

## **Wilson's Version of the 2007 Boston Light 8-Mile Swim**

While heading out of Boston Harbor to Little Brewster Island navigating through 2 -3 foot waves and 20 mph winds to begin my 8-mile swim back to Boston, I heard a voice inside my head say; "this is mom nature, so you want to swim the English Channel, do yah? Well before you do I want to see if you are truly worthy of such a feat."

I stared out at the churning white capped sea, while cold ocean spray crashed over the bow of the small 24 ft escort vessel drenching my son Brent and I as we made our way to the starting point at the lighthouse island.

Trying to stand erect on the boat while it bobbed back and forth on the water surface, I removed my soaking wet garments, shivering and shaking from the first sign of hypothermia. And I said to myself "I have to swim back to Boston under these conditions? yeah right.!!" And again mother nature whispered in my ear, this is your final preparatory test, let's see what you are made of Billy Boy."

I was able to apply some sun screen, adjust my goggles and take a last gulp of my carbo drink before the starting horn blasted. The water temperature was 63 degrees and dropping. The last time I swam in real cold water was back in Sept 2006, the Alcatraz swim, when the water temp. was 58 degrees. Being from Pennsylvania, cold water is hard to find in the summer months. Even the bath showers are luke-warm.

The horn sounded and I took one last deep breathe of salty air and jumped over the side of the boat into the bone chilling sea. When I surfaced I could feel the burning needle like pain throughout my body and was welcomed with a three foot crashing wave that smashed into my wide open mouth when I surfaced. I could hear mom nature laughing.

I pulled my self together and started flailing my arms to generate heat. About a 100-yards from the boat I began to warm up. I looked back at my escort boat which contained a trembling waterlogged Brent and two inexperienced female escort pilots. I said to myself maybe I should just fake a shoulder injury and terminate my swim now. Get my money back from the Channel folks and go on with life. I retired two weeks ago. I don't need this!!

But then a second voice appeared in my head, this time the 43 time English Channel crossing queen Allison Streeter. "Bill" she said, in order to swim the channel you have to take it a stroke at a time." I replied, " I can't even take a stroke without these crashing waves forcing them down to my side." "One stroke at a time" Ali's voice said. "One stroke at a time."

Ok, I began getting use to being tossed and turned about, as if I was in the agitation cycle of my Kenmore wash machine. The sun began peeping through the clouded sky, I began singing the Beatles' Here comes the Sun, the Sun King, and John Denver's Sunshine on My Shoulder. I began to stabilize, building strength stroke after stroke.

Then came a downer, I stopped momentarily to ask Brent "where are the other swimmers"? "They are all out ahead of you" he replied. I felt like a complete failure. Things begin rushing through my mind; you are moving to slow, the Coast Guard is going to pluck you out of the water because you are behind. How in the hell are you expecting to swim the almighty English Channel when you can't even keep up. Then the whispering queen called out again, "one stroke at a time Bill, one stroke at a time."

I began to think about more pleasant things, hummingbirds at my feeder, my wife and kids, family. Then all of a sudden I hit something with my hand, it was another swimmer, Fred Knight, an annually Boston Light swimmer and one of the organizers of this event. I stopped and looked at him and he said, "this water is rough." I yelled out "dam rough, like a washing machine." and I continued swimming. I said to myself, "how long am I going to last, especially since the Boston Light swim guru himself was casting a gloomy outlook.

On I went. Sudden I heard a voice calling from the escort boat. It was Brent summoning me to take my first feeding. He tossed the half gallon jug of nutritional fluids to me. I swallowed as much as I could before the waves crashed upon me. I put on the cap and dropped the jug. I looked up, turned to swim when I was confronted by a twirling outboard propeller. The prop missed me by 3-4 inches. I freaked out and yelled, "what the hell are you doing?" "Next feeding just toss the jug out with no rope, I'll swim up to it." And it was only two miles into my swim? After the swim Brent informed how close I was to getting disemboweled.

Onward I went, like a cork or message in a bottle, slowly drifting on an open sea, feeling powerless as I placed one arm in front of the next. The crazy thing about it, I was comfortable. My body was warm, my strokes were powerful and I was feeling good.

The next 3 miles were uneventful except for the inexperienced escort pilots driving in and out of sight. Then without guidance or "watch out" from the boat, I swam hand, head and shoulder into a channel buoy. I looked at my hand and it was bleeding. Oh no, I hope this is not an invitation to a shark frenzy, I thought.

Onward to the most agonizing mile and a half of the swim. I passed under the Long Island Bridge into the worst water of the swim course. Mom nature just turned up the agitation cycle. Waves coming in from every direction and the powerful currents pulling me every which way. I peeped out ahead to Thompson Island, the 6 mile mark. I kept fighting the strong cross currents and it appeared that I was going to be denied access to the point of the island. I wasn't moving forward, instead sideways. I felt as if I was on a treadmill, going nowhere and just passing time. The currents were colliding into each other causing high waves. I was taking in salt, the last thing I wanted to do.

Then again mom nature blasted me with another wicked thought. "Oh Billy Boy, so you think that this is bad. Wait until you are about a mile off the coast of France, the "dreamer's graveyard", when I will really whip up a much stiffer current, making you wish that you were dead. Now get your gluteus maximus through this and quit @\$#! around."

I knew that once I passed Thompson Island point I had it made. It was just getting to that point. Two strokes forward, falling three body lengths back. In swimming 25 to 30 miles over the past three months I knew I had a lot of fight left in me. I started screaming back at mom nature telling her, listen you %^#\$, I still have a lot of fight left in me. So take this. It took me about an hour and half to go one mile. Normally I swim a little over two miles an hour. I finally passed the point of Thompson Island and saw the Boston skyline in the distance. The sea grew a little calmer and I inhaled my last feeding for the last two mile swim. Oh what a relief!!!

What's this just out a head of me? It's a vessel escorting two swimmers. I said to myself, are you up to a challenge Willy? Sure, why not. Let's sprint the last two miles as if you were playing the "beating the freaking freighter game." This is a game I play in my training sessions. In crossing the English Channel you either wait for the freighters in the shipping lane to pass you by while you drift back to the English coast, or you sprint like hell in front of them to get to the other side.

Let's show these young whippersnappers what this 55 year old man can do. Full throttle ahead. Kick Willy kick. You're gaining. Green tea consumption, the vitamins and nutrition prescribed by Len and Joe and your four years of steady hard training will propel you to the end. Now kick. Peep at the finish line and then reach and kick, kick and kick. And I hate to kick. The large vessel got closer and I could make out the two swimmers in its wake. I was gaining.

I passed them and peeped at the finish line for one last time. What a rush!! Then my hand hit solid ground. The horrendous swim was over. I did it mom nature!! Then I rushed off to the rest room to evacuate the gallon or so of sea water I inadvertently ingested during my swim.

In 2005, I completed this 8-mile swim in 3 hours and 47 minutes. Today it took me 5 hours, 12 minutes and 21 seconds.

It was definitely a confidence builder for my English Channel swim in 2 to 3 weeks. I wonder what weather and ocean conditions mom nature has in store for me then. Please be gentle on me mom.