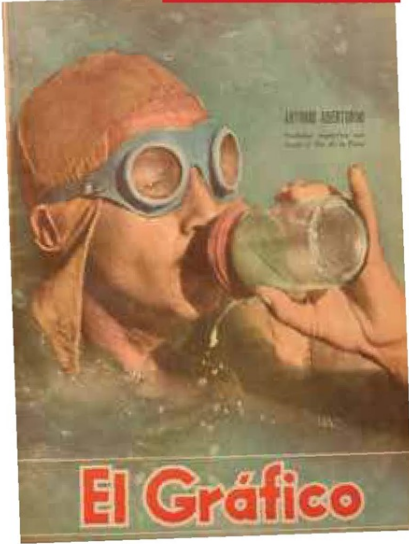


SWIMMING HISTORY

Antonio Abertondo



Ted Erickson



Kevin Murphy and Alison Streeter



Multi-Talented

The history of multi-way crossings of the English Channel.
By Elaine K Howley



Philip Rush



Cindy Nicholas



Chloë McCardel

SWIMMING HISTORY

Jon Erickson



“Curiously, there is a certain breed of human being which flutters compulsively to the flame of challenge as a moth to an ordinary candle-flame. So it is not unnatural that one of the most urgent and constant topics amongst top-class swimmers is that of a there-and-back Channel swim.” Commander Gerald Forsberg, *Modern Long Distance Swimming*, 1963.

In August 1950, when Florence Chadwick swam the 21-mile wide English Channel in 13 hours, 23 minutes, breaking Gertrude Ederle's 24-year-old record, she instantly became headline news around the world. In one of those very first

interviews, conducted on the beach in Dover upon finishing the swim, Chadwick told a United Press reporter, “I feel fine and am quite prepared to swim back!”

Though it's unclear whether she was the first swimmer to publicly contemplate making the round trip journey, her words would one day reverberate multiple times across the channel.

DOUBLE, DOUBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE

The history of successful cross-English Channel swims reaches back to 1875 when Captain Matthew Webb first made his way from England to France in a grueling 21 hours, 45 minutes. But in 1961, Antonio Abertondo, a swimmer from Argentina, became the first to breach the boundaries of human potential by swimming over-and-back. The world's first double-crossing of the English Channel took a punishing 43 hours, 5 minutes.

In his 1974 book, *Wind Waves and Sunburn: A Brief History of Marathon Swimming*, marathon swimming historian Conrad Wennergerg describes Abertondo as “a short, stocky brute who packed 225 pounds on a five-foot-four-inch frame.” Abertondo apparently was “never known for grace either in or out of the water,” but he could go the distance, even if it took a very long time.

In fact, Abertondo had notched two swims across the La Plata River from Uruguay to Argentina that were in excess of 50 miles and took more than 30 hours. Though he wasn't fast, he seemed the right man for the job when it came to a double-crossing of the English Channel.



Sarah Thomas



I WAS FRUSTRATED BY BEING THE 'SECOND BEST MARATHON' SWIMMER! KNOWING ABERTONDO'S TIME OF 43 HOURS IN 1961, I WAS CONFIDENT ON BEATING HIS TIME FOR A DOUBLE CHANNEL," TED ERIKSON

SWIMMING HISTORY

← He teamed up with British Channel swimmer and newspaper man, Sam Rockett, to create a publicity blitz around his double crossing, which launched at 8:35am on 20 September 1961. His swim would span seven tide changes and three dates on the calendar. The swim ended under the cover of night as Abertondo drifted in and out of consciousness.

“Those last few hundred yards were sheer agony,” Wennerberg writes. “Inch by inch they fell away as the indomitable Argentine stroked away. At last Tony sounded at the base of a three-hundred-foot cliff. The beaten, exhausted shell of a man who dragged himself the last few feet over the rocks was a sight never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it.”

MAKE MINE A DOUBLE

Four years later, lightning struck again when Chicago-based marathon swimmer Ted Erikson completed the second double-crossing of the English Channel in 30 hours and 3 minutes. Erikson, a chemist at the Illinois Institute of Technology Research Institute, recalls that his motivation for

the swim came from wanting to be the best in the world.

“I was frustrated by being the ‘second best marathon swimmer’! Knowing Abertondo’s time of 43 hours in 1961, I was confident on beating his time for a double channel,” he says.

Over the next 10 years, only one other swimmer—Kevin Murphy—completed a double crossing. Murphy’s first double crossing took 35 hours, 10 minutes in 1970, and his second came in 1975 and took about an hour longer, and occurred in pursuit of an unsuccessful triple-crossing attempt. (In 1987, he completed a third double in 32 hours 42 minutes.)

Also in 1975, Erikson’s son, Jon Erikson, added his name to the short list of double crossers. The younger Erikson’s two-way swim took place on 13-15 August 1975. He finished just three minutes faster than his old man, again guided by a strong competitive nature. “Jon’s primary motivation was to beat me!” the elder Erikson recalls.

Two years later, in September 1977, a 20-year-old chemistry and biology student from Ontario named Cindy Nicholas would shave well more than

three minutes off the record and put women on the map of multi-way crossings when she completed the feat in an astoundingly fast 19 hours, 55 minutes. Nicholas did not rest on her laurels, however. In 1982, she returned to the Channel and completed two, two-way crossings within a two-week period. The first took place on 28-29 August in 18:55 and the second was on 13-14 August in 20:05. In all, she completed five doubles and crossed the Channel a total of 19 times.

In his 1963 book, *Modern Long Distance Swimming*, Commander Gerald Forsberg wrote: “Admittedly, a two-way swim does not exactly double the mental and physical toil required for a one-way passage. It does however, need courage, determination, patience, and physical powers high above the ordinary.”

Chloë McCardel, herself a veteran of three, two-way crossings, agrees with Forsberg’s assessment. “I think there’s a lot of people who think, ‘I’ve done the English Channel. What’s the new challenge?’ I think there’s a lot of people who think it’s a realistic goal for them, but it’s not for everyone.” While she is supportive of people dreaming big, she encourages double-crossing aspirants to speak with swimmers who have achieved it and understand what it takes to get there – and back again. “It’s eight times harder than a single crossing. You can’t even compare them,” and the degree of difficulty “just goes up” with each subsequent crossing.

THREE-WAY

McCardel is also one of only five people to have successfully completed a solo three-way crossing of the English Channel. She completed her three-way in 2015 in a quick 36 hours and 12 minutes.

McCardel followed in the footsteps of Alison Streeter, the reigning Queen of the English Channel who has a total of 43 solo crossings of the Channel under her belt, including three two-ways and one three-way. Streeter completed that three-way in 1990 in 34 hours, 40 minutes. She still holds the record for the fastest triple crossing by a woman.

But McCardel and Streeter were preceded in triple crossings by two men, the first of whom was veteran double-crosser, Jon Erikson. In 1981, at the age of 26, the physical education teacher from Chicago completed what many in Channel swimming circles

CINDY NICHOLAS WOULD SHAVE WELL MORE THAN THREE MINUTES OFF THE RECORD AND PUT WOMEN ON THE MAP OF MULTI-WAY CROSSINGS WHEN SHE COMPLETED THE FEAT IN AN ASTOUNDINGLY FAST 19 HOURS, 55 MINUTES



SWIMMING HISTORY

IT'S EIGHT TIMES HARDER THAN A SINGLE CROSSING. YOU CAN'T EVEN COMPARE THEM, AND THE DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY JUST GOES UP WITH EACH SUBSEQUENT CROSSING. THERE'S NO FLOATING ALLOWED
CHLOË MCCARDEL



previously thought impossible in 38 hours and 27 minutes.

In 2013, he told the World Open Water Swimming Association that his dream had been to accomplish “something that had never been done before by another human being. It is a record that cannot ever, and will not ever be broken, because like Roger Bannister’s (first) sub four-minute mile run, there is only one first.”

Though Jon Erikson’s three-way crossing had been well faster than Abertondo’s two-way 20 years before, his record crumpled when the blazingly fast Philip Rush came barreling across the Channel on 15-16 August 1987 in just 28 hours and 21 minutes. Rush’s record for the triple crossing – which incidentally took 23 minutes less than Jackie Cobell’s epic 2010 one-way crossing – seems destined to stand for years to come. Rush also currently

holds the speed record for two-way crossings, which he set as part of that three-way crossing at just 16 hours, 10 minutes. The mind boggles when presented with evidence of such sustained speed and endurance in challenging conditions.

The only other person to have thus far completed a triple English Channel crossing is Sarah Thomas, who decided that three simply wasn’t enough.

THE QUAD

When Erikson made the first triple crossing, many reporters noted that so far, no swimmer had completed a quadruple crossing. It’s only human nature to seek the next frontier, after all.

But there weren’t many takers for such a challenge between 1987 and 2017. In fact, many people considered it a sheer impossibility, with the way tides and weather can change so quickly in

the channel and the supreme endurance that would be required to complete a journey of 84 miles in chilly water.

However, in 2017, McCardel – who today has 31 successful solo crossings of the Channel to her name, the most of any Australian, and coaches swimmers around the world to make their own journeys – announced an attempt at a quad crossing. It seemed that the talented Australian swimmer might push out the boundaries of human potential in a new way.

Unfortunately, the attempt was cut short at the end of the second leg. McCardel says she was experiencing symptoms of swimming induced pulmonary edema, a potentially lethal lung condition that is well known in triathlon circles. It causes an accumulation of fluid in the lungs, robbing the athlete of oxygen to power forward motion.

SWIMMING HISTORY

← McCardel says she has no plans to try the four-way again. “I haven’t found a way around [SIPE] yet,” she says. And until such time as a clear preventive protocol or reliable in-water treatment is found, getting into a situation that’s been known to trigger the dangerous condition seems unwise.

BROKEN BOUNDARIES

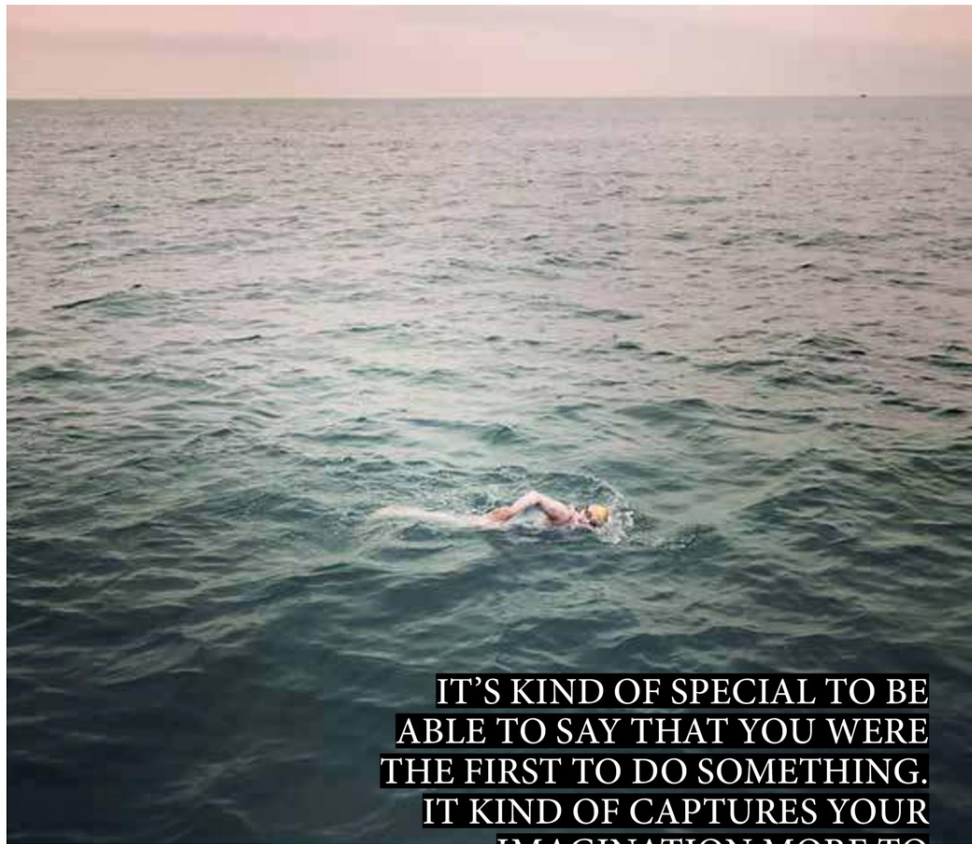
Around that same time half a world away, Sarah Thomas was undertaking a 104.6-mile solo swim in Lake Champlain. In the lead-up to that swim, she had already booked a slot for a four-way crossing of the English Channel in summer 2019. A breast cancer diagnosis in November 2017 didn’t delay her attempt, but it did put a crimp in her ability to train the way she would have preferred.

As Forsberg noted in *Modern Long Distance Swimming*, to train for a double crossing, an aspirant would have to “average four hours a day of waterwork,” over the nine months leading up to the swim. “Towards the end of training, that average will be very much exceeded. This fact alone will undoubtedly place the project beyond the reach of most amateurs with a normal job to do. Extreme single-mindedness and prodigious mental and physical guts is an absolute essential.”

Forsberg was considering a double-crossing; the training required for a quad is exponentially more intensive, demanding a special kind of obsession or the ability to subvert the laws of time, space, even physics itself. For Thomas, who works full time as a health care recruiter, training for the quad signified a formidable commitment to the goal. But the effort would be rewarded if she could become the first swimmer to achieve the impossible-seeming Quad.

“In the marathon swimming world, there’s a lot of swims that hundreds of people have done,” she says, pointing to the Catalina Channel and the English Channel as good examples of “cool, iconic swims where it’s fun to add your name to the list. But it’s kind of special to be able to say that you were the first to do something. It kind of captures your imagination more to have the opportunity to do something new, something fresh and to break boundaries.”

She did, despite having had to cope with treatment for breast cancer over most of 2018. She completed her



IT’S KIND OF SPECIAL TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT YOU WERE THE FIRST TO DO SOMETHING. IT KIND OF CAPTURES YOUR IMAGINATION MORE TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FRESH AND TO BREAK BOUNDARIES

quadruple crossing in 54 hours and 10 minutes on 15-17 September 2019.

EL CINCO?

Now that a four-way crossing has been accomplished, some people have naturally begun to wonder whether a five-way crossing is possible. For her part, Thomas thinks that it is, but would demand a very specific swimmer who can meet a stringent set of requirements:

- Has an excellent navigator who understands the currents and tides and can time them perfectly;
- Is fast enough to make a single crossing in less than 12 hours;
- Can maintain that pace over multiple crossings;
- Can tolerate the chilly temperatures and variable weather conditions that are likely to crop up over three days at sea;
- Has an experienced crew willing to live in tight quarters on the boat to support the swimmer for multiple days;
- Has an enormous capacity to cope with the ravages of salt water on the mouth, throat and skin; and

- Has the ability to simply stay awake for well north of 50 hours.

No doubt, someday a swimmer will bring the right combination of skills, talents, and luck to the challenge. Who and when remain open questions. “It will take some magic to accomplish, but I absolutely think it’s possible,” Thomas says. “If things hadn’t gone so awry with the currents on my last lap, I had enough left in the tank to do a five-way.”

For her part, Thomas hasn’t ruled out making an attempt on a five-way English Channel swim. “If I had unlimited resources and unlimited time to train, I would go back to England and try it in a heartbeat.” But that’s not reality. “I have to pick and choose, and right now there are other bodies of water that are speaking to me.” 