

The sea floor opened up beneath me

ADVERTISER sales administrator **CHRISTINA HYLAND** has swum the Frances Thornton Galway Bay Swim on five occasions. In this article, she gives us a sense of just what a physical and mental achievement it is.

I woke to a mild summer's morning. Didn't sleep the best with nerves and excitement building in anticipation of the day ahead. I had a recurring dream my goggles broke on the way there, but they hadn't. My husband sent me a photo from the docks of the sea, it was flat calm, like glass. I thought great, it will be a fast one this year. Well how wrong I was.

For months I have been in training for this swim. Out most days in all weathers. Getting into the water at Blackrock and swimming along adjacent to the prom, following the line of yellow buoys. I'd head out most days after work in the *Advertiser* starting off small with 2km swims out to Palmers (pier beside the Salthill carpark) and back, building it up to 4km, then doing longer distances at the weekend, 6km to the aquarium and back twice, and finally to finish off my training, a 9km to the aquarium and back three times. Once you do all that training you reach saturation point and can't wait to swim the 13km across the Bay just so you don't have to do any more training.

All I could stomach that morning was a banana and water; my dad offered me buttery toast which I nearly threw up. I did all my eating the day before and I was well fuelled up. On the way to Aughinish, I listened to High Hopes by Panic at the Disco. This is it, the day I have been waiting for, preparing for, my boat and crew are already in the water, waiting off Deer Island. The butterflies in the stomach have started. Even though it is my fifth time doing this swim, it doesn't get any easier, I still think what the hell am I doing. But I know I am going to do it anyway.

Choppy

The water wasn't so calm on the Clare side of the Bay, with waves slapping along the coastline, the tide was in which made for a nice take off. Hopefully the choppy waters would subside once we got going. I could see from a distance Niamh Johnston's yellow boat coming in. She's doing the double, swimming from Galway to Clare and back



Photographer Kevin O'Byrne.

again. And I thought I was doing a long swim today.

The start is the worst, just working up the courage to get in when looking out across the Bay, you can't even see Salthill. Once you get in the water you're fine, all the nerves go away, you're just swimming then, you're free.

A candle was lit for Frances and for the safe passage of the swimmers, all of whom have their own reasons for doing the swim and all of whom have been raising much needed funds for Cancer Care West. We all know why we are doing this and that knowledge keeps us swimming, even when the sea gets rough and there is no shore in sight. We'll get there.

There was a video being made as we all got in to our swimsuits, some in wetsuits, a few dousing themselves in goose fat, me lashing on the sunscreen so my pasty skin doesn't get scalded. We climbed over rocks down to the beach, with our bright orange floats strapped to our backs all in the name of health and safety.

Next we'll have arm bands. I'm getting rid of mine when I get to the boat. We posed for photos before getting into the water; we were told it was a toasty 15.8 degrees. We walked in the sea up to our hips, waved to our family and friends, "see you on the other side," said the last of the Hail Marys, a few Signs of the Cross were made 3.2.1 the horn blew and we were off, like a group of sharks at feeding time, off out into the bay, elated. We had begun, what a great feeling to get to this point, all we had to do now was keep swimming. Just get in at Aughinish and out at Blackrock, simple.

And then, darkness

When I left the beach I could see the sand below me and seaweed swirling in the water, gradually the sandy sea floor seemed



to drop below, moving farther and farther away, until all there was, was sea, darkness, just me and the sea no turning back now.

The waves hit us head on as we left the beach and we couldn't see anything. There were marker buoys out for us to spot leading us to the left of Deer Island where our boats would pick us up, but because of the choppy water and the high tide we just couldn't see them and some had drifted away. Just keep the head down and keep going, that was my motto. I'd get there in the end or I could be swimming out to America for all I knew. I ended up in the midst of the boats as that was all I could spot from my position in the water — sure I might as well find my own boat while I'm out here. They picked me up soon enough and when I say picked up, they didn't give me a tow in, just pulled up beside me, to

guide me along. I yanked the cursed tow float off and threw it into the boat. Good luck I'm away, there is no stopping me now. Freedom.

At this point I should mention the boat crew, the unsung heroes of this challenge, without them none of us would make it across. You are completely disoriented once you get in the water especially in rough conditions and especially out at sea, where there is nothing to sight. They are our eyes, they lead their swimmers across the Bay in as straight a line as they can. Fortunately for me I had, the best crew, Joe Hyland, Mingdaugas Norkus, Lukasz Wrobel and Roisin Byrne and they have never failed to hit their target of the diving towers in Blackrock.

NUIG/GMIT Sub Aqua Club have kindly crewed for me and given me the use of their RIB every year I have taken part. For this

I'm extremely grateful. This can be a challenge in itself to get a boat and crew. I was also fortunate to have my husband on board, looking out for me, making sure I took my food breaks, calling me in for feeds, as if I was a pet seal.

Throwing me a banana, a bottle of water, Lucozade for energy, keep the sugars up. My feeds were every hour, and after the first hour I found out I had only 2km done! I realised in that moment I was in for the long haul and the idea

The sea really tested us this year and it never calmed down, kept roaring at us and we roared back. It rocked us from side to side and lifted us up and down, but we kept the head and kept swimming. The sky above was grey and the waves continued to roll in on us. I couldn't see land. Sometimes it felt like I wasn't moving at all, will I ever get there?

I had to check in with myself. Arms, are you doing OK? Yes, they were holding up, great no pain. Legs are you doing OK

like a swarm of bees all huddled together and you can't believe your eyes, you're home.

You look down and you can see that sandy floor coming up to meet you, the seaweed swirling around below, you're 1km out. The last push and you just enjoy every minute of it because you know it's all going to be over soon. You know you have achieved what you set out to do and that feeling is the best, you're on a high. The sea floor comes up so close, I could touch it, I could see the diving tower to my left and I'm swimming the whole way until I can't swim any more, until there is no water left.

I stand up at the steps of Blackrock, at low tide, with no more sea left to swim in and I'm delighted. I'm on top of the world. Paddy McNamara the king of Blackrock is there to greet me. I wave at the crowds and climb the steps. I'm so happy to be back on dry land. It feels strange to be out of the sea, I have to figure out how to walk again. It's such a beautiful sight seeing the crowds there, all the people who turned out to see the swimmers come in. Thanks for turning up and looking so good. I can't help but smile.

This swim that started out with two swimmers, 13 years ago has turned into this great event, with 155 participants this year, the biggest yet. It has gathered people together; sharing in this challenge, this dream of swimming the iconic Galway Bay and raising funds for Cancer Care West. Throughout the years more than €850,000 has been raised, with funds still coming in.

This was by far the toughest swim I've done, never mind swim the toughest event in general and at 5hrs and 24mins in the water, it was by far the slowest. An hour and 38mins slower than my last Bay crossing back in 2017. It tested me, it wasn't a walk in the park, but I felt all the better for it. And now for next year...

Christina Hyland is a sales administrator with the Galway Advertiser. The charity uses these funds to help meet the costs of residential and cancer support services, which are provided free of charge to cancer patients and their families. This is a great event, all thanks and praise to the Thornton Family, all the organisers and boat crews. To find out more about the swim and Cancer Care West visit www.galwaybayswim.com and www.cancercarewest.ie

back there? Yes they were still motoring away, no pain, no cramps all is good. Are you cold? No I'm not cold, I'm fine, I'm doing this, all is well, and I'm swimming the Bay. I'm doing something amazing, that most people don't get the chance to do. I'm privileged and I'm over halfway there. This put a smile on my face. I'm doing what I love. That thought kept me going. That and the two metre rogue wave I watched hit the boat side on and drenched the crew that was funny.

With 3km to go I could see land. That is an incredible sight, when you see land for the first time and you know you are going to make it. You're on your way home. I wept into my goggles; I do this every time without fail, it gets me.

Weeping into my goggles

You see Galway from a whole new perspective while you're swimming; it looks like a foreign land, all hazy and grey. Then it all becomes clearer, you start spotting land marks, the Cathedral, the big wheel in Salthill, Galway Bay Hotel, and finally you see it come in to view, the yellow of the diving boards and the crowd to the right of it, a black blur of people,

of finishing in a good time and maybe even getting a PB went out the window.

The swim is more mental than physical. Out at sea you are literally out of your depth in an environment completely different from your norm, which you have no control over. You're on your own out there, with nothing to see and no one to talk too. It's a lonely place inside your own head.

Thoughts would come and go, this one is for Ann, songs would play on repeat (Eye of the Tiger) until my next food stop, I was just holding on until then and it wasn't the banana and Lucozades that kept me going it was human interaction finally, I'm not alone. Even though I'd only spend a few minutes floating by the boat that really perked me up and got me ready for another hour. Right, left, right left, keep those elbows high. I'll get there eventually.