

Patti Bauernfeind, 47, becomes second to swim across Monterey Bay

Welcome to the club, Patti Bauernfeind — the very exclusive trans-Monterey Bay swimmers" club.

For 20 years, only one person belonged to that club, which is one of the reasons Bauernfeind, 47, challenged herself six years ago to swim across the bay. On Tuesday, she became just the second swimmer to complete the more than 25-mile journey through the chilly waters between Santa Cruz and Monterey without a wetsuit.

Making her fourth attempt at the crossing, Bauernfeind needed 13 hours exactly to swim from the beach in front of the Crow"s Nest restaurant to San Carlos beach in front of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. That was a slightly different path than Santa Cruz native Cindy Cleveland took when she made the first crossing of the bay in just under 16 hours in 1983.

"It"s hard to put into words," Bauernfeind said of how she felt when she stepped ashore. "You"re just kind of standing there going, "Wow, I"m here. I don"t have to work anymore." And, "Wow, it"s over." There"s a sense of relief and exhilaration."

Cleveland said she's happy to finally have company, noting that one person hardly makes a club.

"There's a specialness to being the only one," she said in a phone interview Wednesday from her home in Redondo Beach. "But if you really care about it, you want other people to have it.

"I think it's neat. I don't think it should have been a desert for so long."

Within the span of two weeks, the exclusive group could triple in size. Capitola resident Kim Rutherford, who often trained with Bauernfeind, will attempt the feat on Sept. 5.

Bauernfeind, who was back at her business development job at [Salesforce.com < http://salesforce.com/>](http://salesforce.com) on Wednesday, would like to see membership multiply. One of her goals is to found a Monterey Bay swim association that would track and help plan crossings, similar to those set up for the Santa Barbara, Catalina and even English channels.

Bauernfeind said the Monterey Bay is an obvious choice for open-water swimmers, who "have a sickness where, if they see another shore, they have to swim to it."

When her swim coordinator, UC Santa Cruz swim coach Joel Wilson, told her only one other person had done it, she said she was "stunned."

"I was like, "Wait a minute, ... nobody else has done this?" I looked at him like, "Why?" I don't know if people are worried about sharks or ... I really don't know. It blew my mind."

Sharks have nothing on jelly fish when it comes to spoiling swims, as Bauernfeind can attest. Her first two attempts, in 2010 and 2011, fell short after the venom of stinging nettles nearly temporarily paralyzed her. She made it about five miles the first time and almost halfway the second time before surrendering.

Jelly fish have foiled other swimmers' attempts as well.

In 2010, jelly fish stings stopped Santa Cruz native Bruckner Chase midway through his crossing attempt. Rather than abandon the attempt, however, he abandoned the English Channel Swimming Association rules by donning a wetsuit and finishing in just over 14 hours.

The association governs swims across the channel and its rules — which also include wearing just one cap and having no contact with boats or other people during a swim — form the backbone for what are considered legitimate crossing attempts by open-water swimmers around the world.

Bauernfeind, who had made it her mission to adhere to the English Channel rules, said it was still dark Tuesday morning when she swam into her first swarm of jellies.

"It was like, "Holy Toledo, is this going to end this swim?"" she recalled. "It was pretty dense. Then there was a moment of, "I'm not getting stung," and "What is this?""

The ocean was thick with jellies, just not the stinging Pacific nettles, she said.

“Everything that was in their place was these really beautiful jellies that don’t sting,” she said. “It went from this really dark moment to this really beautiful moment.”

On her third attempt, in 2013, Bauernfeind made it 27 miles from shore before unexpected southwest winds made progress all but impossible. She used that experience as motivation to not dillydally during Tuesday’s swim. Still, she said she struggled to keep her momentum when she got about 70 percent through the swim.

“Our sport is really sensory deprived. Your swimming hours and hours and you don’t have lot of audio and visual stuff going on. You have a lot of time to think,” she said. “There are dark times.”

To get her through, she thought about the kids who would benefit from the funds her swim was raising for Trust in Education, which promotes education and women’s development in war-torn countries like Afghanistan.

She also leaned on the support of her 10-person crew. They took turns paddling support kayaks, holding up a message board marked with words of encouragement from people following her efforts from shore and mixing the various forms of food she would consume every 20 minutes, including a liquid protein-carbohydrate mix delivered via a tube and, occasionally, peanut butter cups.

Wilson, who has assisted on each of Bauernfeind’s attempts, said the crew felt as vindicated as Bauernfeind did when she finally stumbled ashore.

"I'm ecstatic. It was as emotional for me as it was for her, maybe more so," he said with a laugh. "I'm so happy for her and proud of her."

Contact Julie Jag at 831-706-3257.