

Fairview native Roberts completes Lake Erie swim

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Erie High teacher, swim coach becomes 3rd person this summer to accomplish feat.

NORTH EAST — When 31-year-old Erie High School swim coach Greg Roberts staggered ashore at 8:52 p.m. on Sunday, he earned a spot in the local swimming record book as the 22nd person to conquer Lake Erie's 24-mile course from Long Point, Ontario, to Freeport Beach.

Accompanied by four kayaks, his coach, Mary Kaliszak, and a team of aids and friends, Roberts was greeted by a good-sized army of family, spectators and well-wishers after having completed the grueling swim in 14 hours, 50 minutes.

"I set this goal for myself around 16 years ago, and I'm very proud to have been able to accomplish it," said Roberts, who swam competitively at Fairview High School and Edinboro University. "I couldn't swim very far at first, but my coach told me to go for the impossible, and I became a distance swimmer and just stuck with it."

Roberts was blown away by the number of people who turned out to greet him, including several members of the Erie High swim team.

"I didn't expect this many people to come out, I was thinking maybe 15, 20 people," he said.

Roberts, who was using the swim as a fundraiser for Erie High athletics, became the third person to swim across the lake this summer. The other two were Tom Minnick, 54, of Mars, on July 1, and Erie native Rob Cooney, 38, on July 9.

Isabella Nazdam, 15, one of the several members of the Erie High swim team who turned out to support Roberts, said that his attempting such a difficult task in the name of their school meant a lot to her and her teammates.

“For him to do something like this for our athletic program at Erie High is incredible,” Nazdam said. “I can’t even fathom swimming 24 miles, it’s just awesome that he’s doing this for us, and it’s so exciting to be out here to see it.”

With a water temperature of 74 to 76 degrees and a lake that was smooth as glass for his arrival, conditions were ideal, except for a threat of a storm in mid-afternoon.

“We came close to pulling him out,” said Josh Heynes, manager of Lake Erie Open Water Swimming Association (LEOWSA), who twice swam the lake, in 2006 and 2011. “Fortunately, though, things cleared up, and he was able to complete the course.”

“The first third of it was fine,” Roberts said, “but I had difficulty during the middle third, where I had a mental breakdown and didn’t know if I could finish. I got a second wind of energy in the final third, but that fell off and I wasn’t sure if I could finish, but then my crew rallied behind me, and that kept me going.”

Roberts said that he would not attempt the feat again.

“Once is good,” he said, breathing hard while holding a pack of ice on his shoulder. “I’m very happy, but really exhausted. I’m unbelievably tired and sore, it’s the most pain my shoulders have ever been in.”