

Calendar

Manhattan Was Brackish

Long-Distance Mermaid

'How do I do it? I just put my head down and swim." That really is how it's done. But Carol Sing, ultra-distance swimmer, knows more of an answer is required, so she tries.

"I was born and raised in Ocean Beach. And I've always been in the water — in the ocean, which is different from a pool. Some people enter the ocean with fears. I was just in there. It never occurred to me to be afraid. It's where I like to be."

Still, she says, "I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'Well, I'm gonna swim the English Channel.' First, I swam around North Island. And then I did the Maui Channel. And then I did Catalina. And then I swam around Manhattan Island. And then I went to England."

She also says, "I train. And I had a good base. I started swimming competitively when I was 40. And I've always swum distances. And then I started doing ultra-distances at age 50. Anything over ten miles is ultra-distance in swimming. I'm 58 now, and I set a record. Actually, I often set records, because I'm always the oldest female swimmer to do these events."

Partly, too, Sing credits her friends and supporters with helping her to achieve her successes, starting with her first 12-mile swim around North Island in 1993 (repeated in 1994 and 1995) and her first channel swim, from Lanai to Maui, in 1995. "I have a wonderful crew: the La Jolla Cove Swim Club. We meet every morning — most of them are retired — and they just swim with me. Yesterday we did three miles, from the Cove to Scripps Pier and back."

Kevin Eslinger of Heartland Swim Association is her kayaker. "You don't do this stuff without a boat," she says.

The kayaker as well as the swimmer must be in superior physical condition. "That's Kevin," says Sing. "He's a swim coach, excellent swimmer, excellent surfer — all-around water person."

Ultra-distance swimmers have a "big boat" in addition to the kayaker — "except in England, where they don't allow you a kayaker, so you just follow the big boat, and feed off it."

Sing's feedings happen every 20 minutes. "I take fluids in bottles. Kevin paddles alongside, takes the lid off, and hands it to me. I chug-a-lug and drop it — it's on a line — and he pulls it in."

Otherwise, the kayak is out in front. "The boat sets the course. The swimmer sets the pace. You follow the boat."



Carol Sing

There are no time-outs. "You can't touch the boat, although I guess if you could sleep in the water, it would be allowed."

As for the other end of the digestive system: "You just 'go,' like the fish."

Despite the regularity of feedings, she loses track of time. "After the first three hours, even with the sun going down and things like that, I don't have much of a feel for the concept."

She likes it that way. "I don't want to know what time it is. All I want to know out there is the half-way point."

When she did the Catalina swim, on August 14, 1997, halfway was 10.75 miles. She completed the whole swim in 10:38 — "a very good time for any age." The English Channel, in 1999, was exactly 21 miles; it took her 12:32 — her swim of longest duration to date. Manhattan Island was the longest distance — 28.5 miles, completed in 1998 in 8:46:06.

Spending so much time in water, she

has become a water connoisseur. "Manhattan was brackish — a river swim. I prefer the Pacific Ocean — it's the saltiest. England wasn't quite so salty."

In the waves between Dover and Calais the fearless Sing did find cause for ecological alarm: "It had no marine life whatsoever. That's very scary. Very. Scary."



Swimming to Catalina

Happily, she encounters marine life in the Pacific "all the time." In Catalina, she saw "scads of stuff," since the swim started at one in the morning, and the boat had a light. "They were attracted to it. They were all over me. It was very cool."

The water temperature, by contrast, was cold, and wet suits aren't allowed. "I've been in 55 degrees. England was 63 degrees. I like 68 degrees. Anything above that, you get kind of hot."

When an ultra-distance swim is over, Sing says, "I smile a lot." But she doesn't want to lie right down. She tends to stand — two legs on terra firma. "It takes a while to unwind."

She has a video of her landing in France. She will show it at her upcoming talk about swimming and women's health, sponsored by Soroptimist International of Lemon Grove.

Ultra-distances aren't essential for benefits to accrue. Sing, who teaches arthritis aquatic classes at Grossmont Hospital, believes "firmly and absolutely" on small-scale swims. "It's good for your body and your self-esteem."

Her own mental life has been altered by "the long stuff." "You can't think negative. You can't think you're cold. You have to think, 'The sun's out. It's lovely.' And it's taught me a lot. That I can do a lot. And that attitude is totally important. Period."

On the subject of mental outlook: it's suggested that she must be a very patient person to engage in endurance swimming.

"I was patient before I started," says the unflappable Sing.

— Jeanne Schinto

Lecture by ultra-distance swimmer Carol Sing
Wednesday, April 19
Breakfast served, 7:30 a.m.;
program, 8:00 a.m.
Lemon Grove Community Center
3146 School Lane, Lemon Grove
Fee: \$3
Info: 619-462-6494

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