot and crew for trashing your dreams. That's different, entirely different.

-

## **Mental Stuff Two - Visualisation**

OK, the top three questions all Channel swimmers always get asked are:

What do you think about?

Do you cover yourself in goose fat?

Where do you put your duty frees? (Ooh, that's a rib breaker that one is!).

Let's ignore 2 and 3!

What do you think about during your Channel swim? That's a good question but, quite simply, it's one you are already facing every time you do a long training session in the sea. So, you don't have to learn a new skill 'on the day'. Just apply what you already know - but for longer!

When it gets tough - play games. One of my favourites is to visualise a Dover harbour swim (choose your own). Pick a route in your mind equal to the time between your feeds. For me it would be to the Eastern ferry wall and back. So, I've had my feed and it's half an hour to the next one and I'm off. First the poles, then the first wall, then the sloping groyne, then the ferry wall. Turn around and come back. Simple! But, the thing is, you will get distracted along the way. In your head you might stop to let a sailing dinghy pass or say hi to another swimmer. At the ferry wall you might look at your watch or adjust your goggles before you set off back to the beach. **(By the way, on your Channel swim, hand your watch in at the sheriff's office before you start!!)** . Or something might be happening on the boat that takes your attention. The point is, in your head, as you pick it up again, you will always be further back than you think. Consequently there will suddenly be a feed waiting for you and you think you have only been swimming twenty minutes!! It works every time!

Hope that makes sense. Some swimmers sing songs. Nick Adams does complicated mathematical calculations. I knew a Channel swimmer years ago, a most placid person, who tried to think of 101 ways to bump off his nightmare boss during his swim. And guess what? A successful swim and a career change, not a murder rap!!!

### You're Nearly There

It's been emotional. It still is. You are nearly there. You have tried not to look at France but you can't help yourself. It seems so close. "Can I do it? Can I really be a Channel swimmer? Please let me be a Channel swimmer?" This has been one day in your life but it felt like like an eternity. But you aren't done yet. Keep digging, keep swimming, keep dreaming the dream. The sweetest words you will ever hear and the ones you have been craving to hear are: "**This is your last feed.**" Oh what joy? What did they say? Eight hundred metres and you are getting pushed in. That's twice round a running track. I can do that. I will be a Channel swimmer.

### After The Swim

**Support team.** Get the bag ready. If it's dark you'll be glad you tied the torch to the strap and delighted you untied those shoelaces! Once the swimmer is

on board, wrap him or her in big towels and a blanket. There will be lots of tears and emotion but, really, you should pull yourselves together and take care of the swimmer!! Give them space. Give them a pear drop or boiled sweet (a Nick Adams favourite). But make sure they don't choke!! (clearing a choking hazard is the last thing you want to have to do!!). Ask them what hot drink they want and detail someone to prepare it. Often a swimmer gets light headed standing up having been horizontal for many hours, so, be aware if they suddenly keel over. Get them dressed as quickly as possible. Make sure they have a hat on. Have a bucket on standby (no, not for you - for the swimmer!!)

## **Miscellaneous Details Pertaining to Your Swim, Before, During and After**

**Swimmer - Delegate!!!** This can be tough to do but let your support team do all the work. It can be very draining to get involved with everyone else's logistics before your swim.

Always swim to the next feed! Try not to think about France too much or how long you've got to go. Resist the temptation to ask how long you have left. It's a bad idea and your pilot will only say, "Until you get there!" Enough said.

**Support team:** You shouldn't be telling your swimmer how many hours they have left. At best you can only guess. At worst you'll get it hopelessly wrong and demotivate your swimmer when they reach that point and they are still hours from finishing. But, there will be no harm in telling your swimmer when they are in and out of the first shipping lane and through the separation zone to the French lane if that's been agreed before the swim.

If the weather is hot you might get a heat haze and the French coastline will be misty. When you are swimming it is best not to look up towards France. When you do see the French coast it will seem to be as far away after an hour as it was when you first saw it! It's really only in the last 1000 metres or so when you can really see it getting closer. (Different for a night finish or if it's a bit foggy). One arm in front of the other, that's all you have to worry about. If you go to it, it will come to you. Yes I know that is stating the bleeding obvious but, can you think of a better way to describe what you have to do?

A lot of pilots think white boards are a waste of time. They can be hard to read and waste time if the swimmer is craning their neck to try and make sense of bad spelling or smudged felt tip. However, if you do favour one ask your crew to write up good wishes from friends and family (but not every 5 minutes or it will get tiring and irritate you). You can acknowledge with a smile or a thumbs up (your crew will feel good and worthwhile if you do this). But if

you are feeling grumpy, growl at them or ignore the buggers!!!! (But, only for a short time in case they down tools!).

**Sea sickness!** Oh the scourge of the rocking boat travelling slow!! If you get sea sick on the way to the start don't try and hold it in - get rid of it!! To prevent sickness try ginger, it works really well. They've never worked for me but you can also try wrist bands. If you take tablets use the non-drowsy variety and read the instructions - some of them need to be taken two hours before the activity. If you aren't keen on taking medicines try homeopathic sea sickness tablets. As for your team - what do you care!? If you're in the water swimming your heart out, why shouldn't they suffer too? OK, so you're a nice person and are worried about your crew. Well, the same applies to them. A bit like altitude sickness, sea sickness affects some and not others.

**Be flexible!** Sometimes all the best laid plans……: You can't be too rigid in your expectations that everything will happen exactly when, and as, you plan (see below re date of your swim). If your cup fills with sea water just as you are about to drink you just have to bin it and swim on. Don't worry, your team will do another one straight away. If you are being battered by wind and waves your pilot might want to put you on the other side of the boat to protect you. If you only breathe to the right or left he won't be able to do that, or it will be difficult - so, learn bilateral. These things might seem trivial in the cold light of day but if you are eight hours into the swim, or it's getting dark and you are very tired, the impact is magnified ten fold. (Note: If you haven't mastered proper bilateral, and don't think you will in the time before your swim, don't fret. Try learning to breathe two to the right and one to the left. Or, try breathing just to the left for a while and then just to the right. There have been some good, archived emails on the chat group on bilateral breathing - check them out.)

**Grease/Vaseline.** Personal preference, this one. Channel grease stinks!!! Yeugh! These days most swimmers just use Vaseline. Channel grease (lanoline/Vaseline mix) doesn't keep you warm but is still very popular with some swimmers (especially hairy ones) and can help avoid rubbing especially if you are a man with a heavy beard or a woman wearing a full conventional, strap laden costume (I think I got that the right way round!). I am not sure if Boots The Chemist in Dover or Folkestone still make Channel grease up (they stopped when we had our last foot and mouth outbreak) but I know David and Evelyn have sold it at Varne Ridge Channel Swim Park, near Dover, where a lot of Channel swimmers stay. Vaseline is freely available in any pharmacy in Dover or Folkestone.

**Date of Your Swim. Very Important!** - Don't get hooked up on the date of your swim. You might be No 1 on the first day of the first tide in August but

that doesn't mean you will swim that day. Channel swimming isn't like the London Marathon where, disaster of some sort notwithstanding, you know it will take place on the due date and you plan and peak accordingly. Channel swimming respects no such order! You have to prepare yourself mentally for this eventuality. This might sound obvious but, each year, some swimmers set their stall by going on the booked date and when that doesn't happen, or if the whole tide disappears through bad weather, they suffer mentally as a result. By the time they do get to swim they are shot away from all the hanging around making it tougher than it needs to be.\_\_\_\_

**Interval Training.** At some point in your swim your pilot may ask you for a swift half hour or hour. He will be aware of an advantage further on if you can give an extra effort. This is always a tough call because you will certainly be tired and a request to speed up will seem neither attractive nor possible. The solution lies in not going all out in the beginning (you will be nervous and might go off a bit quick but you should soon settle down to a steady pace) and interval training. In your club you will be doing sets from 25's up to 400 or 800 in one form or another. A lot of swimmers think this has no application to open water training. They tend to just get in the sea and swim (dare I say, plod!) worrying about the length of the session not what they are doing in it. Try interval training in the sea. It works, it's fun and it makes the session go quicker. Play with your speed over varying distances. Now, if your pilot asks for a burst, you can do it.

Take a couple of torches (with the LED bulbs). Your pilot won't like your crew turning the cabin lights on and off all the time at night as it spoils his night vision.

Wear loose clothes (jogging pants, big t-shirts, floppy socks) before and after the swim. Tell your team to wear the same. Comfort is the order of the day for them. They might be sat in cramped areas at times and clothes that are too tight will irritate.

Are you taking your mum or dad or partner on your swim? Is that wise? Swims have been abandoned because a parent (normally a dad when the swimmer is young) can't bear to see their 'baby' suffering (this is true - ask around). Conversely I know of swimmers who have succeeded partly because their parents or partner were on board. Think carefully. Still want them along? Train them just like you train your feeders.

What about the rest of your team? Who are they? Do they know what you'll be like 8 hours into your swim? How will they handle you throwing your toys out of the pram? Will they be tough with you (part friend, part psychologist)? On my first Channel attempt I had 7 people on my boat, not including the pilot, his crew-man and the observer. That was too many and it turned into a bit of a circus. You need to get the balance right but one or two of your team should be strong people who won't stand any nonsense - from **YOU!!**

**Make sure someone is on 'point' at all times - especially at night.** Your pilot, his crew and the observer will be paying attention but it's important that

you have a friendly, trusted face looking at you as you swim. Let them work out a shift pattern if necessary. Let them know what you respond to. It's no use someone weaving about screaming at you like a demented nutter if you don't like or respond well to that stuff but, conversely, you don't want a limp-wristed lettuce wave every 20 minutes either.

If you swim on the port (left!) side of the boat be aware that, late in the afternoon when the sun is on the other side of the boat, you will view your crew in silhouette (small thing but you will be tired and won't be able to see gestures as clearly as earlier in the day (some would say that is a good thing!).

If you can't pee while you are swimming try to go on a food feed. If this isn't practical or puts too much pressure on you and you have to stop make sure your crew know why you have stopped. There's no need to shout out but a pre arranged signal of a raised hand or raised finger (two fingers if you are hacked off) will let them know you are OK and the pilot can take the boat out of gear until you are finished. All dignity flies south on a Channel swim but this is a serious point. If you can't pee and haven't for hours let your crew know. Pre arrange that they give you a tea and fruit sugar drink on the next feed. Ten minutes later you should be peeing for your country!

Be wary about having a 'fast' time in your head that you **WILL** do because you are ace and the best in your lane back home. We have had so many instances of people coming to do a Channel swim who can do a squillion strokes a minute and are going to get under 9 hours (guaranteed, mind you!) and they either give up when they realise they can't do that time or go away disappointed having only done an 11 hour Channel swim (a time I would wear a frock for a fortnight for, by the way!). However, you would not be human if you didn't have some sort of expectation in your head even if you haven't told anyone. But, hugely important is to know what to do if you get to that time and you are still a couple of hours away. (Plug on and reel it in, that's what).

**Most important of all: have a great day (oh yes, lets not forget - it's fun!!!).**  
Get lots of pictures. Your observer might not do a detailed, blow-by-blow, report. Ask your friends to keep a separate report in a big notepad. Ask them to chronologically record the day. They can take turns. It will include feeds, ships passing, funny moments on the boat, comments people make and all sorts of trivia. Ask them to write it up for you afterwards - warts and all. It's great, after the event, to know what happened on the dry side.

At the end of the swim your pilot won't be able to come as close to the water's edge as he did in Dover. He will stop and turn the boat around about 200 metres off the French shore. He will either launch a dingy to retrieve you or allow one or more swimmers to accompany you in for safety (behind you, obviously!) and back to the boat. Pre warn them to have a disposable waterproof camera to hand for **THAT SHOT!**

**Support Team:** If one or more of you get to accompany your swimmer in at the very end (last 200 metres or so) don't touch the swimmer. Let them finish under their own steam. If they are landing right on Cap Gris Nez by the rocks

they will have to scramble to a standing position clear of the water (see David Walliams finish on the BBC documentary of his swim). If you can, get some cheap, rubber soled neoprene slip-on shoes. The rocks can be a bit sharp on your feet. **Swimmer:** Sorry, but you'll have to take your chances!!! It'll be worth it and the scratches will be something to show your friends in the pub!

When you land it is **amazing**. Your life **will** change from that moment - guaranteed. Whatever journey you have taken to get there, and whatever trials and tribulations you encountered on the way, to achieving your dream, you now have the right to call yourself a Channel swimmer. WOW! How cool is that?

**WELL DONE! WELL DONE! WELL DONE! WELL DONE! WELL DONE!**  
**WELL DONE! WELL DONE! WELL DONE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

Last thing, and if you have got this far you have been most patient! You will notice that every time I have typed the word Channel in this document without the word English in front of it, I have used a capital C. This probably isn't grammatically correct and might irk those of you who pay attention to such things. I can't help it. The English Channel has been both my best friend and worst enemy. It has been my nemesis and my saviour but, such is the respect I have for it, I will forever happily and reverentially refer to it as the Channel. Happy swimming.\_

**Cliff Golding 2015**

—