

Marcia's Swim across the Catalina Channel: A Real Virtual Swim Three swimmers, 21 Miles on August 3, 2005.

Marcia Cleveland is the current Chair of the USMS Long Distance Committee. This is her swim. She has done several marathon swims, including the English Channel in 1994, Manhattan Island several times and other long swims. This summer's swim was her first marathon since having two children in 1998 and 2000. Read about Marcia's training and her description of swimming 21 miles completely in the dark. This photo was taken as she was about to start, in the middle of the night.



Synopsis:

On Tuesday August 3rd, we swam the Catalina Channel in 8 hours, 56 minutes, 10 seconds. David Blanke, (Austin, TX, age 45), Liz Fry, (Westport, CT, age 46), and Marcia Cleveland (Winnetka, IL, age 41), left the island of Catalina, off the coast of Los Angeles, CA, and swam to Palos Verdes, CA, just south of LA. We left from the island around 11:30pm on Monday and arrived on the very rough coast around 8:30am. This is the first time 3 solo swimmers have done this swim together, and thanks to lots of cooperation and patience from the swimmers, we swam almost swam stroke for stroke the whole way. We were accompanied by our faithful kayaker, Richard Clifford and an armada of extremely capable supporters including additional kayakers, and boat crew. All were committed to being a part of this selfless team. It was the culmination of lots of hard work from several different people and everyone was grateful that the swim worked out so well.

Marcia's Training:

To begin turning this dream into a reality, I realized better start to take my own advice, namely in the form of *Dover Solo*. In 1999, I published this book, describing the preparation and actual swim of my English Channel crossing. Anyone preparing for a long swim needs to put some serious yardage in the bank and in the Fall of 2004 my current yardage account wasn't going to get me too far.

A build-up plan was established. Most swimmers talk about their training in terms of yardage, either weekly or daily, and I am no different. In the Fall of 2004, I was swimming about 15-20,000 yards a week. (There are 1,760 yards in a mile.) During January and February, I increased this yardage to 20-25,000 yards a week. In March/April, my weekly yardage total was 25-30,000 yards a week. In the May/June phase, I swam 30-35,000 yards/week, and continued this schedule during the first three weeks of July. During the last week of July, I swam a little less, in order to rest. This stair-step plan made the yardage increases more feasible, both mentally and physically. I also did stretching and core exercises several times a week, plus a weight lifting program twice a week.

On a weekly basis, from January until school let out in early June, I would make my heavy swim days Monday through Thursday but it depended on our family's schedule (Mark's travel for work and the kids' activities.) When I could, after dropping Julia and Sam at school, I would swim 6000 to 7000 yards by myself at a health club two to three mornings a week, followed immediately by weight lifting. Then when I needed to, I swam more in the evenings at Northwestern University with our masters' team, NASA.

When school let out, my time wasn't my own anymore so much of my swimming was done before the kids woke up, and on the weekend mornings. When Lake Michigan warmed up to over 55°F consistently in early June, I swam 3-4 mornings a week at Tower Beach in Winnetka for about an

hour-and-a-half with my training partner, Blair Johnson. On Saturday mornings, I went to Ohio Street Beach in Chicago for longer, 2+ hour, swims. A few times a week, I swam in the pool with NASA in the evenings. Throughout this time, there was a garden-variety of lake conditions, ranging from completely flat and still to 5 foot rolling seas. We swam in any and all conditions; all of this was good practice. When I swam in California just before Catalina and my legs felt buoyed up by the salt water I realized that the recent training I had done in the fresh water of Lake Michigan had been harder than swimming in the salt water of Connecticut that I was used to; our family had moved to Illinois from Connecticut in 2003.

I also started to think about the sensory deprivation of swimming in the dark. Over the summer, I became more and more comfortable with the idea and convinced myself to approach the swim calmly, regardless of the available light.

Feeding Plans:

We went over the feeding plan too. Sixty minutes into the swim, and every 30 minutes thereafter, at Richard's prompt, we would all stop, tread water and receive our feeding from the kayakers. My feeds would comprise of a water bottle filled with 8 ounces of water mixed with Maxim, plus one Hammergel. At the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, etc. hour, I would get the same mixture but with one scoop of protein powder mixed into the Maxim. Motrin would be given upon my request. Each feeding would end with a quick gargle of mouthwash, giving relief to the effects of the saltwater in the mouth. Then after this one minute break, we would all resume swimming. Official Channel swimming rules dictate that you can't touch the boat, kayak, or another swimmer to gain assistance or an advantage.

The Big Night:



We left the dock in Long Beach around 8:15pm as the sun was setting. I immediately headed for a bunk in the back of the boat and was quickly followed by David, Liz, and Leslie. These bunks were more out in the air than the ones up front; I wanted to minimize the potential for seasickness. Although I never actually slept, I rested and just kept thinking about good things. I was really relaxed and ready to go when the boat arrived at Catalina.

It was dark, really really dark. The outline of the island was barely visible and there was no moon. The kayakers and the boat would have some lights for us to follow, but not enough for us to see much in the water around us. Usually you can see some sort of lights from the land but right now darkness prevailed. I simply didn't worry. It was going to be whatever it was going to be. Nora applied Vaseline to the chafe points along my suit lines and neck, I put on my cap and goggles, wrapped a towel around me, and waited in the 60F cool night air. Channel rules stipulate that a swimmer may wear a bathing suit, one cap, goggles, and grease. When it was time to get into the dinghy from the boat, there was no hesitation. We motored about 200 yards over to the island and jumped into the 68F water.

The start point for Catalina Channel swims is a small beach at Doctor's Cove on the northeast side of the island. All of us were reaching the island for the first time. On the cliffs about this beach is a Boy Scout camp. In order to begin any open water swim, you must "clear the water," that is, get to a starting point where there is no water behind you. (Subsequently, to finish, you must also "clear the

water,” getting to where there is no water in front of you.) As we left the water and walked up onto the beach, we noticed some post-curfew scouts on the cliffs above, watching us swim in. They ran down to the beach and asked us where we were swimming to. “Long Beach,” I replied.

11:36pm Monday August 1, 2005: David Blanke, Liz Fry, and Marcia Cleveland enter the Catalina Channel and each begin their solo swim crossings.

This swim started out calmly and smoothly. The water (68F) and air (low 60sF) temperatures felt fine and the wind was blowing from the west at 10 knots. As I mentally checked myself out from head to toe, everything was coming up in the “good” zone and I felt like butter. For the first mile we were in the lee of the island and had nice flat water. Then the open waters of the Pacific Ocean welcomed us whole-heartedly with 5-8 foot northwestern swells and western winds of 15 knots. Our crew told us that had any of us known just how difficult these swells were to swim in, we all would have gotten out. This is the time that I was really glad that I was swimming with others. If they could do it, so could I and I’m sure they were thinking the same thing. For the first two hours, it was all the three of us could do not to sandwich on top of one another.

I kept reminding myself that I was swimming with really good people. When it was all over, we would be able to reminisce these first few hours but for right now, when things are a little crunched, hold on and relax. Patience, patience, patience: There must be a reason why he/she is doing that. Remain calm and you’ll find out later what’s happening to everyone else right now.

We had arranged our order ahead of time: Richard would be on the outside in the kayak the whole time, David would swim next to him, I would swim in the middle, and Liz would swim on the right side. To her right would be the other kayak then the boat. The total distance from Richard to the boat was about 50 feet or less, so we were comfortably bundled. David and I would feed from Richard’s kayak and Liz would feed from the other one. One of the other rules of open water swimming, along with “clearing the water”, is that the swimmer cannot touch anything to gain assistance. You can have things handed to you such as cups for feeds but you can’t touch the boat, kayak, or other swimmers unless it is accidental. Miraculously, we managed to adhere to this rule even in these bunched up, swelly seas.

I volunteered to swim in the middle because I breathe bi-laterally (on both sides) and heck, with two young children, I’m used to having no personal space. As we were being “swelled” into one other, I envisioned a large Oreo cookie with David and Liz as the cookie part and me as the crème. Hey, if this is where my mind was now, I’m doing pretty well. If I needed something else to think about, I always knew I could think about the fact that we were swimming in 3000 feet of water, or that there were things with teeth around, or how DARK it was. As it turned out, I really didn’t worry about any of these things. (Liz, sorry I almost bumped you again and again.) Swimming in the Pacific at night in high seas with very little light gave me an appreciation for people in shipwrecks. Whenever I would lift my head up so that my eyes were at water level and look forward alligator-style, I could see only a black horizon line.

Now, I like stomach-dropping roller coasters just as much as the next person. After about 2 hours of these seas, I felt as if I may get sick from Mother Nature’s roller coaster. I asked Richard to get some seasickness medicine to have on hand. As it turned out, I didn’t take it and I didn’t get sick but it was nice to know it was right there if I needed it. Leslie, Carol, and Nora thought I had taken it because in the darkness they couldn’t see our immediate actions and they were concerned that I was getting sick. If a swimmer gets sick in the water there is always the concern that they will become dehydrated and have to abort the swim. Fortunately, none of us were sick.

Around 3AM, I was tired. Not tired from the swimming but tired from being up all night. My brain felt like it was rattling around in my skull and I hoped that I could stay awake. It really helped when the sun came up. Staying up all night is just one of those things that you do for this swim and really can't do anything more than rest up in the few days before. There was no point in complaining about it either since we were all in the same "boat." By this point, I had hunkered down to a sustainable pace that I knew I could continue all night and kept thinking, "rotate, rotate, rotate", which make me concentrate on rolling my hips and moving more easily through the water. My stroke rate, number of arm pulls taken in a minute, held consistent at 64, (although down from 71 at the start.) Liz and David were also holding consistent SRs of 65 and 58, respectively.

Richard was performing magnificently. When we're in the water, he is the BOSS and treats us like little children. Not abusive, just authoritative, telling us what to do. When it's all over, everyone is again on equal footing. During this swim, he was managing to stay afloat, not take on water in his kayak, navigate in the dark, keep the other kayaker in line, feed David and me on regular 30 minute intervals, and stay pretty cheerful. Because he's so in control, it puts me at ease and lets me do my job: just swim. At one feeding I said to him, "It's soooo dark, Richard. Can you see anything?" He told me, "I can't see anything, not even the lights on the coast." In a moment of levity, I inquired, "Do you think they're playing a cruel joke on us and leading us in a big circle back to the island?"



Around 5 hours into the swim, my left shoulder started to hurt. Had I not done all the PT work with Brian, this pain would have most likely begun earlier and been worse. I asked Richard for 1 Motrin. Two hours later, the pain was worsening. At that feeding, Richard had 3 Motrins ready for me to take, barking, "Take these because the first one obviously isn't doing the job." (I took 2, and they worked.) Other swiftly delivered commands from the kayak included, "Marcia, keep you head down and stop looking around. Let

me do the sighting. There's nothing to see anyway. Don't be a tourist." (It was really foggy.) At one point, because Liz and her kayaker were working their way about 10 yards forward, Richard gave her a "time out." He rearranged the swimmer order, had Liz swim right next to him, put David in the middle, and had me swim on the right, next to the other kayak. If Liz got ahead of Richard's kayak, he barked at her to stay back.

Before the swim, I was concerned about potential encounters with sea life in this Channel. While in the water, I barely thought of it at all. Liz did report to Richard at one point that she was being attacked by "thousands of flying fish." David and I saw and felt nothing even though we were all in the same water, giving Richard license to tease Liz after the swim. The only encounter I did have with any sort of sea life was a few stings from random jellyfish tentacles at arbitrary points in the swim. Yes, it hurt but by the time I would have stopped to complain about it, the sting would have subsided so I adhered to the "No complaining" rule.

Around 6am, it finally became light. It seemed to go quickly from DARK to light and with this light came calmer water, which we would have for the next two-and-a-half hours into the finish. One of the benefits about swimming for 6 hours in the dark was that when it was finally light, much of the work had been done. At 6:10am a super tanker crossed about 200 yards in front of our bow, creating major

swells, then our boat crew saw dolphins! None of us swimmers saw them, but apparently they got pretty close. Big exciting half hour for everyone!



At 7am, with the booming sound of Captain Greg's bag pipes resonating across the water, I knew everything was going well and that we were going to make it as long as we avoided a disaster. We could see land, the temperature had dropped (to 63F) as it usually does in the final 3 miles, and all three swimmers were in good shape. Leslie and Nora even joined us in the water, making it a five-some! From the pictures taken at this time, we look like some military formation: three swimmers bracketed by 2 kayakers in one line and two swimmers (Leslie and Nora) comfortably trailing the outside swimmers.

The skies remained overcast but we could clearly see the shore now. Thanks to the Motrin Richard had insisted I take, my shoulder felt fine and I could comfortably keep up the increased pace offered by David and Liz. Everyone wanted to finish so when a feeding was presented at 8 ½ hours, I bluntly said, "NO." David told me later that he was glad I made such a quick, firm decision because he didn't want it either. We were in "Let's Go!" mode.

There is a lighthouse that overlooks Palos Verdes and on the next cliff just south of the lighthouse, there was a large screen; we would land in the small bay between these two points. The screen turned out to be part of the fort scene in the movie *"Pirates of the Caribbean"* and several movie workers cheered on our finish from overhead. When we were about a mile from shore, Kevin Eslinger got in the water on his paddleboard and it was evident that he was there to guide us to a safe landing. We headed straight towards the movie screen then made a sharp left into the bay. I wondered why we weren't landing straight ahead and knew this answer could wait: right now, the unspoken deal was to follow Kevin.

The water was getting shallower and rockier with every stroke. Ok, I'd heard about this finish, it didn't look so bad. Then we hit the rocky beach. The three of us each crawled in on all fours because we instantly realized that the combination of the rapidly pounding surf against the nasty little sharp, slippery rocks right at the surf line made for a dangerous landing. When everyone was able, we stood up together and TA DA! Our swim was complete! It was 8:31am and we had just swum the Catalina Channel in 8 hours, 56 minutes, 10 seconds. I was joyful that everything worked out. This had been such a team effort on the parts of everyone: swimmers, kayakers, and crew. It amazed a lot of people that we successfully completed this swim in such a fast time and it produced a deep sense of satisfaction for everyone involved.



Kevin told us to pick up a few rocks and put them in our suit if we wanted any because we weren't coming back to this beach.

On the boat Kevin told us about the reason for our sharp left turn at the finish. If we land under the movie screen it would have resulted in three immediate visits to a plastic surgeon. The rocks there were much sharper than the sharp, nasty, slippery ones we landed on. OUCH! Kevin also massaged my shoulder on the boat, which enabled me to recuperate in just a few days. (THANK YOU KEVIN!)

When I shared my initial results with family and friends, many people told me how inspired they were by this feat. It makes me happy to know that this swim accomplished by a couple of 40-something-year-olds can help to prompt others to dream and then fulfill these dreams. Please continue to pass it along, with the hope that someone somewhere will set in motion the steps to achieve a dream. Simply to get moving may be enough of a goal.

People ask me if I had a good time on Catalina Island. Based on the 30 seconds we spent there, it was very nice. Someday, I'd like to return to explore more.

This is a condensed version of Marcia's narrative of her swim. She may be reached through the USMS Website.