

Super swimmer conquers the seas - three times over; Super swimmer: Richmond attorney circled Manhattan twice in a 20-hour swim, among other feats

Richmond Times Dispatch (Virginia)

May 26, 2020 Tuesday, 2 Edition

Copyright 2020 Richmond Newspapers, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Section: METRO; Pg. 1B

Length: 752 words

Byline: LILY BETTS Richmond TimesDispatch

Body

The Catalina swim took over 33 hours to complete, starting Tuesday evening and finishing early Thursday morning, exhaustion causing her to hallucinate through the final nine hours.

The world's best open-water swimmers aim to tackle the sport's "Triple Crown," swimming coast to coast through the English Channel (21 miles) and the Catalina Channel (20 miles) and circumnavigating Manhattan (28.5 miles).

Courtney Moates Paulk, the first female president of Virginia-based law firm Hirschler Fleischer, has one-upped even those rigorous tests.

Paulk became the first marathon swimmer to claim a "Triple Triple," doing each of the feats a total of three times. That's just a stepping stone on the way to her ultimate goal - swimming the channels both ways, and doing two laps around Manhattan.

Paulk completed her first Triple Crown in 2013. Afterward, she felt adrift, comparing the feeling to graduating collegiate athletes who have to look at retiring after spending so much time with the sport.

Paulk had been a marathon swimmer for around 11 years by that point; a 4.4-mile swim in the Chesapeake Bay with co-workers built upon a love for ocean swimming she had picked up while attending high school in Virginia Beach.

"After that, I was pretty much hooked. I did that swim for 15 years, then started doing longer swims and colder swims," Paulk said.

Unlike Olympic-style competitive swimming, marathon open water competitors are in a field dominated by older women. Of the five swimmers who have completed two Triple Crowns, only one is a man.

Along with greater access to the sort of training that marathons require, Paulk said that the women who are successful in the sport tend to have better "bioprene" - meaning greater body fat to protect from the environments without wetsuits.

"And then, of course, a lot of women think that they're tougher than men, giving birth to babies and things like that, and so they can go longer and colder and in harsher conditions," Paulk said, also noting there are lots of men who are successful in the sport.

Super swimmer conquers the seas - three times over; Super swimmer: Richmond attorney circled Manhattan twice in a 20-hour swim, among other feats

She missed the training that the Triple Crown required and having such a demanding goal to work toward. So she decided that the next goal would be to double the Triple Crown in another way: back and forth across the channels, and two trips around Manhattan.

Her first completed double crossing came in July 2017 with the 40 Bridges swim in New York. The two consecutive laps required 20 hours, 15 minutes and 55 seconds to complete.

In that time, Paulk was unable to touch anything but water. Food and drink had to be tossed out of the boat following her and drawn back in on a line. The feedings would come in manageable servings every 30 minutes, and she'd only get items that are easy to consume: apple sauce, peaches, or, if Paulk craved something that wasn't sweet, egg salad.

She returned to Catalina that October - her first attempt at a double crossing in September 2016 was thwarted by poor conditions - to add another notch in her conquest.

The swim took over 33 hours to complete, starting Tuesday evening and finishing early Thursday morning, exhaustion causing her to hallucinate through the final nine hours.

"I have always felt like I have more in me and that I have wanted to push my limits and see how much further I could push myself," Paulk said, "And I have to say that is when I think I found what was pretty close to my limit."

Paulk has made two more attempts at double crossing the English Channel, in 2018 and 2019, and both years she was forced to abandon the second leg due to conditions.

But those swims earned her a second and then third Triple Crown, and, if travel restrictions allow, Paulk is set to make a third attempt in August after a qualifying six-hour swim at the start of May.

While the challenges require a deep individual struggle, Paulk also highlighted the community aspect that comes through the support given to swimmers as they strive toward their goals.

During the qualifier, Paulk was joined by five swimmers to help keep pace. Fundraising for charities, including SwimRVA's initiative working with children, keeps her motivated out in the water. The teams keeping up with her during her crossings, in particular, prove the importance of a supportive team.

"The difference between having somebody right there in a kayak and somebody on the boat is huge, because they're just right there in the water and they're experiencing it along with you," Paulk said. "It's something that brings people together for a lifetime."

Graphic

Courtney Moates Paulk Courtesy Courtney Moates Paulk Courtney Paulk has taken on marathon open water swims that have lasted more than 30 hours. Courtesy Courtney Paulk Courtney Paulk has taken on marathon open water swims that have lasted more than 30 hours. Courtesy Courtney Paulk Paulk Hirschler Fleischer Paulk Hirschler Fleischer Courtney Moates Paulk Courtesy Courtney Moates Paulk Courtney Moates Paulk Courtesy Courtney Moates Paulk

Load-Date: May 26, 2020