

Erie's Cooney completes swim across Lake Erie

By Victor Fernandes

Posted Jul 20, 2018 at 12:01 AM

Updated Jul 20, 2018 at 6:17 AM

Rob Cooney finished the 24-mile journey Thursday in 13 hours, 32 minutes.

NORTH EAST — Rob Cooney's 24-mile swim across Lake Erie on Thursday will remain a once in a lifetime accomplishment for the rest of his life.

The Erie native's maiden voyage from Long Point Lighthouse in Ontario to Freeport Beach in North East will be his last.

"No," he said succinctly, and with a smile on his face, when asked if he will attempt it again after emerging from the water to cheers from at least 200 people on hand.

Once was enough to build lifelong memories Cooney and his father, Dave, will share. Dave Cooney has battled Parkinson's Disease, a debilitating nervous system disorder, since May 2007.

“It was a very moving moment, one I’ll never forget,” the elder Cooney said of witnessing his son become the 21st person since 1989 to complete Lake Erie’s 24-mile standard course after spending 13 hours, 32 minutes in the water.

Rob Cooney, 38, also is the second swimmer to cross Lake Erie this month. Tom Minnock, 54, who resides in the Pittsburgh suburb of Mars, reached Freeport Beach in 16 hours, 44 minutes, 22 seconds on July 1 to become the oldest swimmer to complete the course.

Cooney, who lives in McKean, entered the water off the coast of Long Point, Ontario, at 6:40 a.m. Thursday to complete a journey that began last September with the first of 720 miles of training that included open-water swims in lakes around Pennsylvania and New York.

His father provided inspiration through his final stroke at 8:12 p.m. Thursday.

“It means everything,” said Rob Cooney, who will donate proceeds raised from his swim to Parkinson Partners of Northwestern Pennsylvania. “I spend a lot of time with my Dad. I live in the area. He’s done so much for me. It’s the least I can do for him.”

“It shows the love of a son and a father,” Dave Cooney said of his son’s feat.

Rob Cooney said his swim began with “relatively flat” conditions. He encountered rough water midway through the race, which took two hours to overcome, followed by stronger winds for the final eight to nine miles. “We were fighting that a little bit coming in,” he said.

“We could pretty much see the shore the entire way, all the way from Long Point,” he said. “It seemed to never move any closer to me though.”

Still, Cooney’s resolve never wavered.

“I felt confident the whole way,” he said.

Two other swimmers, Fairview native Greg Roberts and Pittsburgh resident Conrad Kubaney, are registered with Lake Erie Open Water Swimming Association to swim across the lake this summer. There likely will be more swimmers in the future. Rob Cooney won’t be one of them.

“I put my heart and soul into training,” he said, “and made some big sacrifices (being) away from my family. I’m busy at work. And somehow, I just managed to train hard and stay committed to what I was after, and I achieved my goal.”

Victor Fernandes can be reached at 870-1716 or by e-mail. Follow him on Twitter at [Twitter.com/ETNfernandes](https://twitter.com/ETNfernandes).