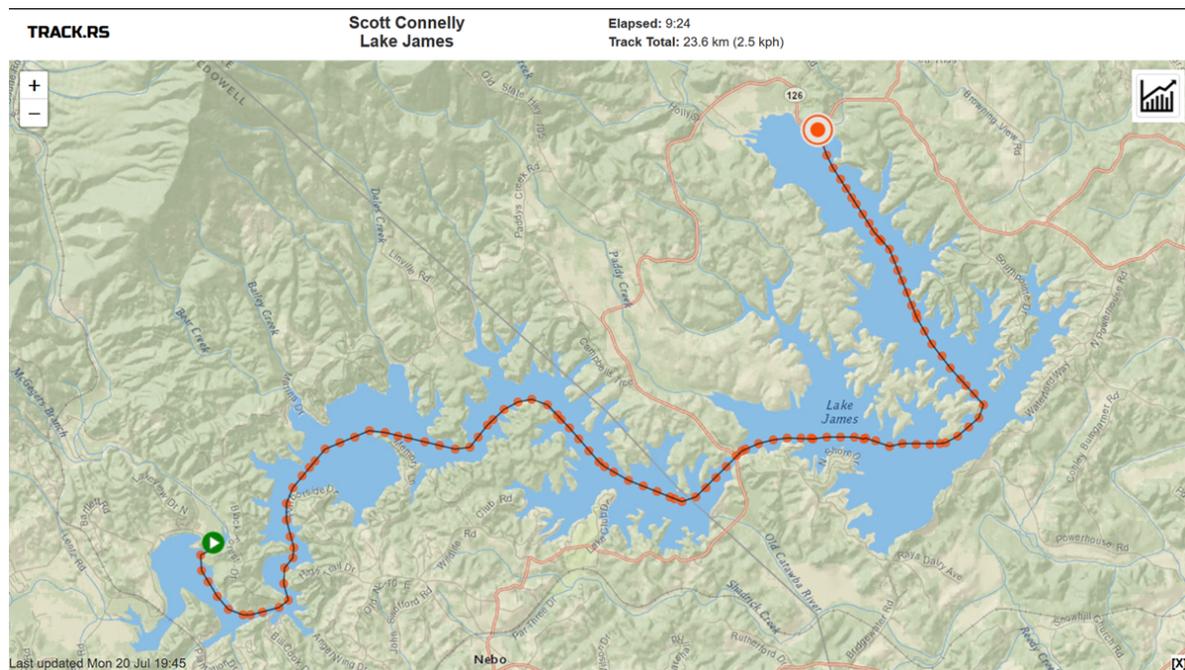


An aquatic feat: College student swims the entire length of Lake James

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This map shows the length of Scott Connelly's swim across Lake James.

He accomplished his 14.8-mile goal in nine hours and nine minutes.

On Monday, July 20, a young man accomplished a personal goal of swimming the entire 14.8-mile length of Lake James.

Scott Connelly, 21, is the son of McDowell native Julie Faulkner Connelly and her husband, Dr. Chris Connelly. He also is the grandson of Richard and Pat Faulkner, who live in a house on Lake James.

Scott has always enjoyed swimming. Originally from Concord, he's been to Lake James many times when he visited his grandparents. He never thought of himself as a distance swimmer, but he grew up swimming competitively on his YMCA summer league and year-round swim teams in his hometown. He later turned his swimming passion to playing club water polo at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he is a junior majoring in biochemistry and exercise and sport science, according to information from his family.

But then came the COVID-19 pandemic and UNC-Chapel Hill switched to remote learning in April. Scott decided to start training for a goal he's long wanted to accomplish: swimming the length of Lake James.

"I just wanted something challenging to do," he said to *The McDowell News*. "I had heard about people doing marathon swims, and I thought I would try one."

For his training, he would swim about 1½ hours each morning most days of the week. This was a little tricky at first because indoor pools were closed in April due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Scott started training in Lake Norman and Lake James, and then later moved to his outdoor neighborhood pool and the West Cabarrus YMCA pool. However, he had never swum more than three hours without stopping before, and really had no way to predict how his muscles, shoulders and endurance would hold out, according to information from his family.

Early start

On the morning of the big swim, Scott and his family boarded a pontoon boat around 5:45 a.m. and headed to the starting point. He began his swim at the North Fork of the Catawba River end of the lake.

To make the event count as a legitimate marathon swim by the Marathon Swimmers Federation, Scott could not touch the boat or receive assistance at any time (except to be handed food and water as he tread water or floated on his back).

His family supported him in this effort. His mother served as the official observer who recorded GPS coordinates, swim stroke rate, water, and air temperatures, and other measurements. His father drove the boat. His brother Robert was the lifeguard and also in charge of handing Scott water and food about every 30 minutes. Scott's grandfather, Richard Faulkner, also stayed on the boat for the entire trip and assisted in navigation and as an all-around helping hand.

A second pontoon boat was driven by David Ricketts and Sherron Crawford. Onboard were Scott's uncles, John Faulkner and Mark Groeninger. They checked on the primary boat multiple times, took some pictures and were on call if needed for any reason. They also were on the lookout for other boats or personal watercraft that could interfere with Connelly's swim, according to information from the family.

Scott told *The McDowell News* he chose a Monday for his swim because he reasoned the boat traffic would be lightest on that day rather than a weekend. The water was calm and the weather sunny for about the first 11 miles of the swim, with a few passing boats making some waves.

Anytime a boat would approach too closely, his brother Robert held out a yellow caution flag over the area where Scott was swimming just to be sure the approaching boat would notice the swimmer in the water. He swam about 5 to 10 feet from the side of the boat and could see the boat when he turned his head to the side to breathe. The boat guided Scott in the direction to swim through the lake and prevented him from accidentally going into a dead-end cove, according to information from the family.

Determined pace

He kept a very steady pace of about 48 to 50 strokes per minute, despite sore arms.

“The last 4 miles were very painful,” he told *The McDowell News*.

A storm was brewing in the distance, and the wind created choppy waves that made swimming much more difficult. He was swimming straight toward Shortoff Mountain, but he says it never looked any closer when he put his head up to check his progress every 30 minutes.

He felt like he was working harder to swim but making less headway as his arms were progressively fatigued. Connelly was determined to finish before any potential storm threatened to get him out of the water.

Luckily, the storm moved in a different direction, and he was able to complete the last segment with calmer water, according to his family.

Finish line

Scott continued until he reached the boat ramp at N.C. 26 near the Linville River. When he reached the Linville River side and walked out at the boat ramp, Connelly was met with cheers from his family.

He accomplished his 14.8-mile goal in nine hours and nine minutes.

“Despite complete exhaustion, there was no way to hide a big smile after finishing,” said his mother. “Scott is very glad he completed his goal, but he doubts he will ever want to do it again. We will have to wait and see what his next personal challenge will be.”

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