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June 21, 2018

# Easy Reader

Vol. XLVIII - No. 46

Hermosa Beach Manhattan Beach Redondo Beach Hometown News

## SWIMMING BY MARS

by Kevin Cody

A pod of California White-sided Dolphin escort Amy Appelhans Gubser off of Hermosa Beach. Escorting in the kayak is retired Los Angeles County Lifeguard Shannon Davey. Photo by Greg Gubser

### Former Los Angeles County Lifeguard **Amy Appelhans Gubser** uses Mars to guide her swim across the Santa Monica Bay

Last Thursday, at 21:07:44, as recorded in the Marathon Swimmers Federation (MSF) log, Amy Appelhans Gubser entered the water at Pirate's Cove, on Point Dume and swam through the night to Rocky Point, in Palos Verdes. The north and south points of the Santa Monica Bay are separated by 28 statute miles of rich, open ocean.

"I just wanted to show what a fat, 50-year-old woman can do," Gubser said after "climbing like a billy goat," as she put it, out of the water at Rocky Point, over the same rocks that shipwrecked the Greek freighter Dominator in 1961.

It was her 50th birthday and a swim few women and fewer men, regardless of age, are capable of completing. The Santa Monica Bay swim had been done only once before, on March 16, 2013, by marathon swimmers Jen Shumaker and Forrest Nelson. They crossed the bay in 13 hours, 10 minutes, 35 seconds.



Amy Appelhans Gubser wore a chip that enable friends to track on smartphones her swim across the Santa Monica Bay. Chart courtesy of Track.RS

Gubser looked heavy because she deliberately put on 15 pounds as protection against hypothermia, which is a greater threat than fatigue to marathon swimmers. She trained by swimming 30 miles a week in the 55 degree San Francisco Bay with fellow South End Rowing Club marathon swimmers.

Gubser is a neonatal nurse in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at UC San Francisco Benioff Children's Hospital. On the three days a week she works a 12 hour shift, she would get in the water at 4 a.m.

"If you can't find the time, you make it," she said.

Her training also included the SCAR Challenge Swim last April. Each year, marathon swimmers from around the world gather at the Superstition Mountains in Arizona to swim 40 miles in four days across the four reservoirs

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Amy Appelhans Gubser celebrates her swim across the Santa Monica Bay with her crew. Photo by Kevin Cody

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## Gubser

that give the swim its name (Saguaro Lake, Canyon Lake, Apache Lake and Roosevelt Lake).

Gubser grew up in Palos Verdes and swam for Rolling Hills High School. After attending the University of Michigan on a swimming scholarship, she became a Los Angeles County Lifeguard and married fellow county lifeguard Greg Gubser. In 1993, the couple moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where Greg is now the Deputy Harbor Master at the San Mateo County Harbor.

Gubser might have chosen to swim the Catalina Channel for her 50th birthday, but she did that in 2016. Last year, she became only the third person to swim across the Monterey Bay, a 25-mile stretch of sharks and jellies between Santa Cruz and Pacific Grove.

### A bumpy start

The first challenge Gubser faced on her 50th birthday swim, was getting to the start.

"Bumpy ride to Pirate's Cove. 18 mph wind. 4- to 6-foot oncoming swell," the MSF log records. MSF officials Jax Cole and Timetra Wellington were aboard the Nicole Ann, Gubser's escort boat, to certify her swim. Also aboard the 24-foot Skipjack were her husband Greg, boat captain Mike Chandler, co-captain and swim escort Matt Schubert, and kayak and swim escorts Melissa King and Shannon Davey. King is a fellow South End marathon swimmer. Davey lives in Hermosa Beach and was Gubser's first boss when she became a Los Angeles County Lifeguard.

The Nicole Ann (named for one of Gubser's swim partners who recently died from cancer), departed from Marina del Rey for Point Dume at 7 p.m. The anticipated one hour trip took two hours and left three crew members seasick.

"Greenwater was coming over the

bow and into the cockpit. We all got drenched," Gubser said. To keep herself from getting seasick, she skipped her usual pre-race hydration drink. "I would have just thrown it up," she said.

After arriving at Pirate's Cove, Gubser swam ashore. MSF rules require swimmers to start and finish on land, unassisted. The rules also limit what a swimmer may wear to a standard swimsuit, goggles and a single swim cap. Wetsuits, which offer buoyancy and protection from the cold, are prohibited.

Cole's and Wellington's log records swells of one to three feet when Gubser set off from Pirate's Cove shortly after 9 p.m. Fortunately, within the first hour the westerly wind that had delayed the start laid down and the water smoothed out.

The line between Point Dume and Rocky Point runs as far as 10 miles out to sea, placing the coastal lights below the horizon through most of the night. But the sky was clear and Mars was high in the southeast sky, in perfect alignment with the rhumb line Chandler and Schubert had set for the Nichole Ann.

"I'd look for Mars whenever Melissa or Shannon told me I was veering off course," Gubser said.

About 2 a.m. according to the log, the water beneath her lit up with streaks of green and white biofluorescence.

"A super pod of over 100 Pacific White-sided Dolphins were swimming beneath me. It was magical," Gubser said.

A photo taken by Greg off of Hermosa after the sun rose shows Gubser being escorted by another pod of California White-sided Dolphin. They look like baby Killer Whales because of their hooked dorsal fins and their contrasting black and white coloring. The dolphin kept at a respectful distance until she passed the Whaling Wall in Redondo Beach. Only one shark was sighted during the swim, a curious blue juvenile off of Torrance Beach.

Gubser maintained a consistent, 64 strokes per minute, except for slowing for a short time just before sunrise. "She

says she's dreaming," the log records.

Afterwards, Gubser explained she had felt dizzy and closing her eyes made the dizziness go away. She attributed the dizziness to not having hydrated sufficiently during the bumpy boat ride. During the swim she alternated every half hour between a 500 ml bottle of plain water and an electrolyte drink to flush out lactic acid.

The rushed start also caused her to neglect applying sufficient lubricant on the back of her neck. As a result she developed what appeared at the finish to be a second degree burn where her suit chaffed.

"I started to feel the chaffing after the first hour. But once your skin's wet, you can't apply lubricant. Chafing is something swimmers get used to," she said.

Otherwise, the swim went as well as she could have hoped until she reached the R-10 buoy, four miles off of Torrance Beach and a mile shy of Rocky Point. The water off of Palos Verdes is notorious for kelp and unpredictable currents. Last year, a current raced south from the Manhattan Pier, leading to terrible finish times in the Catalina Classic Paddleboard Race and the Dwight Crum Pier to Pier International Surf Festival Swim. Both finish at the Manhattan Beach pier.

Last week, the current was running north, carrying with it the kelp that carpeted the water.

"Amy hates swimming in kelp," the log notes at the R-10.

The wreck of the Dominator was within sight. The Nicole Ann sped ahead to Lunada Bay, immediately around Rocky Point, to look for a passageway through the kelp. They found a clearing leading right up to the sandy beach. But when they turned back for Gubser, they found her swimming in place, despite holding her rotation at 64 strokes a minute.

Greg Gubser got on the radio to the head of the Marathon Swimmers Federation. He asked if his wife needed to pass Rocky Point and land in Lunada Bay.

The answer was she only needed to

reach the Santa Monica's Bay southern demarcation point. It didn't matter if she went a foot or a mile past it.

Schubert and Davey jumped in the water and along with King in her kayak, guided Gubser diagonally across the current in the direction of the Dominator remains. The Nicole Ann was forced to wait outside the kelp line.

At 13:40, the log reads, "600 yards from point. Amy hates kelp."

"The kelp was like swimming across pool covers. I wish I had included that in my training," Gubser said afterwards.

Schubert swam ahead, with his head up, warning Gubser of submerged rocks in front of her and breaking waves behind her. King ventured in too close and her kayak was swamped, forcing her to retreat outside the breakline.

After Gubser was finally able to touch bottom, the surge swept her off her feet and up the rocks and then dragged her back out. The sequence repeated itself several times until she secured a handhold and, with the following surge, a foothold.

"Clears water, on dry rocks. 14:14:20," the final log entry reads.

Back aboard the Nicole Ann, Gubser mentioned that the 17 hour, six minute 36 second swim she had just completed was a practice swim.

In July, she travels to Ireland to swim the North Channel, a 21-mile wide strait that separates Ireland and Scotland. The North Channel is considered the most difficult of the Ocean Seven Marathon Swims. Unlike the Santa Monica Bay, the North Channel's 50-degree water is too cold for dolphins and sharks. But it does host Lion's Mane Jellies, seven-foot wide hoods and 190-foot, toxin filled tentacles. A woman who swam the North Channel in 2014 was stung over 200 times and had to be hospitalized after finishing.

Gubser said jellies go with the territory. When she swam across Monterey Bay, she passed through patches up to a mile long of Pacific Sea Nettles, whose 24 tentacles can reach 15 feet in length.

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