

Stalham member swims Channel and raises £50,000

After three years of intense training veterinary surgeon Tom Hume completed the 23-mile crossing of the English Channel in 16 hours and 49 minutes. Having been brought up in his native Kent, he had always dreamed one day of swimming the Channel. When he dislocated his shoulder playing rugby at Holt RFC, he couldn't play again. Determined to become fully fit again, he was drawn to the idea of the cross-Channel challenge. In 2020, he asked New Zealander endurance swimmer Tracy Clark, who now lives in Norwich, to coach him for the crossing, and then booked a place with the Channel Swimming Association. It can take three years to get an official crossing date. As he told members, it cost about £3,500 to make the crossing – including hiring the pilot boat, official observer and scrutineer. Then the training started in earnest. He had to relearn how to swim – with a more efficient action – and, of course, to build up his fitness and crucially, his weight. On the practice's dog weighing scales, he was 80kg but had to get to 100kg – partly because swimming will burn almost 3,000 calories an hour. Typically, a swimmer can lose 5kg. In addition, the “blubber” helped to insulate against the cold water too.

The three challenges that swimmers faced – were physical (and mental) exhaustion, injury and coping with the pain of immersion in salty and cold water for more than 15 hours. He knew that getting to the actual start line would be tough – gaining fitness and crucially, the weather opening for a crossing without too much wind or rough seas. The strength of Channel tides limits potential crossing windows because although the shortest distance from Folkestone to France is 21 miles, the actual loop for swimmers is at least 23 miles.

With a training schedule including swimming twice a week with friend Ed Sargent from West Runton to Cromer pier and back in three hours, they had to “qualify” with a six-hour swim the sea off Dover in water temperature below 15C. Fortunately on the day, the water was just cold enough – otherwise they could not have tackled the swim. The actual failure rate for crossings is high – and of the nine on the qualifying swim, only five completed the crossing.

As the deadline for the crossing approached, Tom kept his fingers crossed. But the weather, strong winds, forced postponement in July and again in August. Despair. It seemed as if he had lost his slots but Ed Sargent did get his chance and crossed in 16 hours 15 minutes.

When he was at work on September 12 with the crossing season almost finished, his phone rang that lunchtime – there was a possibility of a weather window. If conditions remained calm, could he get to Folkestone to start at 9pm that night? His two brothers and rest of the support team rushed to the Channel and an hour later than planned, he was in the water heading for the official start. Smothered in Vaseline to protect against the cold, he was in the water. As a result of climate change, global warming – the traditional goose fat is not applied because it can attract sharks but being nibbled by fish is another challenge for swimmers.

Then, escorted by the pilot boat, which gave him a sense of direction, he was off. Every half an hour, he was given either a 250ml bottle of hot high energy drink – or hot coffee (caffeine) or paracetamol/ ibuprofen. To comply with the rules, the bottle was attached to a fishing line but if it went taught, he risked being disqualified. Once in mid-Channel, out of sight of land, in the dark, it was very disorientating and became a test of

willpower, just to keep going and going. Encouraged by his support staff and the coach, who had trained 83 cross-Channel swimmers, he kept going. After 12 hours, he was within sight of the French coast – having narrowly avoided a big oil tanker just 500 metres away.

But the tide was pulling him further south – that hour's delay in starting – was draining his energy. As he swam through that "graveyard" of swimmers' hopes, he managed to keep going although he could hardly lift his arm above his shoulder. Ever so gradually, he was getting closer and closer until, when he looked down there was sand under his feet.

Finally, just 500g lighter than at the start, he had made it. In November, he attended the official ceremony as he became one of 76 swimmers to complete a solo swim last year. He joins a very select band of 1903 swimmers since 1875, who had completed the solo crossing. In addition, they had raised £50,000 for the Holt Youth Project. His next challenge