

Solo English Channel Success

Tom Russell 8th September 2009

BOAT: SUVA

PILOT: NEIL STREETER

CO-PILOT: ADRIAN PIDDICK

OBSERVER: ROBERT NIGHTSMITH

HIGH TIDE: 01:30 (6.5m)

START SWIM: 00:37

FINISH SWIM: 15.20

TIME: 14 HOURS 43 MINUTE

The sky was clear and starry and the channel was lit by the strong moonlight as we met at the marina in Dover for the start of Tom Russell's solo English Channel attempt. Spirits were high and Tom looked ready for the mammoth challenge ahead of him. We were met by well wishers who accompanied us as we made our way to Tom's escort boat (Suva) at 23:40. There was another solo swimmer and a relay team who were also preparing themselves for their challenge and wished Tom good luck as we all boarded our boats.

It was midnight when we left the quay waving goodbye to our supporters to make our 30 to 40 minute trip to Abbott's cliff which is situated at the far end of Samphire Hoe where Tom would start his swim. On board we had the pilot, co-pilot, official observer, Debbie Russell (Tom's mum), Victoria Moore, Chris Stowell and myself Lee Wakeham (coach). As we approach the beach I ask Tom to get changed into his swim gear and I apply large amounts of Vaseline under his arms, back of his neck and chin and chest areas to stop any chaffing. Contrary to belief, Vaseline, lanolin or the traditional goose fat will not keep you warm, it will only contribute to viscous resistance and in some instances stop the skin breathing and make the swimmer feel sick. I attached two glow sticks to Tom's costume so he could be easily seen when in the water. I shook Tom's hand and wished him good luck as did the rest of the crew and Tom jumped off the back of Suva and swam to the beach at Abbott's cliff ready to start his swim.

Tom started to swim towards France (Cap Griz Nez) which is the nearest point to the English coast at 00:37. By now there were some clouds in the sky but the moonlight still lit up the channel. Visibility was very good with the French coast clearly lit up by house and road lights

and flashing light houses at Cap Griz Nez and Cap Blanc Nez and Calais harbour in the far distance.

The sea temperature was approximately 64 degrees; the sea state was calm with a SE wind blowing up to a force 4. This was very good conditions for a channel swim. Tom started to swim 1 hour before the high tide which means we would be taken by the flooding tide which starts 1 ½ hours before the high water up towards St Margaret's and Walmer for 5 hours.

It took Tom 20 minutes to settle into his swim and adjust to distance between him and the boat but after mastering this he was able to concentrate on finding his pace and focus on swimming to each feed station. Tom would feed on a strong carbohydrate mix and some electrolytes every hour for the first three hours and then every half hour until the finish of the swim. The body needs energy and each of these special drinks would be the equivalent of eating four jacket potatoes. The feed stops are also a good time for quick socialisation where messages of encouragement from friends and family can be passed on and it is also a good time for the coach to monitor the condition of the swimmers reactions, awareness and general wellbeing.

We entered the SW shipping lane at 04:00. Tom is swimming very well with a stroke rate of 58 strokes per minute and his feeds have been very quick with Tom in high spirits. At 04:40 the pilot asked Tom to stay close to the boat due to a high volume of ships passing down the SW shipping lane. Some of these ships are very big and give off a lot of wake.

At 05:10, Tom asked where we were and I told him we were half way across the SW shipping lane which is approximately six miles wide. Half hour later at the next feed station we were able to see a very red sky in the east and Tom said he felt a bit cold from the air temperature.

We finally got daylight at 05:50 and it was not long before the sun rose giving us a hot sunny day and a light SE breeze. Tom had been swimming in the dark for over five hours and the sunshine provided some very welcoming warmth on Toms back and shoulders.

It is 06:40 and Tom has asked for some jelly babies and he is able to see the French coast clearly. The tide has changed to ebb and will take us back down the channel until 12:15 before turning back to flood which will take us back up the channel and hopefully into Cap Griz Nez.

Tom asked for Victoria to give him some company and at 07:10 she entered the water and swam with him for one hour. Tom is swimming well and his feeds are still quick, he is still maintaining a 58 stroke rate as we entered the separation zone (middle of the channel) at 07:20.

09:40 and Tom's stroke rate has dropped to 56, Tom is starting to get tired. We are about a quarter of the way across the NE shipping lane and at 10:40 I gave Tom a double strength feed. Tom says "I'm not doing this again".

11:40 and the tide has stopped running for half an hour (slack) and Victoria has re entered the water to push Tom and take advantage of the slack moving water. The double strength feed has worked and Tom is now stroking at 59 strokes per minute. We have just passed the CZ buoy and left the NE shipping lane taking us into French inshore waters.

12:40 and Tom is very tired and asking where we are heading. We are 2 miles from Cap Griz Nez and the pilot tells Tom to follow the boat and he will land him on a beach. I have given Tom a triple strength feed this time and again at 13:10 and 13:40.

When the tide turned to flood again, we were a mile and a half off Cap Griz Nez which meant that we would be taken up the channel towards Cap Blanc Nez. This made it a very long, slow and mentally challenging finish for Tom as he tried to get into the shelter of Wissant bay. Tom showed real strength of character and true grit as he made this very painful battle to the finish. At 14:40 Victoria re-entered the water to help Tom during the final hour of his swim. Tom was now getting very emotional as he battled with this painfully slow finish but he was able to maintain a stroke rate of 58 which he had done for 95% of his swim.

Finally, at 15:15, Victoria, Chris and I joined Tom in the water as he finished the last 200 meters of his channel swim. Tom was leading the way onto the beach under the cliff's at Cap Blanc Nez, France. At 15:20 Tom cleared the water turned around and looked back at his mammoth achievement seeing his escort boat bobbing off the shore in the bay and his support crew making their way into the shore.

Tom trained very hard for this challenge and he showed real strength of character and true grit when it mattered. I am very proud to have been part of Tom`s success from which he has been able to raise £3000 which will rise to over £3600 with gift aid added for the” Help For Hero`s” charity.

Well done Tom, you really deserved it.

Welcome to one of the most exclusive clubs in the world.

Lee Wakeham
Dover Life Guard Club
Open water Secretary & Coach