Ashley Channel Swim 1st August 2017. 13hrs 40mins– My Story

Swimming the English was a long-term ambition and it was a chance meeting with Dizz Verth at the Brownsea Island swim 2015 that it started to become a reality when she prompted me to Facebook friend request ‘Durley Sea Swims’. It was here how I learnt about Channel Swimming then fast forward 2yrs until I’m standing on a beach at Dover.

I felt relatively relaxed in the run up to the actual swim, the only thing that was causing me any anxiety was the fear of injury. I’d enjoyed the camaraderie and training challenges with my fellow swimmers at Durley Sea Swims, Just Swim and Shirley Swimming Pool ‘Sea Dogs’. Open water swimmers are a unique bunch of people who have so much enthusiasm and encouragement for their peers.

Anyway, once I’d received the call from the pilot of Sea Leopard, Stewart Gleeson, that we were good to go at 5am Tuesday 1st Aug 17. I rallied my support crew and off we went to Dover from Southampton at 11.30pm. No sleep.

Once meeting Stewart in Dover Marina we decided to make the attempt even with the potential for conditions to turn unfavourably later in the swim.

Travelling out to the start point Samphire Hoe, I was still relatively calm considering what I was about to embark on. I’d done all the training and I was as ready as I could be. No doubts there.

So just before 5am I jump into the sea, swam to shore, walked out of the water and stood with my hands in the air to indicate I was ready. Stewart sounded the horn which meant to can commence the swim. Water temperature felt warm, 17c, the conditions were fine, small waves.

I always hate the first two hours of any big swim as I’m getting into my stride and getting used to the sea conditions and temperature. I was also feeling sick from the milkshake I’d had at 3am, I never feel sick normally and in my head I was thinking ‘Why the hell am I doing this?’.

Once I reach three hours and the sun was up, the sea had calmed a tad, I was enjoying the experience. Thinking ‘Ya this is great, I’m living the dream, I’m swimming the Channel!!’

I was feeding every hour for the first 4hrs, every 45mins for 6hrs, and every 30mins thereafter. My crew was able to rely some of the lovely messages of support sent to me via them. Feeds were quick and completed within approx. 15 seconds because every second not swimming you are being pushed by the tide.

Jon Tribbeck swam with me for an hour as my support swimmer. It’s always nice to have someone to swim with. You can feel quite vulnerable swimming in the sea when you can’t see the bottom and wonder what’s down there. Any creepy thoughts you have, must be push out of your mind. I often just close my eyes when my face is down in the water and only look when I breathe. This was when I got my first jellyfish sting on the arm which felt a little worse than a nettle sting. I gave a cheer in my head as this was the first sting ever and the fear of it was worse than the reality, so I was glad to get that one ticked off. It wasn’t long after the first that I felt the second sting across my face. But again I gave a cheer in my head.

So all was well, I was feeling strong, maintained 58 strokes per minute, I was confident, even euphoric, I remember feeling quite emotional with tears in my eyes thinking about how proud my daughters would be when I told them ‘Daddy’s just swam the Channel’.

When crossing one of the shipping lanes we got caught by the wake of a large container ship. I remember suddenly going up with the wave, then it felt like it just disappeared from under me and I was left in midair, a bit like the Road Runner cartoon when the Wiley Coyote runs off a cliff. I had to laugh and smile to myself at this image.

I think it was when I was ten hours in, when the crew said you’re three miles from the Cap Griz Nez, I was feeling good so I decided to up the stroke rate slightly. It was sometime after that, that my shoulder started twinge, so I eased off again back to 58 per minute stroke rate.

At the next feed I called for painkillers, which were ingeniously stuffed into half a banana. The pain in my shoulder progressively got worse over the next few hours. The painkillers appeared to be doing nothing.

The pain which started in my shoulder was now working its way down my arm. I wasn’t able to put any power through it and thus I became more reliant on my right arm. The worry of how long will each arm keep moving and the fear of failure dawned on me.

This dream swim was now turning into a nightmare. The pain was now shooting down my arm from my shoulder to my wrist with every stroke. I had to run through all the reasons why I am doing this - to raise money; the time spent training and preparing for two years; to fulfill a lifelong ambition; to test myself but mainly for my two daughters Sophie and Violet. Even though they are too young to comprehend the challenge and the fear of failure and how hard it is just to keep one arm moving at a time.

The waves had also picked up and it was suggested I should swim on the other side of the boat and the aim was to get some protection from the waves. So I did this but I felt little advantage and I was breathing in exhaust fumes from the boat and opted to swim back on the other side.

It was on the next feed that Ali said just ‘one more Durley Loop’ meaning (1hr) swimming to do. I can remember thinking ‘well that’s an hour, I can do that but can my shoulder holdout’. Also I was well aware that the hour left could mean 2 hours in reality.

So with Sophie and Violet’s voices in my head saying ‘Go Daddy, go daddy, go daddy’ with each arm stroke I plodded on with ever increasing pain. Until sometime later the support crew shouted ‘you’re out of the tidal water’. This meant I wasn’t being pushed up the coast with the tide any longer. This was significant as I now only had to swim into the beach which only looked a few hundred metres away and should only take minutes. In fact I was actually about 2km away. I tried mentally pushing the pain of my shoulder out of my head but it just didn’t work. It took an age took get anywhere. It was great when Jon got in to swim with me but I kept drifting away from the boat for some reason. I think I was just losing concentration due to the pain and fatigue.

I was waiting for the boat to release the dinghy to follow me into shore, as I knew this was sign I was close but it never seemed to happen. Finally, the CSA official Tony and Sea Leopard’s crewman Jo got in the dinghy and I knew I only had to swim a little way. At last I felt my hand touch the bottom and I stood up and walked up the beach, stretching my arms above my head, shouting aloud ‘Thank f\*~# that’s over, I need a HopHead’ (beer).

It was brutal, far beyond all my expectations. Never again.