

Warrington Dolphins 2way Channel Relay 2007

Michaela Richard came up with the idea of the 2-way crossing in August last year. If successful this would be the first 2-way crossing by the Dolphins. She emailed me with the following:

Hi

*I would like to **organise and swim in a 2-way Channel Relay** next year, naturally representing the Warrington Dolphins.*

I thought I would run it past you to see what your thoughts are.

Do you think there would be much interest from the club, such as yourself perhaps, as the team would need 2/3 strong swimmers (creep, creep)?

I await your reply before I carry on any further.

Michaela

I dutifully replied with the following:

Michaela

I think there may well be interest. I know that Lisa has said that she wants to swim the channel so this would be a must for her. If we can convince Christian that there are no jellyfish in the channel he might swim. I suppose that I might just be fit enough to join in.

If we could get Chris and Keith with their sons interested there would be 6 fast swimmers.

I'm sure that we could get Joe and Chris Carter interested.

Hope that encourages you to rally the troops.

Andy

My thoughts were that out of the eight swimmers I had suggested she would get a team of willing swimmers involved and I wouldn't be needed. However the response I received back highlighted to me that I was in.

Also Lisa Stout has replied and is up for it, so that makes 3 of us. (Me, YOU, Lisa).

That put me in a difficult position, I had to be fairly fit, I was going to be busy as I would be President of the BLDSA and I had to tell Sandra which wouldn't go down very well at all.

So the initial team was drafted and the services of our faithful Pilot Dave Whyte were secured for 1st off in the week 19th August to 25th August. Over the following months the team changed as Lisa Stout had a serious injury to her shoulder and Kevin Saunders contracted Shingles.

At this point I must point out that Chris Carter initially said he wouldn't join the team. When we got news of Lisa's withdrawal from the team, I commented to Michaela and Caroline that Chris Carter on the day would be on the boat during the swim and it would be worth asking him again to swim. Within a day he had agreed, but with conditions. The first he would only swim 4 times and that he wouldn't swim between dusk and dawn. We were back to full strength. Within days

I'd heard the team described as 4 channel swimmers and 2 pretenders. Now, who was a pretender!!!!

Training became more serious in January with Caroline lashing out many comments about Chris not keeping up with her pace in training. At the BLDSA Golden Jubilee Relay we had 5 of our final team swimming. The sixth had started on being President and was now missing swims and training.

Leading up to the swim Kevin withdrawn but Jo Norton-Barker saved the day.

In the week before the channel week all the team met up after Masters training to collect their Hoody tops and finalise plans. Chris considered the team, set the order and concluded that he would swim 5th. Now I believe his reasoning was that he believed he had organised his pre-conditions into the swim, i.e. he wouldn't be swimming at night and only four times.

The final team was made up of Michaela Richard (Channel 97), Andy Wright (Channel Relay 04), Jo Norton-Barker (first season), Mark Blewitt (Channel 02), Chris Carter (Channel 73) and Caroline Lewis (Channel 94). Just to add a few details about the team, Mark is a type 1 diabetic, Jo had never swum in the sea or at night and Caroline was 4 months pregnant.

So the team assembled in the Dover area on Friday 24th August, 132 year's to the day after Captain Matthew Webb successfully swam across the English Channel to France, Not only did the swim coincide with this most magical anniversary in the Channel swimming calendar but it was also the 10th anniversary of Dolphin relay organiser, Michaela Richard's solo Channel crossing and the day after the record for a solo crossing had fallen to Petar Stoychev from Bulgaria, in a time of 6hours 57minutes and 50seconds.

Andy, Gary (aka Chris) and Mark travelled down to Dover together the night before the swim and spent the entire journey down confusing Michaela with miss information, leading her to believe that Chris was still on the golf course in Scotland. After an Italian meal the trio spent the night paying homage at the White Horse with walls covered with the names of successful Channel swimmers. Chris Carter entered his own name and 1973 date onto the walls of fame.

At 5:00am early Saturday morning, in the car park by the clock tower faces emerged out of the shadows laden with equipment more suited for a Shackleton or Scott expedition. Ocean Breeze was found and supplies and team transferred onboard, the show was on the road. Upon arrival at Dave's Boat we found him and Joan still asleep on his boat but Brain Harbottle and Colin Whyte arrived with us and the loading of the boat started. It was at this point that an error in the planning was found. Everyone had brought water; there was probably more water on board than in the harbour!!

Half an hour after meeting up, Michaela left Shaky Beach (Shakespeare beach) to start the swim at 5:39 with her usual stroke (yes the one that looks so effortless). Gary tucked into his cornflakes, and I (Mark) started blowing chunks. The crossing was at first uneventful with the main points to note being the sun coming up, leading into a warm morning before a mist descended for around an hour.

After a couple of legs had been swum we come up with a crude semaphore type signalling to the swimmer in the water. One TESCO carrier bag lifted high meant 30minutes swum and a TESCO Bag and ALDI Bag meant 50minutes swum.

I (Andy) took over for an uneventful plod followed by Jo's first ever dip into the Channel. Upon climbing into the water she lets off a great scream of delight and promptly set off on her swim, immediately settling into her comfortable stroke as if she'd done it many times before.

Mark took over: on my first swim I was cursing; I had left my watch on. I resisted the urge to look at it and see how long I had been going. Eventually someone on the boat waved two bags at me, now what did that mean, half hour to go or just ten? While swimming I remember the quaint tooting of Varne Ridge Light Vessel. Quaint at first, but it went on and on and on and still when I am in a moment of reflection, I am sure it is still there tormenting me. In meantime whilst on the boat, Caroline had started to be sick too.

After each swimmer had entered the water and another got out, we played musical chairs to get a comfortable place aboard the good ship Ocean Breeze. Meanwhile our Observer Jill Anslon regularly measured the temperature of water (16°C) and counted stroke rate.

Now the channel to some is a bleak stretch of water with nothing to see. To those there it's as eventful as driving from Wigan to Warrington on the A49. There are numerous buoys and then there are the shipping lanes. Two of them, in order from England, first there is the South West Shipping Lane with the Separation Zone in the middle (where all the flotsam, jetsam, and jellies congregate) and finally the North East Shipping Lane. On a number of occasions some mighty large vessels altered course to avoid us, but left their calling card of a large wave radiating from behind them, to throw us from side to side.

The afternoon was drawing on. Now moving in a southerly direction with the tide and the wind blowing in a northwest direction the sea became quite lumpy. Jo joined in with the sea sickness sufferers. As France approached we learnt via text that Saints had won the Challenge Cup although we did not yet know the score. France was well in sight and Michaela was in the water, but it was not getting close enough fast enough. At the end of her third hour, Andy entered the water and the two swam ashore. Andy, fresh landed first, swimming up a small river, just 13 hours and 6 minutes after Michaela had left Dover. Twenty yards away and marginally later Michaela followed. They ran towards each other like separated lovers. Whatever you do don't hold hands I thought! They did not and swam back out with Michaela returning to the boat.

Mobile phone activity increased with texts flying back and forth. Andy learnt via text that "we had landed" - he text back "I know it was me!" Following Andy's swim, Jo had the pleasure of swimming into the dusk. This was once again followed by Mark stint. Clearly as darkness set in the carrier bag signalling system wasn't going to be seen and so the TESCO bag was replaced by a red lightstick and the ALDI bag by a green stick.

Now we had got to the point where Chris had just got to face it that his master plan of one night swim was looking very unlikely upon entering the water at 21:39. Not even the super Dolphins were suddenly going to return in 3 hours faster than they crossed in.

Caroline prepared to enter on her third swim. Michaela and I (the remaining two swimmers on board at that moment, unaffected by the motions of the sea) could see that she was truly suffering and that without being able to take seasickness pills she didn't look good. To our amazement she just got ready to swim and just got on with it without a comment. We were in true admiration of the courage.

Now in the thick of the night Michaela took over followed by myself at 00:39. Ocean Breeze was nicely lit by the moon over on my left hand side. However, the swim was not pleasant, as the wind had got up making the swim challenging. As I approach the 55minute mark, I was conscious of a white light behind the boat. I swam a few more strokes and saw the light again. Then on my next stroke concern set in, as it was getting brighter and very quickly. Next stroke there were several lights from the boat and several arms waving at me frantically signalling to swim to the boat side. I was very concerned and sprinted as best I could to the boat. Then the light went out. After questioning the swimmers on deck they encouraged me to continue. However, I

was glad to be out a couple of minutes later. It probably wasn't that dramatic seeing it from on the boat, but from the water at night it was frightening. My first question was what was it? We weren't sure whether it was a fisherman protecting his patch or a coastguard. Jo calmly got in and continued.

During the night Dave spoke to me and said there's some good news and some bad news. He said the good news is we're making progress; the bad news is it's not exactly in the anticipated direction. He produced charts, tide tables and plots of many previous swims to explain what usually happens. He then showed me our route and we were travelling north in the direction of the North Sea rather than northwest in the direction of Dover. What appeared to be happening, which no-one aboard had predicted, was that after the week of northerly winds, that had finally abated, the water that the Northerlies had pushed south, decided to flow back north in search of equilibrium. It took us on a scenic tour as it did so. We joked later that it had taken us off the chart. With Dave commenting trips to the North Sea cost more!

No matter what any individual might have felt, this was a team, and each dutifully got in place each hour for their turn. The night was swum out by Mark, Chris and Caroline, with Chris's swim being his second of the night which clearly blow out his preconditions. We started working out how long it was going to take to finish and came up with the conclusion that this was Caroline's 4th and final swim. When Chris finished his swim the three none seasick swimmers concluded that we didn't enjoy our night swims, with words ringing 'that was horrible' and just to add to it Jo had been stung by a jellyfish in the dark.

With Michaela's next swim at dawn she appeared to spend nearly the entire hour swimming toward a buoy (marked on the chart as an area to be avoided). When morning came we could clearly see Dover. That said we could still clearly see France too. I continued and got into my rhythm, swimming with the tide I was flying and felt good. I stepped onto the boat and from Dave's radar we were 3miles of England.

It was now a question of who would finish. I guessed Mark would get in and finish after 20minutes of swimming. With all but the finish to be done we started comparing notes. The general theme was Rubs. Chris had developed a beauty on his shoulder that would have made you think he had had a recent motorbike accident. I had a very mild copy of Chris's. However, Michaela had developed a costume rub on her neck that resembled a mighty love bite.

Jo completed her swim and we still had two miles to go, this tide was putting up a good challenge. I (Mark) entered the water and asked Andy and Chris, as president of the BLDSA and swimming senior statesman respectfully, for words of inspiration to help me nail it. Despite the accusation that I wanted to see Chris swim again I tried hard and kicked to finish off, so that I didn't just leave him a five minute glory swim. I was unable to finish it off and got out leaving Chris 1.25miles.

We did not think that we would need to give either the single or double bag warning! But as time ticked on progress against the tide was slow. Chris's swimming conditions had clearly gone down the toilet, mind you it must be restated that he picked the order. The question now was did Caroline have to swim again. Michaela and myself (Andy) were prying that Chris finished it or at the worst Caroline could get in and swim only 5 minutes which would make up for her relay of suffering. She had really been unwell. After a nervous fifty four minutes into his hour and after finding a suitable rocky beach we landed. We had been battling against a current for hours to get in but had done it, the first Dolphins team to complete a 2way relay, completed in 28hour 54minutes.

Wasting no time at all, Chris filled his trunks with pebbles and swam out to the Ocean Breeze. He was back in no time, less a few pebbles and distributed the pebbles to the team. Jo was

chuffed that she had a face in her stone “a Jesus stone I thought” no a Loch Ness Monster stone thought Jo whatever Nessie looks like! A bottle of bubbly appeared for Michaela to open. There were some refusals including the pilot who could not drink on duty. No problems there it was Marks and Spencer non-alcoholic Champagne - everyone accepted at glass or rather a plastic cup. A few photos later and we all toasted the successful swim before visiting Freda’s channel training school in the harbour. We found Ex-Dolphin and current King of the Channel Kevin Murphy, had a chat, found Jane Murphy and had another chat before returning to dock in the Marina for reunions, pictures, more pictures by the Captain Webb bust.

In summary, 43 years after the Dolphins were formed we completed our first 2-way Channel relay. In truth the weather was kind allowing the team to achieve the goal. But I believe that the team was so mentally strong that if we had been swept up to Holland we would have dug deep and just kept swimming to finish it. None of the team during the entire time passed any comment about not finishing it, even when three members felt very ‘green’. As a ‘pretender’, I felt extremely honoured to have been part of this fantastic group of swimmers and thank them for allowing me to be part of their team. The final bonus to our efforts and achievements was that we swam to raise money for Cancer Research, our target being £2000.



Andy Wright & Mark Blewitt

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