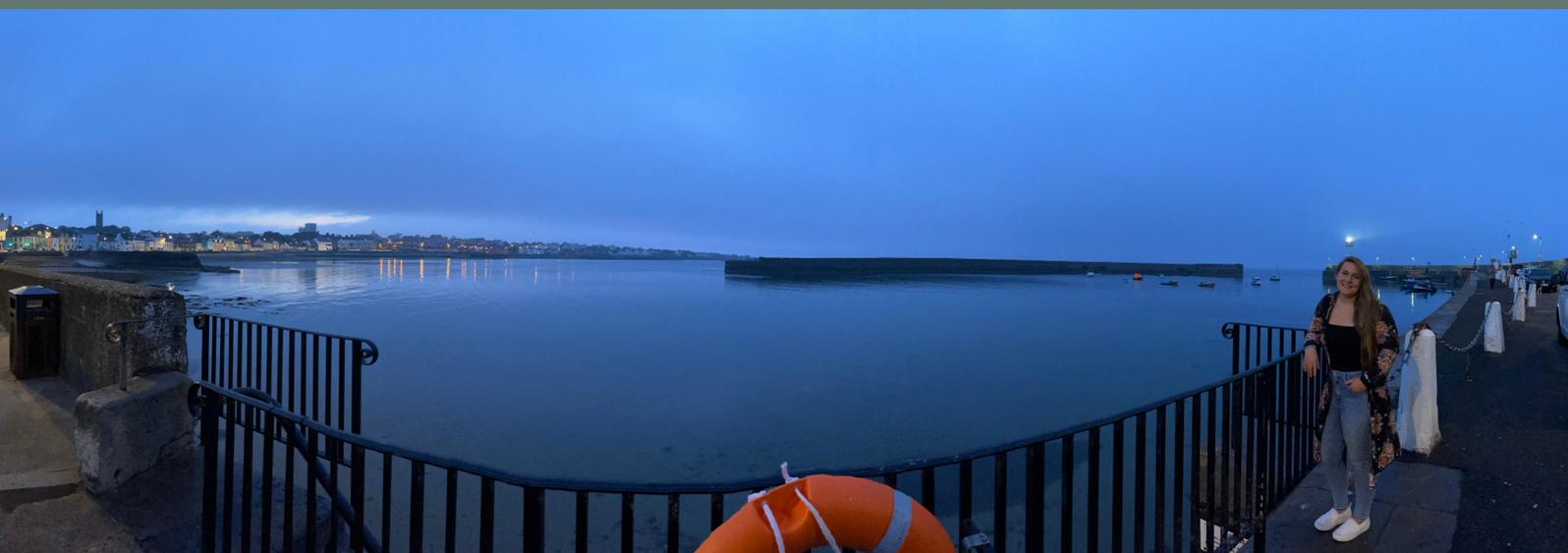


JULY 1, 2021

# SWIMMING TO SCOTLAND

*My North Irish Channel Crossing*  
Lauren Lesyna



## How It All Began

The North Channel was *not* supposed to be my first channel swim. Described by many as the most difficult of the Oceans Seven swims (English, North, Catalina, Gibraltar, Tsugaru, Cook and Moloka'i), the North Channel's unique challenges include the cold water temperature, the unpredictable weather, and the Lion's Mane Jellyfish. So, why did I start there? Channel swims tend to need to be booked two or three years out in order to secure a position with an experienced pilot and to allow for the proper amount of training. My first channel swim was to be the most popular one - the English Channel. I secured a booking in 2018 for the summer of 2020, and I trained for two years to get a proper open water marathon swimming base. My friend and training partner, Luca, broached the subject of booking the North Channel at the same time, so in 2019, we booked for the summer of 2021. Then, the world turned upside down.

Just three months before I was to leave for England to swim the English Channel, we went into lockdown. I refused to believe that the feat that I had been training for for two years, my fixation and ultimate obsession, the one dream that kept me going through my Masters program and a stressful first year of teaching, was going up in smoke before my eyes. I continued to train, whether it was cross-training at home, swimming in place with a tether in a twelve-foot-diameter pool in the backyard, or eventually getting back out to the sea once we knew more about how the virus spread. But, with each day, the dream of swimming to France slipped away little by little until it faded into nothingness, like the sun setting below the horizon of the sea. My saving grace was the North Channel.

It was going to be another year before I would have my shot at being a channel swimmer, but I had North booked, so I had little time to feel sorry for myself about English (which was rescheduled for 2022). A skill that I have gained from my life as an athlete, a coach, and a teacher is the ability to pivot. I know what must be done after a failure or an interruption: alter your goals, change your tactics, and get after it again. So, I did.

## The Training

Luca and I knew we would need to hit our peak training in the winter months when the water was at its coldest in San Francisco Bay (50-53F), as that would be the temperature we would face in Northern Ireland in the summer. Training consisted of shorter morning swims during the week and longer ones on both weekend days. Luca and I jump-started our training in October with a Round Trip Angel Island that took us 6 hours 39 minutes. I was knowingly undertrained for that swim given that I was coming off of a short break after canceling my English Channel, and it was a huge confidence booster to know that I could pull that off. I increased my yardage from about 60k yards in September to about 120k in March, which ended in an 8 hour swim in 53F water (the temperature most similar to the North Channel). We continued doing 6 and 8 hour swims (and slightly shorter ones, of course), but the temperature slowly increased in the bay after our March swim.

In April, my high school implemented a hybrid model, which put a strain on my training. Being back in the classroom after so long with this sub-optimal (to say the least) form of instruction, starting our water polo season that had been delayed in the Fall, and commuting again was tough. My days were twelve to fourteen hours long, and I was tired. To add another layer, our school received a threatening phone call (found later to have been a joke) implying there was a shooter on campus on our second day back. We went into a school lockdown, and while barricading my classroom door, I dropped a lab table on my toe and broke it. I will never forget huddling behind the desk that I had shoved a student under and clutching a candle that I figured I could throw at anyone who tried to get in. While the North Channel mattered very little in those moments, I did reflect on the grit that being an athlete had instilled in me - there was no way I was going to let someone take my life without giving them hell. Suffice it to say, my yardage dropped to 30k in April (which had previously been my weekly yardage). I was ashamed of that, but I trusted the great training that I had already done, committed to getting back on track, and, perhaps most importantly, worked on forgiving myself for it. With the help of my pod, I got back to work in May and finished with an 8 hour swim in mid June, after which I began to taper down.



*Sylvia piloting a training swim for Luca and I*

*A training swim with the pod: Andrea, Lauren, Luca, and Randy*



# The Swim

My window was July 2nd - 8th, and my pilot would update me on which day in that timeframe would be the best one to go based on weather and tides. I knew the notice to swim would be last minute, but I was not prepared for it to be as last minute as it was. On the morning of June 30th, my pilot texted me that he was 80% certain that I would swim on July 2nd. I was happy with this, as it would give me nearly two full days to pack, sort out the last few details with my crew, get some good sleep, stretch, and visualize. But that was not to be. I had just sat down with my crew on the evening of June 30th to make sure they knew the details about how I prefer my feeds when my pilot called me at 9:30pm and told me I would be jumping in a few hours. The staggering adrenaline coursing through me at that moment helped me pack swiftly and prepare, but it was not helpful in getting me to sleep. I had maybe two hours of sleep before we were up at 2:00am to arrive at the dock at 3:00am.

We set off for the starting point, called Robby's Point, in Donaghadee. My crew lathered me up with SafeSea, Badger, Desitin, and Vaseline, I clipped my light onto my goggles, and I jumped in at 4:30am. It was extremely foggy, so I was told to swim to a faint light on shore. As the water shallowed, I crawled up rocks and could see Martin, Kathryn, and a few other Chunky Dunkers materialize before me on the beach. They had been holding the light, and they cheered for me as I clumsily found purchase on a rock and pulled myself up to fully clear the water. I don't think they will ever understand how much it meant to me that they were there to see me off. The whistle blew from the boat, my time started, and I climbed down from the rock to officially begin my crossing. On the way down, I fell hard on both my knees and scraped one up. I didn't notice - it was time to swim.

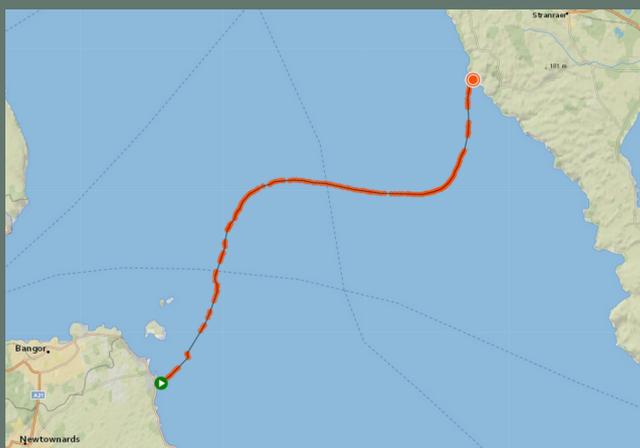
Within the first two hours, I was stung by Lion's Mane three times. I swam through massive schools of beautiful, large, harmless Moon Jellies that glowed a bioluminescent blue, but with that beauty came danger, as the Lion's Mane would often be hiding amongst them. The first Lion's Mane came out from my blind spot and got me on my right arm. I could see the imprint that the tentacles left in the Desitin on my skin. It was honestly a relief to be stung. It hurt, but it wasn't the end of the world. The fear of not knowing how bad it would be was finally over. The next stings were on my left arm and left leg, but there was nothing to do but push the pain away and continue. Soon, the Lion's Mane were too deep below me to reach, and then they disappeared all together.

The first six hours were great. My pace started out a little bit quick, which is expected with the excitement, but I didn't feel as though I needed to let off the gas, so I held it. I figured that with my pace and how good I felt, and the fact that we had made the turn in what I knew would be a curved track, I must have been about halfway (I was expecting a 12-14 hour swim). At around six hours, another boat approached and my great pilot Ian switched places with my new pilot, Pdraig. Pdraig hopped on and brought the energy, asking me if I could pick it up a little so we could make the next tide. I thought that was a little odd given that I knew I was keeping a good pace, but I did pick it up for the next two hours or so, calling it "Power Hour" in my head. Everyone on board was very optimistic during my feeds and lauded me for picking up the pace. At eight hours, the longest I had ever swam before, I still felt great and I thought my swim would only be a few hours more. I didn't know what my crew knew.



Apparently when Padraig came on the boat, it was revealed that my swim was going to be at least 16 hours. It had been a bad tide, and I had been pushed too far north without making the necessary easterly progress towards Scotland. It was going to be a battle to get far enough south-east before the next tide would push us north again. The sense of doom aboard did not trickle down to me in my world of Moon Jellies and bubbles, and I am thankful that they let me live in blissful ignorance for a little while longer.

At about nine hours, I figured I could broach the subject of an approximate finish time. During my feed, I asked my estimated time of arrival (which swimmers typically aren't supposed to do, but I was so confident). Michael said, "Well, you are over halfway there!". This annoyed me, since I thought that *of course* I was over halfway there. I kept swimming, and at ten hours, Scotland appeared in front of me. It was hard to tell because it was foggy over the cliffs of Scotland, but it seemed a little too far away for the two to three hours that I assumed I had left. I asked again at my next feed, and Michael said, "Well, you are over halfway, and there is Scotland, so that should tell you". It was at this point that I knew there was something wrong. He was dodging the question and Scotland was too far away. For the next thirty minutes, I was angry at Michael for not being honest. Of course I knew that was silly and unfair, but it gave me something to think about! At ten and a half hours, I demanded to know. I needed to prepare mentally for what was coming and control my pace. I asked, "Are we talking five hours more?", meaning to throw out an outrageously high number to lessen the blow. When Michael replied, "About that much", I was shocked. I thought I had been swimming so well; I didn't understand how I could possibly have that much more. I figured that I must have been slower than I thought, and I even felt embarrassed. There wasn't much time for those thoughts, though. It didn't matter if it was going to be ten hours more, there was no escaping the reality that I would swim until it was done.



My wonderful observer, Cara, never took her eyes off of me the whole swim, and she even danced and sang to keep my spirits high. But, the next three hours just went by slowly. I settled in for the long haul, and my pace slowed a little. My stroke rate stayed consistent, though and I tried to keep my spirits high - two reasons why they did not pull me, I was told later. At about thirteen hours, Padraig said if I could give 10% more, I would have three hours more. I needed to get to a certain position in order to catch the third tide that would help take me to shore. That was a killer because I was already trying so hard, and I thought that I was finally less than two hours from the finish. I nodded and said I would give the 10%. I literally gritted my teeth and tried to focus on my catch and my kick in order to pick up my pace. At the next feed, I asked for my charm.

I had been given a charm by the last person who successfully swam the North Channel, Zach Margolis, who happened to be my friend from San Francisco. The charm had been passed down from previous Dolphin/Southend North Channel swimmers - Amy Gubser, Catherine Breed, Ranie Pearce, and Zach (all legends in their own rights!). I was going to keep it in my suit as I swam, but I had forgotten to grab it before I jumped. I figured I could ask for it if there was a time that I needed it. It happened that there was. My crew sent it with my feed, and I stuck it in my suit. The charm was a small wooden piece with a fish and the word *courage* etched in it. I pictured it in my head as I swam. I succeeded in speeding up for about an hour and a half more, but then I really lost steam. I could keep swimming for a while, of that I was certain, but I was pretty much down to one gear. I was in a lot of pain and I was thoroughly exhausted. I became quieter at feeds because I didn't want to expel the energy - I just wanted to breathe.

With an hour and a half to go, it seemed like the end was near. My dad was getting excited and shouting encouraging words. Michael was smiling at me. I didn't really believe that we were close since it was so foggy that there was no Scotland in sight, and all of my previous expectations about when I would finish had been blown out of the water. But, I trusted them. With about an hour more, my dad stood at the side and started continuously yelling encouragement: "Come on! Keep it up! Almost there! Go go go!". I couldn't really hear everything he said, but I figured he wouldn't be yelling that if I wasn't super close. At a feed, he said I had 1400 meters to shore. That was excellent news - it was less than a mile! I could do that easily. At one point, he went inside to look at the computer with the pilot. There was a short discussion amongst them, and when he came back out he was quieter. I groaned inwardly - that could not be good. He must have jumped the gun with his cheering. Sure enough, there was a bit more than 1400 meters left because we didn't catch the tide and we had to land in a different spot than previously planned. But I kept on chugging, and my dad kept on cheering. Of course, the North Channel wasn't going to spit me out without one last laugh, and I was stung one more time in the right arm (it would have been my face if Michael hadn't shouted out to warn me).

Soon enough, out of the fog, Scotland suddenly appeared. We were in a small bay, with rocky brown cliffs topped with green grass, and a lighthouse perfectly situated atop the cliff to my left. It was gorgeous, and I finally knew for sure that I had done it. The boat stopped, and I was on my own swimming the last few meters into the cliff. I slapped my hand down onto a rock in the side of the cliff, and cheers erupted from the boat behind me. I was done after 16 hours 14 minutes and 37 seconds of swimming. I layed out onto my back, pushed off from the cliff, and took a look around. It was such a beautiful place to finish, and I would love to go back there (on land, of course). Back on the boat, Michael and my dad scrubbed me down with water and soap, and Cara and Michael helped me change quickly into warm clothes. Then, I sat between Michael and my dad for the ninety minute ride back to Northern Ireland. It went by much faster for me, as I was so content with hearing what they thought about it, eating bread and drinking water, and reveling in the fact that I had just swum the North Channel.



## Acknowledgements

I am lucky to be a member of the Dolphin Club in San Francisco, which, along with the neighboring Southend Rowing Club, is the home of many of the best open water swimmers in the world. I had a wealth of knowledge and wisdom at my fingertips, and I am so grateful for that community and the support they have given me. Ryan Utsumi, Amy Gubser, and Zach Margolis are North Channel swimmers who all gave excellent advice. Sylvia at Pacific Swim Co. was vital in my training, as she piloted all of our big swims out on the bay. She is an extremely skilled and talented pilot, but she also keeps things entertaining! Lauren Au and Andrea Amato made key appearances in long training swims and were always cheerful. John Ottersberg joined the fun on many a morning.

My two real rocks were Randy Edwards and Luca Pozzi. Without Randy, I'm not sure Luca and I would ever actually get in the water! Randy was there, rain or shine, throughout everything that happened in 2020. I am extremely grateful to have him as a training partner, but also as a friend whose calming presence is refreshing. And what can I say about Luca Pozzi? He was my partner through all of the training, and this process would not have been half as fun without him. He knows how to work hard, but also to not take ourselves too seriously - a vital characteristic when the training gets arduous. I cannot thank these two enough for their friendship.

The Chunky Dunkers of Donaghadee are some of the most lovely people I have ever met. Martin and Kathryn Strain in particular took me in under their wings and made me feel at home in Northern Ireland. I thought of them often when I swam, and I will be back to visit again!

The crew from Infinity - Pdraig, Ian, and Milo - were knowledgeable, skilled, fun, and they believed in me! The crossing would obviously not have happened without their expertise. Cara, my observer, was so warm and cheerful the whole time, and she really helped keep the positivity. And of course, my personal crew members, dubbed "The Michaels", were brilliant. My dad was excellent with the cheering at the end, and he continuously checked in and told me I was doing well. He was a great, comforting presence all the way through. Lastly, my partner Michael has been my anchor. He saw everything behind the scenes - the failures, the triumphs, the times I was confident, the times I doubted, the times I hit snooze on my alarm, and my daily grind. He never failed to lend a hug or brew a cup of hot chocolate, and I am so lucky to have someone like him in my life.



*Signing the flag with the  
Chunky Dunkers*

*"The Michaels" and I right after  
the finish*

