



## THE MOLOKAI CHANNEL SWIM

By Dr. Harry Huffaker

"Dentist Conquers Molokai Channel," reads the caption of the newspaper article. The article itself gives the basic statistics in regard to the distance, starting and finishing points, and any significant events. Beyond this the public is fairly ignorant about marathon swimming; it involves so much more than swimming a long distance. A river, lake, or sea swim may present a set of obstacles peculiar to it alone. Vast differences exist in distance, temperature, currents, tides, wind, and water (salty or fresh). In addition there may be natural hazards such as sharks, Portuguese man of war, swooping seagulls, heavy navigational traffic, and the intensity of the sun. It would be an impossible task to single out any one person as the greatest long distance swimmer.

Brenda Sharratt, the only conqueror of Loch Ness, would most likely be unsuccessful in an English Channel attempt. Her slow speed would preclude her from being at the right place at the right time to take advantage of the tidal changes, yet her well insulated body allowed her to withstand the biting cold of the Loch for some thirty hours. Reports tell of how she would literally float and kick for hours at a time. Greta Anderson holds the women's record for crossing the English Channel, and yet she was defeated in two attempts at swimming the Molokai Channel.

Cold water prevented me from conquering the English Channel when within two miles of the white cliffs of Dover. Up to this point I looked like a fair bet to better the men's record by one hour and thirty minutes. The thoughts of the people on the boat were turning to champagne, when suddenly I lost consciousness and had to be taken out of the water. After thirty minutes of thawing out I was in A-1 condition physically and mentally. Naturally it was disappointing to think that a transient fall in body temperature had prevented me from accomplishing one of my greatest dreams and setting a record in the process.

"What on earth makes you do it?" That is a question that besets every marathon swimmer or anyone else who attempts anything out of the ordinary. Seven short questioning words; they cannot be entirely answered with seven thousand. Sometimes the query is merely conversational stonewalling while the questioner looks for someone more normal to talk to. In this case it is permissible to score first by telling him it is done to get away from tedious people for a couple of hours every day. At other times the inquiry may come from someone genuinely interested. An appropriate reply in this instance would be, "To be an acknowledged expert and to do something better than most other people." The entire answer, though, embraces both of these ideas—together with a host of others. It develops and satisfies the body while simultaneously resting and satisfying the

mind. Marathon swimming is an even paced, calculated, and sustained effort which is plainly more beneficial to the heart and system than short concentrated doses of exertion. It is a clean, inexpensive, healthy and pleasant hobby. Satisfaction springs from the smooth coordination of brain with muscle. In pool racing the brain can play little part in the constant repetition of identical lengths. In a river, sea, or lake, the brain selects landmarks, works out courses, calculates short cuts, and is constantly active. Pre event study of maps, routes, tide tables, weather forecasts, etc., can be worth a great deal to the intelligent marathoner.



It is curious how devotion to one's own sport blinds one to the good points of others. Sometime ago I was talking to a friend at lunch. He proposed to spend the afternoon on a racing bicycle with a cycling club. "Good gracious," I replied, "What an absurd way to spend an afternoon. Racing around the countryside with a mob of others. Just seeing how far and how fast you can go and never looking at the country. Four hours waste of time I call it."

He just looked at me and laughed, reminding me that only the day before I had spent eight and one half hours swimming back and forth in a heated, chlorinated, indoor swimming pool.

It is hard for me to envision any other aspect of my life where the reassuring words and wisdom of the philosophers play such an important role. It is indeed a unique experience to stand alone on a deserted beach on the island of Molokai at the ghostly hour of 3:30 a.m.; to contemplate diving into the Pacific Ocean and start swimming for the shores of Oahu some twenty-six shark-infested miles away. As I gazed through my goggles at the darkened body of water just in front of me, my mind became cluttered and confused. I couldn't think about the finish. It seemed as far away as retirement. I didn't even want to look ahead to see how far.

Thoughts of well wishers' prayers and skeptics' criticisms screamed and echoed in my head. I had twice failed at crossing the English Channel and here I was attempting an even greater challenge. The Molokai Channel is five miles longer, it is generally rougher and less predictable, the salinity of the water is considerably higher causing the tongue to swell and burn from swallowing too much salt water and causing an insatiable thirst, and the currents can cause aimless diversions. And for a little extra punch, there are those not so little animals that make you wonder about God and the universe. The trip across had been anything but encouraging. It got so rough at one point that on two occasions I was thrown out of my bunk and onto the floor. Then the bunk above collapsed and fell on me. When Ron Haworth got up to extricate me, he got sea sick. My mind turned to memories of the hours and hours of swimming back and forth along Ala Moana Beach Park, about the time while on a training swim off Koko Head, the escort boat came too close and my hand was severely lacerated by the propeller of a 110 horsepower outboard motor. There

was also my wife to think about. On several occasions she jumped up in the middle of her sleep following nightmares about the creatures with teeth that go snap snap in the night. "How is she tonight?" I thought to myself. "Can I?, Will I?, Should I?"

At times such as this it is very comforting to quote the masters: "Success, remember, is the reward of toil" (Sophocles), "Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? Or hast thou walked in search of the depth?" (Book of Job), "Be ye strong therefore and let not your hands be weak; for your work shall be rewarded" (Chronicles), "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Tennyson), "It is the hope of reward that sweetens labour" (Old Saw).

The people aboard the Scuba Belle were getting anxious for me to commence. My last thought before plunging into the water was the advice of R. H. Horne who once said, "Your labor is for future hours. Advance. Spare not. Nor look behind. Plough deep and straight with all your power." So I said to myself, "Self, with all that wonderful advice, how can you possibly fail?"

I had previously done some scuba diving in the same area and the thought of what might be below me was a little unsettling. I had instructed John Marshall to signal me after two hours for a feeding break. After what seemed like two days I looked over and saw John waving an orange soda at me as he leaned over the water level platform protruding from the rear of the boat. Have you ever thought what a porpoise feels like as he swims over for a reward from his trainer?

By this time the spectacular full moon was just sinking below the horizon with a surrounding flood of brilliant orange light illuminating the sky. I became so engrossed in the beauty of the setting moon and the simultaneously rising sun that I neglected to stop for nourishment until after six hours. It was now 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. still seemed a long way off.



Physically I felt no discomfort and this enabled me to divorce my mind from the task at hand and think about other things. I thought about Chuck Tyus, an old friend who first got me interested in this sport. Chuck can't swim very well and really wasn't interested in taking up the hobby himself, but he thought it might appeal to me. Although in a good mood at this point, I thought it best to reserve judgment about Chuck until later. I thought about Del Andrews, a former roommate and classmate who worked so very hard with me on my English Channel training and attempt. When I failed, I felt that I had let him down more than myself. Circumstances prevented him from being with me this time, but I knew he was pulling for me. I thought about David Kahanamoku, who had been so friendly and encouraging to me until he passed away last month. I stroked on, feeling even better as the time passed. I sang a few songs to myself. I thought about the past and planned for the future.

Suddenly I spotted a shark. I thought how tragic it would be that the swim might have to be cancelled on account of the naivete of a sea life creature who could not possibly fully appreciate, understand, or be considerate of my efforts. Then another shark came much closer. Finally a clever idea occurred to me. If I stopped looking for sharks, I probably wouldn't see any. Sure enough the idea worked and after another hour I was again feeling relaxed and beginning to anticipate completing the swim.

After eleven hours we were within two miles of Sandy Beach Park and it appeared that I might be able to conclude the effort in less than twelve hours. "That would be some record," I thought. But the natural elements had other ideas. A strong flood tide was now sweeping past where I was trying to land. I knew that if I could not land at that point it would mean either attempting to land at some other point along the coast which is predominantly coral and razor sharp lava rock, or swim-

ming an additional three miles down to Hanauma Bay. Neither alternative appealed to me at this time, and mental depression began to set in. For the first time I had a landmark with which to compare my progress, and for nearly two hours nothing appeared to get any closer. The people on the boat looked at each other with questioning glances.

Still feeling very strong physically and finally able to distinguish cars and people, I swam even harder. The bottom which I could now see for the first time seemed to move past me at a snail's pace. Then quite unexpectedly I felt a surging wave pick me up and propel me toward the beach with considerable force. The next thing I can remember was feeling my outstretched hands and spread fingers dig deeply into the sand. The foamy water receded, leaving me high and dry on the beach. After approximately 42,120 strokes, 126,360 leg kicks, and 21,060 breaths, Success!! Pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain.

Enough credit cannot be given to Roy Damron for the magnificent job in charting and piloting my course from the time we left the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor until I reached Sandy Beach some 20 hours later. Never once did he leave the wheel of the Scuba Belle, his unselfish concern for my well being was most certainly a major factor in the success of my venture, as was psychological advantage of having an experienced water man like Mike Holmes along side. The time and effort on behalf of the Outrigger Canoe Club and its members who sponsored and helped with the swim was greatly appreciated.

Seated at dinner two days later, my wife read me an article in the paper about a ten-foot, five-hundred-pound shark that had been caught in the Molokai Channel. Upon further investigation, human remains were discovered, and scientists estimated that they had been inside of the shark about 48 hours. In the same paper was a statement attributed to me to the effect that I'd like to make an attempt at a reverse crossing. As she read it to me, indigestion began to set in and I could not look Chris straight in the eye. She was visibly shaken, and I felt ashamed to think that after only two days following my achievement I was searching for something new to conquer. Irresistible forces applied to immovable objects always cause upheaval. I tried to explain to her that Channel Fever, like hay fever, rheumatism, and many other trying ailments is never entirely beaten. When the mind and body return to a normal state of health, the ailment tends to recur. I then quoted Thoreau, who said, "Man's capacity has never been measured nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedent, so little has been attempted."

I thought that would impress Chris and even make her encourage me to make another attempt. She replied, "Couldn't I interest you in taking up volleyball?"

