

Katie Blair's historic open water swim!

By **David Pascal** - October 23, 2020

The old saying "so close and yet so far," rang true in the case of highly experienced open water swimmer Katie Blair. She recently attempted an incredible open water swim, of going back and forth from one country to the next. She did not achieve her objective, but her heroic attempt is one for the ages. On Tuesday, October 13 at approximately 1:27 am, Blair and her support crew left Saint Lucia — her mind set on becoming the first man, woman or child to swim from Saint Lucia to Martinique and back.



Lead Organizer-Director of the St Lucia Channel Swim, Sue Dyson (right) presented Katie Blair with souvenirs from the island courtesy the St Lucia Tourism Authority.

Mission impossible! Taking into account Blair's 20 year sports endurance experience including swims of the English, Catalina and Molokai channels, it seemed highly possible. She almost succeeded, finishing five miles away from her final destination Saint Lucia.

Blair who is 41 and resides in Indiana, USA gave an account of her historic swim at a recent press conference at Bay Gardens Hotel. Officials in attendance included President of the St Lucia Aquatics Federation, Eddie Hazell; St Lucia Tourism Authority Public Relations Manager, Geraine Georges and Lead Organizer-Director, Sue Dyson.

Hazell was full of praise for Blair. "We deem it a success...On behalf of the St Lucia Aquatics Federation, thank you for choosing Saint Lucia. We look forward to using this as a motivational tool towards the programs that we have in place, which is mandated by our governing body FINA."

From the get go Blair was uncertain if the St Lucia Channel Swim would actually take place. On account of COVID-19 there were numerous schedule changes that interrupted her training. In the end she paid the price. Speaking at the press conference, Blair said: "It has definitely been a struggle to even get to start the swim. It has never happened to me that a swim got postponed so many times. None of us had ever been in a situation that was uncertain, where we didn't know when there would be air travel again. This was a very unusual preparation for me."

At first it was easy going. She mentioned that crossing the channel on the way to Martinique was "pretty much ideal without any major obstacles." Along the way she spotted another boat and was excited to hear that 12-year-old Christophe Maleau, who recently swam from Saint Lucia to Martinique, was on board. He was among the cheering section when Blair completed the first leg of the historic swim. She arrived at Anse Meuneir, Martinique, in a time of 12 hours, 29 minutes.

Having completed the first leg there was no time to waste. After putting on extra sun screen and other protective lotions, five minutes later Blair jumped back into the water at 2:01 pm. Knowing there was an entire night ahead of her, she knew the worst was yet to come and mentally prepared for it.



Katie Blair during her historic swim from Saint Lucia to Martinique and back.

She said: "No doubt about it the second night was hard and I think somewhere along the way we went off course a little bit and to far west. I am not sure what happened but that's the nature of our sport. We were pushing for many hours trying to get back on course. Naturally I am getting more tired in the process, so we really didn't make much of a headway towards the end."

Complicating matters even more, was the fact sea urchins made their presence felt making it rather uncomfortable for the swimmer. She described the painful ordeal and the effect it had on her physically and mentally. "One of the issues was with an organism in the water called hydroid and there were some jelly fish stinging me at night as well. There were a lot of things in the water that tickle a little and sting. About 3:00 am I started having some

pretty serious issues with my mouth. My tongue was swelling and had difficulty swallowing. That turned into an issue, because at that point I could not drink or eat as much as I wanted to anymore. That's one of the things you have to be very much on schedule for, if not you are kind of on borrowed time."

Despite her discomfort Blair persevered. However, roughly five miles from Saint Lucia with more difficulty breathing and swallowing, she had a brief discussion with Dyson. It was decision time! On Wednesday October 14 at about 6:30 am after swimming an incredible 29 hours and 10 minutes covering 41.1 miles (66.2 km), Blair's historic swim came to an end.

It was a tough call being so close and yet so far from her final destination. In retrospect it was the right decision. Blair considered the pros and cons and summed it up this way. "With five miles to go even in good conditions, it would probably take me two and a half hours and might have easily been six and knew I had an hour or two left in me. Having my son on the boat was a consideration. I did not want to traumatize or scare him and my crew started looking very somber. I guess at that point I felt as a swimmer, I have the responsibility to make sure we are having a good experience. This is just sports, it is just a swim, and nobody's life is at stake and so let's keep it that way and make it a good experience. The idea is to come back next year and hopefully get the allergies under control, fine tune some things but I am excited we got this opportunity. Given all the things we have been dealing with in 2020, it was amazing just to be able to swim at all."

Her historic swim was amazing and spectacular!

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