

Anne Cleveland - "One Stroke at a Time"

By Judith A. Habert
Photos : Lisa K. Miller

She may have been young, but Anne Cleveland's Mom knew right off the bat that her daughter had a strong affinity for the water. When given a birthday present of a boat trip, it took all of her power to keep Anne on the boat and out of the water. Not much has changed, decades later Anne Cleveland finds it almost impossible to stay out of the water.

Anne started swimming as a young girl and swam competitively from the age of 13. She was such a strong swimmer that when she attended La Jolla High School, the absence of

plunge and started spending every Sunday afternoon at the pool. She would swim the width of the pool, which was 20 yards, stop and rest and then continued doing this for about 30 minutes. There was a lot of wheezing going on at first, but before too long Anne was able to withstand more time in the water. Anne smiles and adds, "About a month later the kids at the pool talked me into doing the Coronado Fourth of July Rough Water Swim, which is a one mile ocean swim. I did it, and I was so proud afterwards that I came home and called all my friends to tell them what I had done."



For Anne this was only the beginning. "I was reading an article which was a first person account of a woman's experience swimming the English Channel. This brought back my childhood desire to swim the Channel." Shortly thereafter another article appeared about two local gentlemen who had swum the English Channel in their early sixties. "I found out that they swam at the La Jolla Cove. So I set out to meet them. I went down to the Cove and met one of the men, Bob West,

a girls swim team prior to title 9 meant that if she was to swim it would be as a member of the Boy's Swim team. So swim she did with the boys, proving to be one of their strongest competitors. Anne competed in rough water swims in her early teens and was lucky enough to hear the great Channel swimmer, Florence Chadwick talk to her swim team about Dover and her English Channel swim. Ann recalls, "It was at that moment that I decided that one day I would swim the English Channel." After high school came college and marriage and Anne's love of swimming took a back seat for quite some time.



At the age of 40, having given up a 23 year smoking habit, Anne decided that the best diversion was to get back to her primary love, swimming. She joined the mission beach

who was president of the La Jolla Cove Swim Club and he became my mentor.

Woman of Distinction

I started swimming in the ocean regularly with the group. One day Bob asked in his big booming baritone voice, 'So Anne, when are you going to swim your first channel?' Anne was ready for the challenge, "That was what really kicked it off for me. I was going to do a channel swim, so I booked the Catalina Channel swim, which is where most of us channel swimmers cut our teeth." Catalina is close to home so it is cheaper to get too, the distance is about the same as the English channel, (21 miles from Catalina to Point Vincente on the mainland.) The England Channel swim is a 22 mile swim. The ocean temperature in Catalina is warmer than the English Channel swim. The water is usually in the high 60's to low 70's. In the English Channel it is high 50's to low 60's.

The outcome of this first swim in September of 1999 was not great for Anne. She failed to follow the advice to put on a few pounds before she attempted the swim. "I was too vain to gain and I paid for it. The extra body fat helps insulate

the body against the cold; without this barrier against the cold the swim becomes impossible." We had a la nina weather pattern that year so the temperatures were colder, in the low 60's and by the end it was in the high 50's, and Anne wasn't

expecting water that cold. After about 6 hours in the water and only 6 miles from the finish point, she passed out from hypothermia. Luckily she woke up, feeling like she had just blinked, but suddenly she started swimming erratically and was headed for the propeller of her escort boat. She felt like she had died and gone to hell, and hell was so very cold. She tried valiantly to continue "I wasn't about to quit...all my friends were on the boat offering support, but no matter how strong minded you are, you can't beat hypothermia. In my humiliation of defeat, I was passing through the galley of the support boat, on my way to the hot shower, when one of my friends anxiously inquired, 'So, you are going to try this again? My response was a resounding 'Hell No!.' And I hid in the hot shower for as long as I could get away with it."

My next attempt at a Channel swim was the warm 10 mile Maui Channel which is from Lanai to Maui. I was successful in this attempt and completed the swim in 4 hours. However, Anne was determined not to give up on the Catalina Channel swim.

For her second Catalina attempt the conditions were not cooperative, and the waters were so rough that the officials debated letting Anne attempt the swim, but at that point she would have had to pay the escort boat the full fee so they decided to let her give it a try. She was seasick from the ride over to Catalina, but determined to succeed this time. After four hours of swimming in these conditions, Anne couldn't help but admit to herself that this was harder than she thought it would be. It gave her a new respect for channel swimmers. She continued on valiantly wondering in her mind if she truly could pull this off. At the time not realizing that what she was swimming in was so much worse than normal

Channel conditions. As it turned out she had a 10 hour and 15 minute swim, a great time for the conditions in which she was swimming, but most importantly she had done it. She had mastered a Channel swim. "I can still recall reaching the mainland and touching the ground under the beautiful light house at Point Vincente."



The Catalina Channel swim starts around midnight, because the swimmers want to be done around ten o'clock in the morning to avoid the wind chop. I couldn't help but ask how a swimmer can successfully swim in the dark, considering possible ocean friends and simply the inability to see in what direction you are headed. The answer seemed simple after Anne explained, "You have a boat that escorts you, we have a larger boat and a kayak that works off of the escort boat. They keep you going in the right direction and look out for your safety. They also provide meal feeds of a warm carbohydrate drink every 30 minutes to keep the swimmers alert and strong to make it through the length of their swim."

All I could think of as Anne gave me the details of her ten hours in the water, was that it must be really tough to get out of bed the next day after putting your body through such a grueling workout. "I swim a lot with the core of my body so my abs hurt. A little ibuprofen helps, and I usually get back in the water and stretch it out a bit. A little hair of the dog, you might say. You are actually so high on the fact that you did it that it usually doesn't hurt too badly." Anne also admits that it is at this point that you usually say 'never again,' but before you know it you are back on the phone booking another one.

"A week after my Catalina swim, I attended the La Jolla Rough Water Swim as a spectator, which I was skipping for the first time since I had gotten back into the water, when my training partners informed me that they felt I was ready for the English Channel Swim. I decline, having decided to wait a year before attempting this. They didn't let me off the hook that easy. And when they said they would pay my airfare if I went, I figured okay, let's do it."

Having learned her lesson from her first attempt in icy waters Anne knew she would have to put on the requisite 30 pounds in order to have a successful attempt. So in July 2002 Anne Cleveland made her way to England and set off to accomplish her childhood dream, to swim the English Channel.

Knowing how difficult athletes work to remain slim and in shape I had to inquire how this added weight affected stamina, lung capacity and speed. Anne addressed these questions, "It does affect you somewhat, but you aren't swimming for speed, so you can get around the extra pounds. What slows you down more than any weight can is getting cold. If you get cold you just can't make it happen. So it is better to gain weight and lose a little speed than to not gain it and really lose speed or not be able to do it because of the effect of the cold on your body."

Anne succeeded on her first English Channel attempt and one would think this would suffice, to have met your childhood goal, but as Anne admits, "Channel swimming is addictive and once you accomplish one goal you are always in search of the next challenge." In 2004 at the age of 48, Anne set out to do a consecutive two way swim across the English Channel and back. The swim had Anne in the frigid waters between England and France and back again for 28 hours. This swim gave Anne Cleveland the world record as the oldest of the elite group of 18 individuals to have ever completed a two way swim.

Anne shared some interesting bits of information with me on Channel swimming. In total only about 1,000 individuals have successfully swam the English Channel. Of these only 18 have completed a two way swim and only 3 individuals have the distinction of a three way swim. This places Anne in a very elite group of swimmers. Also, Anne shared the story of Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to complete a one way English Channel swim. The year was 1926 and she

took the world by surprise by accomplishing such a feat for a woman. What had them equally aghast was that she swam in a midriff baring swim suit that her sister designed for her. This was during a time when women only swam in long, fully concealed swim dresses. However, Gertrude knew she couldn't swim the channel in the traditional garb. Even more surprising was that at some point through the swim the top of the suit was causing chaffing, which was inhibiting her swim, so she took off the top and completed the swim in only the bottom half of the suit.

It was truly amazing to me to hear that anyone could withstand 28 hours in icy cold water with high winds and darkness adding to the almost impossible task, so the most pressing questions I had for Anne was how do you do it and is it honestly fun? Anne chuckled and thought about it for a moment before responding. "Yeah, it is fun. Part of it is the challenge. You have such a strong determination to finish... no actually," she corrects herself, "It is the determination to do five more minutes. You don't think in terms of hours, you think in terms of minutes. When you are standing on the beach in France you don't think I have to swim all the way back to England. You just say to yourself I am going to see how far I can swim. Every half hour we get a warm carbohydrate flavored drink for nutrition we call that a feed, so you say I can go to the next feed. Then as it gets more grueling on your body you tell yourself I can go another 15 minutes, then okay I can do another 5 minutes and by the tail end you simply say I can go one more stroke and you concentrate on pulling as much water as you can with each stroke. The English Channel is truly swum 'one stroke at a time' It is truly amazing what your body can do if your mind will simply allow it."

So what is now in store for Anne Cleveland? Anne currently does motivational speaking at health spas and corporate functions. She is also a realtor with Beacham Walsh Properties in La Jolla and is the swimming coach for La Jolla High School at the Coggan Family Aquatic Complex, where she also coaches the Masters swimming team which is a swim team for adults that provides structured coached work outs. In addition she is a strong believer in community service and is the immediate past president of the La Jolla Town Council,

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where she has served for the past several years and currently is the chair for the Town Council Parks and Beaches sub-committee.

So having accomplished her childhood dream and then some, I had to ask if she was going to continue attempting the amazing swimming feats. Anne just smiled and admitted that there are two more challenging Channel swims that intrigue her and are considered to be more difficult than the English Channel. One is between England and Scotland and in addition to frigid waters it is known for poisonous jelly fish, which have curtailed many swimmers attempts to complete the swim. The other swim is The Cook Strait which is a 16 nautical mile swim also complete with frigid water and poisonous jelly fish. It is the body of water separating the North and South Islands of New Zealand. To date, only 71 successful crossing have been made by 61 individuals from 8 countries. Although, she admits the England Scotland swim is not as interesting to her as the Cook Strait swim, she coyly refused to comment on whether or not she will attempt, it although I can't help but feel that before too

long Anne will be attempting yet another amazing feat "One stroke at a time."

For more information and pictures on Anne's Channel swims visit her site at www.annecleveland.com



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