

## Adventure Holidays

### Sarah Thomas: the woman who swam a century

Unnoticed and unfeted, a US swimmer is breaking the sport's boundaries



Sarah Thomas © Ken Classen  
Tom Allan  
7 HOURS AGO

Last week Sarah Thomas got up at 5am and drove the 25 miles from her home to the swimming pool in Lakewood, Colorado, as she does most mornings. There she completed her 6,000-yard workout before heading to work as a healthcare recruiter. She was untroubled by autograph hunters; no TV crews stopped her to seek an interview.

And yet Thomas is, according to Steven Munatones, founder of the World Open Water Swimming Association, “an outlier, a once-in-a-generation athlete, and a motivator who is showing others how far they can push themselves”. In August she completed what must rank as one of 2017’s greatest achievements in endurance sport, swimming further than anyone — man or woman — has swum before without the assistance of currents: a scarcely believable 104 miles, nonstop, in three days and nights in the water.

“The record wasn’t really the big incentive for me,” Thomas tells me from her home in Denver. “It was about finding and pushing my personal limits.” What could be a weary trope coming from many athletes rings true from Thomas. She swims without

sponsorship — fitting her training around her full-time job. Her achievements have received little media attention; her record-breaking swim has not, to date, even been mentioned in a national newspaper.

“Sarah herself doesn’t seek out publicity,” Ken Classen, her coach and training partner, tells me. “If it wasn’t for her friends and mother-in-law she’d probably have no publicity and quite frankly I don’t think she’d care either way.”

Last year Thomas swam a record 82 miles nonstop in Lake Powell but felt she could go further — the 100-mile barrier beckoned. In choosing the current-free Lake Champlain for her swim, Thomas was attempting something no one of either gender had previously done. “A few people have swum over 100 miles before,” explains Evan Morrison, co-founder of the Marathon Swimming Federation, that adjudicated Thomas’ swim, but only with the assistance of strong, predictable currents.

These include a 139.8-mile effort by the late Croatian swimmer, Veljko Rogosic, in the Adriatic. “His swim was very impressive, but it belongs in a separate category,” explains Morrison. According to his records, only three athletes active today have finished “current-neutral” swims of 63 miles or more — all three of them women.

Beat Knechtle, a Swiss doctor and endurance athlete who has studied female performance in open-water swimming, offers two possible explanations for this dominance. “Women have an advantage due to their higher body fat, which provides insulation against the cold and better buoyancy.” As wetsuits may not be worn for official open-water swims, this could be an important advantage. Then there is the mental side. “In open-water swimming women have learnt that they are able to beat men and therefore expect to compete at a higher level,” says Knechtle.

Thomas agrees. “Women have a long history of swimming: it’s been socially acceptable for us to be athletes in the pool and open water for much longer than in other sports. I think having that strong foundation has really helped women to compete and train at a high level.”

At 8.30am on August 7, smeared in a chalky mixture of lanolin and Desitin to prevent chafing and sunburn, Thomas waded down a concrete slipway into the calm, silky waters of Lake Champlain, on the border of Vermont and New York State. It may be current-free but conditions on the lake can change fast.

“We were afraid our boats wouldn’t handle the waves on the second night,” explains Thomas’s sister Melody, who was on board the support boat. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about nautical transportation over the years, it’s that boats may be faster but Sarah is infinitely more reliable.”

Even for Thomas, who was covering 68 miles a week in training in the run-up to the attempt, 100 miles was uncharted territory. For one, she had to stay awake for 67 hours. “Not sleeping was the hardest part,” she admits. The crew used a long pole to pass her caffeinated energy drinks at the twice-hourly feed stops — Marathon Swimming Federation rules forbid swimmers from touching the support boat. When she’d had enough of sports drinks they substituted her favourite food, risotto.

Her team used another ploy to keep her awake. “We played ‘Two Truths, One Lie’”, says Thomas. “It slowed me down a little, but gave me something to think about between feed stops.” At other times, she entered a Zen-like state of focus. “[Swimming] is like meditation — just one repetitive stroke after another. Thirty minutes between feeds goes by in a blink.”

But 48 hours in, something flipped. “I just started crying for no reason. I cried for two or three hours — I was having to dump the tears out of my goggles.” Nonetheless, she kept swimming and as the miles ticked by an unexpected problem emerged: Thomas was so far ahead of schedule that she was going to finish at night, not in daylight as planned. Her husband hurried to set up a strip of lights to guide her in to the slipway. Then, having covered the equivalent of 3,347 lengths of an Olympic pool, she had to stand up. “Putting your feet down and bearing weight on your legs is a weird sensation after three days of swimming,” Thomas recalls. “My ankles were stiff, my feet tingled, my balance was off-kilter. But it’s the most welcome feeling in the world to feel something solid underneath you!”

Will anyone attempt to break Thomas’s record? Knechtle says he thinks it will take “a very, very long time” for the feat to be repeated. As for Thomas, she is characteristically laid-back about the future. “I don’t think I’ll try to swim further,” she says. “I mean, there are a lot of fun and challenging swims to do between one and 104 miles.”

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