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Just keep swimming, just keep swimming

By Steve Lawrence Aug 2, 2018



Caroline Block, mid-stroke.

Photo provided

It is amazing that a journalist can get so many interesting interviews right here in Ithaca.

Over the course of nearly three decades, my checklist has been an impressive (and enjoyable) one, and it just picked up another check that I really did not know I was looking for. Let me explain...

Up until last week, my list read as such: Olympic Gold Medalists: Check. World Series winners: Check. Super Bowl Winners: Check. Stanley Cup MVP: Check. Hall of Famers: Check. 4-time NCAA wrestling champ: Check. NFL Lawyer: Check. Nobel Prize Winners: Check... The list is longer, but you get it.

Last week, my friend Paula reached out and said, "I think you might be interested in a swimmer in Ithaca, who swam Cayuga Lake recently (the long way), and is either preparing or already did the English Channel. She's a Cornell Law student. Her name is Caroline Block." My interest piqued, I did a little research, saw that Paula was right, and that Caroline Block is one of Open Water Marathon Swimming's most accomplished athletes. I couldn't wait to meet her.

Caroline was very accommodating, and we were soon sitting down to talk about her somewhat common circuitous path to Ithaca, and her very uncommon accomplishments in her sport.

"I grew up in Westchester," Caroline told me, "and I swam as a kid. When I was 14 (20 years ago) I was recruited to be on a Florida-based relay team of six swimmers that would attempt to break the two-way record for swimming the English Channel." She added, "We did it, and that was great, but I realized I wasn't going to be able to swim in college so I focused on fencing."

Caroline became a Division 1 fencer at Princeton, and when she went to graduate school at Johns Hopkins, circumstances aligned to reinvigorate her swimming career. She said, "I was on a research budget, so I took a job as a lifeguard and met some people who were swimming at Coney Island." Caroline had been training for a triathlon while in grad school, and she learned that some of the Coney Island swimmers had done the English Channel. She said, "The channel is the world's busiest shipping lane, so they regulate the number of swims allowed each year. In fact, far fewer people have swum the English Channel than have climbed Mount Everest."

The Channel is, according to Caroline, "a 21-mile swim 'as the crow flies,' but given the strong currents push you up and down, that's not really the distance." She did a solo crossing of the Channel in 2016 and earlier this year she became the fourth person to swim the length of Cayuga Lake. The first three people (Claire de Boer, David Barra and Bridget Hobart) swam from north to south (Hobart and Barra separately, but on the same day) and Caroline was the first person to do it starting at the south end. "I started at noon and finished at 9:20 am, so it was a 21 hour, 20 minute swim," Caroline offered. "My pilot was Warren Miller, and Kelly Lattimer and my mother made up my support crew."

While Caroline does much of her swimming in area pools (like the YMCA, Cornell, Island Health and Fitness and Ithaca College), she can be found swimming in Cayuga Lake nearly year 'round. She stated, "I found a small group of people who do some winter lake swimming, and we start out at East Shore

Park (near the sailing center) and swim up the lake, parallel to the shore. This year, the lake stayed very cold for a long time.”

This prompted me to ask whether she wears a wetsuit or a (dry suit), and she said “Oh no... the rules of marathon swimming dictate that you wear only a suit, a cap and goggles for a swim to be recognized. Other rules state that you start and end on the shore, and that you never touch the boat or a crew member.” (As for sustenance, Caroline paused every half hour to take in her liquid nutrition, and consumes about 200 calories per hour.)

Caroline has circumnavigated Manhattan as well, and she recently swam the length of Lake George, but she calls these lake efforts “training swims.” She has her sights set on being the first person to do a two-way crossing of the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland (22 miles each way), and she said, “I just returned from my second attempt.” She has twice met with frustration, as in 2017, the conditions were just too rough and this year, the water was so warm that Caroline found herself swimming through thousands of jellyfish. “I swam through them for hours,” she said, “and while the rough conditions last year were unpleasant, the swim through the jellyfish was scary.” She pointed out that since the North Channel is colder, the Lions mane Jellyfish that live there are much larger than their warm-water counterparts, and their stings can be debilitating.

Caroline will continue to swim in our beloved lake for the foreseeable future, given she has 2 more years of law school to complete. “I love it,” she said. “It’s such a gorgeous lake, and there’s often nobody out there.”