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It was done before, at least times four: swimmers reached Block Island in 1968

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It was done before, at least times four: swimmers reached Block Island in 1968 By Peter Voskamp

The front of the Providence Journal sports page, August 25, 1968, showing Iglesias and Abou-Heif at the finish line in New Harbor.

On July 23, Block Island witnessed James Bayles, 53, of Newtown, Conn., complete a 13-mile, five-hour swim to Block Island from Narragansett. Certainly a remarkable accomplishment by any measure.

But a question remained: was he the first?

Bayles said he was told by the harbormasters of both Block Island and Pt. Judith that he was.

But the Block Island Times began hearing whispers that maybe it wasn't the first such swim. Different memories pointed to a race of some kind in the late 1960s.

This week we hit pay dirt when K.C. Perry arrived with a clipping from the Providence Journal Sports Section of Aug. 25, 1968:

"2 Tie in Block Island Swim."

As the Journal's Harold Rich reported, on the previous day in 1968, Abdel-Latif Abou-Heif, then a 40-year-old Egyptian lieutenant in the United Arab Republic Army, and Horacio Iglesias, then a 26-year-old engineering student from Argentina, were the first two of only four racers to finish the 15-mile race from Sand Hill Cove State Beach in Narragansett to Block Island's New Harbor.

A total of 17 swimmers from seven countries started the event, called the John P. Fogarty Memorial Swim.

The two tied for first in eight hours and 11 minutes. According to the Journal, it was the only event sanctioned in the United States by the World Professional Marathon Swimming Association that year.

Rich writes: "A yard from the float that served as the finish line, the two clasped hands and touched the line together while a small band blared, skippers of crafts in the [New] harbor honked their horns and a crowd of 1,000 persons applauded."

Rich added: "There may be a harder way to make a buck, but one doesn't come to mind."

The pair shared the first and second prizes: \$2,000 for first place, and \$1,500 for second.

According to the Journal , "The result left Abou-Heif the 1964-65 world champion, and Iglesias, the defending champion, one-two in the federation point standings this year."

The conditions were not stellar that day: 62-degree water and winds of 10 to 15 knots. And all the swimmers reportedly complained of the extreme cold of the currents. Not to mention sharks.

The two other finishers were the Italian Antonio Scamardella and Regent Lacoursiere of Canada. The Italian and Canadian also finished simultaneously, but did not qualify for third- and fourth-place prizes because they arrived two hours and 17 minutes behind the first arrivals - rules said they had to finish within two hours of the winner. But, reports the Journal , the Block Island committee, one of the prize donors, decided to award the two \$875 each.

The American and ex-University of Michigan swimmer, Tom Bucy, led the race at the outset, but was the first to drop out two hours into the race.

"Luckless Linda"

The Australian Linda McGill was the only woman entered in the race. She had the distinction of being the swimmer in the water the longest that day - 10 hours - and she was the last to be picked up by the Coast Guard. McGill became ensnared in the current near Sandy Point and wasn't able swim out of it, despite her best efforts.

On a colorful note, McGill was celebrated for her efforts to reduce drag while swimming competitively: The Journal wrote, "Linda, known as the girl who swam the English Channel topless, yesterday discarded her one-piece swim suit shortly after the start of the race. She put the suit back on before boarding the Coast Guard boat."

Rhode Islanders

Two Rhode Islanders began the race but didn't finish.

One was Bill Lafferty of Providence, an Air Force sergeant at the time, who gave up after four hours and 40 minutes, when his legs "went dead."

Harold M. Weymouth of Newport, and then a senior at Eastern Connecticut State College, spent six hours and 45 minutes in the water before giving up.

The two Rhode Island entries had the extra worry of being followed by an 8-foot shark, which the press boat was successful in warding off.

Bayles

Bayles wasn't available for comment this week.

He dedicated his July 23 swim to his 20-year-old daughter, who suffers from epilepsy. To learn more, visit his website, [www.swimforhope.com](http://swimforhope.com) (<http://swimforhope.com>) .

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dave399 • 4 months ago

The race was also held in the early 1950s. The winner, I believe, was a man from Pawtucket. Polish name. Began with letter M.

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