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# Extreme Exposures: The Practice and Narratives of Channel Swimming as a Methodology for the Creation of Contemporary Art

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## Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework and methodology behind my a recent creation (2012) of a body of artwork based on Channel swimming, the result of a three-month research sabbatical. The work investigates the narratives, processes, rituals and apparatus of the sport of open-water swimming with a focus on the 'cult' of Channel swimming: in particular the necessity for learned behaviours, the collective interaction among swimmers, and the identity of the Channel swimmer.

The work combines object-based sculpture, photography, drawing and films that utilise an experiential approach to the research of the sport by a direct involvement. Documentary processes and re-enactment are engaged in, with myself as subject of the study in the video series *Acclimatisation* (2012) which documents the body's physical response to cold-water immersion and the method of acclimatising (habituation) over a set period of time, a process that is core to Channel swimming training. This piece in particular reflects aspects of 'positive deviant' behaviour (Ewald and Jiobu, 1985) in which "interaction amongst peers can lead to an excessive commitment to action" (Hughes and Coakley, 1991), in this case that undertaken by extreme athletes. Links between practices of endurance art and acclimatisation are described.

Other pieces within the work are part of a series of sculptural photographs and films made from the same apparatus and materials that Channel swimmers use to take nourishment during a swim. The 'feed' and how it is administered is part of the learned channel-swimmer behaviour; the feeding construction becomes an essential object within the performance of the swim.

The constructed sculptures that reference those mechanisms become semi-abstract, retaining traces of their function, but are distanced and transposed from their original purpose via the medium of film and the manner of its editing. The photo series *Channel Swimwear Rules* (2012) consists of self-portraits of myself as the swimmer wearing all the equipment disallowed when swimming the channel, thus exploring the relationship between the authentic body and the use of technology to enhance performance.

### **The sport of Channel swimming**

For the relationship between art and sport that is proposed within this research to be discussed, it is necessary to describe what is involved in swimming the English Channel. Measured between the traditional start and finish points in England and France, the crossing of this body of water is approximately 21 miles in distance.<sup>1</sup> The Channel is seen as a particularly difficult body of water to attempt to swim across due to a number of factors. It is very unpredictable with continuously changing tides and currents. It is also one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world with around 600 ships moving along or crossing it each day, so safe navigation between and around these vessels is key to the swim. The temperature of the water in the Channel ranges from 14C–18C during the channel swimming season (a public swimming pool temperature is usually 28C–30C), which runs from June to October.

An average swim crossing takes about 13 hours of continuous swimming. The cost of a channel swim is currently around £2500. This covers the accompanying pilot and his boat, two central elements of the swim, as it is the pilot's skill in navigation that will mean a swimmer hits tides at the right time ... and does not hit ships! The cost also covers relevant insurances and ratification costs, so that the swim fulfils the rules as set out by one of the two organisations that oversee channel swimming, The Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation or Channel Swimming Association. A swimmer cannot swim the channel legally without sanction of one of these two official bodies.

Swims are usually booked with the accompanying pilot and relevant association around 2-3 years in advance, allowing the ideal amount of time to train. Not just anyone can swim the channel: solo swimmers must qualify for the attempt and present evidence of their preparation by swimming for 6 hours in water 16c or below, and relay swimmers by swimming for 2 hours in the same temperature.

Developing into a channel swimmer is a matter of training the body, learning the behaviour, rituals, language and becoming part of the channel swimming community. This communal experience manifests itself clearly in the training at Dover harbour beach, where Channel swimmers have the option of training from May to September each year, swimming in the sea at this location. A group of volunteers run training every weekend, giving advice on timings/planning, feeding and the swim itself. At this training there is a strong sense of a channel swimming community. Here feats of swimming endurance are undertaken, personal limits pushed, camaraderie developed and successful swimmers congratulated. The training is overseen by The Channel General, Freda Streeter, who has trained channel swimmers for over 20 years. She is the mother of Alison Streeter, known as 'Queen of the Channel' because she has swum the English Channel a total of 43 times. Next to this Queen on the thrones of channel swimming is Kevin Murphy, 'The King of The Channel', who has crossed it a total of 34 times (see related art work in **Image 1**).



Image 1 *The King of The Channel (2012) Yellow Neon Glass Sculpture*

Elizabeth Matheson and Emelie Chhangur, in their 2010 article on the artist Humberto Velez, discuss his 2010 swimming project *Le Saut (Paris Plunge)* in which the Seine plays stage to swimmers attempting to swim against its current. Of that project's bringing together of diverse individuals from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities to swim, she says:

... one is immediately reminded of the earnest aesthetics of sport: the multiplication of perspectives and the embrace of contingency, collaboration and communal action. Whatever their political efficacy (and it can be very little), these aesthetics at least could succeed in occupying space in Paris, imprinting themselves on the city. Which is, of course, what art and sport both claim to do. (Matheson, 2010: p. 37)

Velez's swimmers are staged as swimming 'against' the governing rules of society (particularly as swimming in the Seine is banned). This embrace of the collective and communal action shares affinities with Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of relational-aesthetics (1998) involving human interaction and social interstice as art practice. The 'communal' is also central to the seemingly lonely sport of channel swimming via the training grounds and forums that constitute the channel-swimming community and connect it both materially and virtually worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

The sport of channel swimming also significantly calls into question the traditional aesthetics of the athlete's body as an instrument of athletic prowess and perfection. A successful channel swimmer from Dover harbour training beach commented to me during a training weekend that "In channel swimming portliness is next to Godliness". The enduring aspect of the swim is not just the continued long duration of the swimming itself; alongside this, cold-water tolerance plays a significant part in the swim. This can mean that swimmers need to put weight on so they have more insulation against the cold.

Throsby (2013) investigates the processes of becoming a channel swimmer through her own experience. She found that, in relation to gender and the body in channel swimming, female swimmers were viewed as possessing sporting advantages:

... as explanations of high performance, women are also often credited with a biological advantage in swimming — for example, because of higher average levels of body fat [and] a presumed (but scientifically unproven) higher tolerance for pain. (Throsby, 2013: p. 2)

Throsby draws distinctions between types of fat and terms this gaining of weight for channel swims a form of "heroic fatness", a fatness that can be lost

after the event and is a temporary form of body modification. 'Heroic fatness' is a controllable body adaption that is 'necessary but undesirable' and perceived as morally different to 'normal' fatness. A technological form of body adaption is discussed later in this chapter with reference to the artwork Channel Swimwear Rules.

### Contemporary art and sport

My position as author of this body of work that researches channel swimming involves a bridging of the two disciplines of art and sport but also requires some delineation between the sportsperson and artist (and researcher). Therefore multi-disciplinary methods using theoretical frameworks from philosophy, sociology, sports science and art are used in a trans-disciplinary way throughout this paper.

The project seeks to both illuminate and eliminate the boundaries between the disciplines of sport and art, so that the resulting gallery-based artworks are informed by swimming experiences, while the potential is created for the acts of swimming endurance themselves (such as the channel swim and its training) being considered art works. The endurance features of the act of a channel swim indeed share many similarities with endurance performance art works such as those of Marina Abramovic<sup>3</sup>. The training and mental preparation required for physically demanding symbolic feats are also comparable.

Proposing the act of the swim as performance art in itself is consistent with Allan Kaprow's thoughts in *The Blurring of Art and Life* (2003) in which he questions the nature of art and its reception. In his editor's introduction Jeff Kelley notes that as a young student in 1949 Kaprow questioned John Dewey's writing on *Art as Experience* by stating "...art is not separate from experience ... what is an authentic experience? ... environment is a process of interaction" (p. xvii). Kaprow goes on to suggest that the "Happening"<sup>4</sup> is an ideal vehicle for art and life encounters. Interestingly Kaprow was also of the belief that for a Happening to maintain its originality it should be a one-off, with no publicity, and staged in a multitude of non-gallery environments that integrated the landscape within the performance. The audience was also reduced, usually including only a handful of people and 'accidental' participants who happened to be in the location at the time.

Such distancing from the accepted confines of the art world is described by Kaprow as "... un-artisting ... I define it as that act or thought whose identity as art must forever remain unknown" (Kaprow, 2003: p. xxix). The typical intention of the channel swimmer is not to 'make art', but the artist who



*\*Image 2 Sandettie Lightship (2012)  
Photograph of sculpture utilising appropriated objects and  
referencing a weather station positioned in the English Channel  
that swimmers use to predict the weather for a swim*

swims the channel as performance is starting from a different perspective. The 'happening' of the channel swim takes place in an unpredictable environment continually in a state of flux, with unexpected, unscripted events unfolding. There is also a lack of an apparent audience aside from the crew and pilot, who are themselves subjects within the performance. Each crew member has a pre-stated (by the swimmer) set of tasks to undertake at specific times during the swim, such as organising hourly feeds and observing the number of swimming strokes per hour<sup>5</sup>.

The relationship between artist and sports person is one that continues to be full of tension and ambiguity. For the most part artists who create work around sport do so through residencies that may involve researching, examining the sport from an objective viewpoint of observation and documentation. With my body of work the immersion and sustained contact makes it difficult

to identify the ending and beginning of the two areas of sport and art in (myself as) the author. So a hybrid approach is taken in which my position slips between artist-observer, artist as subject and creative sportswoman. An analogy could be used that draws on recent notions around creative research, which are termed 'practice-based' and 'practice-led'. The methodology used in this body of work is sport 'in' art rather than 'through' it.

As a sporting subject I am somewhat tenuously placed in the Channel swimming community, having trained for and swum a channel relay (a standard relay is six swimmers each swimming for an hour at a time). However, not having swum the channel solo, my position is one of slippage — remaining accepted, but without the necessary "solo" honour, sometimes referred to after a successful solo as being 'welcomed to the club'.

In a similar position of hybridity, albeit with a more deliberate distancing, author and illustrator Leanne Shapton draws on her own swimming experience from a distance, which creates a sense of nostalgia. It is apt, when considering her book *Swimming Studies* (2012) that "nostalgia" in Greek literally means "the wounds of returning". Shapton's book is based on her own experiences of training and competing at a high level internationally in swimming and her fondness for drawing. It contains intimate recollections that detail her personal narratives via text and visuals. *Swimming Studies* demonstrates that the artist and athlete are not incompatible opposites. In Shapton's case, she likens the repetitive habitual nature of swimming to the mental endurance needed within her creative life for the processes of drawing. Here the notion of a learned practice with defined common languages could be seen to connect sport and the practice of making art. That is, the notion of a practice that is practised.

Trying to define what swimming means to me is like looking at a shell sitting in a few feet of clear, still water. There it is, in sharp focus, but once I reach for it, breaking the surface, the ripples refract the shell. It becomes five shells, twenty-five shells, some smaller, some larger and I blindly feel for what I saw perfectly before trying to grasp it. (Shapton, 2012: p. 1)

## **Training**

There are specific systematic and tested processes of preparation for channel swimming (unlike the more generalised sport of open water swimming) and at the forefront of preparation is a testing (and extending) of the limits of the body's ability to deal with cold water. Such training is undertaken in the

sea, rivers, lakes and particular outdoor unheated lido's such as the Tooting Bec in London (**Image 3**). This is commonly known as 'acclimatisation' and 'habituation'. This process differs from other forms of outdoor swimming, as within the sport of channel swimming the swimmer is not permitted to wear a wetsuit, which would aid heat retention.

Habituation is a learning process in which the body learns to adapt to the shock of getting into cold water. Acclimatisation, however, is the process whereby the body gets used to being in and staying in cold water for gradually longer periods of time. In order to undertake both, the body is forced to go through (often painful) experiences. Makenin (2010) explained habituation as:

... the most common form of cold adaptation and develops in response to repeated cold exposures where whole-body cooling is not substantial. When being habituated to cold, thermal cold sensations are less intense and shivering and the vasoconstrictor response is blunted.

Makenin also suggests that mental perception of coldness plays a significant part in the body's reaction to it: "At the same time stress responses are reduced, meaning a lesser rise in blood pressure and reduced release of stress hormones in the circulation" (Makenin, 2010).



Image 3

*Training Ground: Tooting Bec Lido (Film Still) 2012*

These processes of acclimatisation and habituation can be viewed as extreme by those outside the sport. This aspect of training pushes the body to its physical limits, and minor hypothermia is an accepted occurrence while undertaking such training. Within channel training, swimmers are taught (mostly by each other and more formally during structured training) to understand signs of hypothermia and processes to reduce the symptoms. Hughes and Coakley (1991) discuss in their "Positive Deviance" essay the notion that such extreme athlete behaviour can be classed as deviant where peer/community pressure results in overconformity and the collective encouragement to push limits. They observe that positive deviance within sport can be caused by "...an unqualified acceptance of and an unquestioned commitment to a value system framed by what we refer to as the sport ethic" (Hughes and Coakley, 1993: p. 362). They outline how this 'sport ethic' is used to excess: "Much deviance amongst athletes involves excessive over-conformity to the norms and values embodied in the sport itself" (p. 361).

In channel swimming certain aspects of training can be conceptually framed by this notion of positive deviance. Elements of the training, including long periods of swimming and time spent in cold water, take place in group situations. Often the group training (including the Dover beach weekly training) encourages excessive commitment to what might be viewed outside the community as deviant behaviour.

When viewed outside the channel-swimming community (and wider open-water swimming sport), my video *Acclimatisation* (2012)<sup>6</sup> documenting the after effects of attempting to acclimatise to cold water swimming over a period of weeks (known as after-drop, the continued fall of the body temperature during the re-warming process) is viewed as deviant and has been questioned due to the apparent severity of my condition in the video. When displayed within the open-water and channel-swimming community, the body state is immediately recognised and viewed as comical (swimmers refer affectionately to this after-swim state as "having the shakes").

This piece, *Acclimatisation*, is the first self-referential work within the body of research, and perhaps the piece that most obviously disrupts the boundaries between artist and swimmer. With my own body as the central subject of this documentary film, the filming processes are deliberately homemade, scenes being filmed on hand-held mobile devices. The use of hand-held filming devices has become ubiquitous as a documentary technique, and the documentary artist film becomes one that is contained in multiple mobile formats and is thus transposable (differing from the traditional unique art

object). Its aesthetic is recognised as of the moment. This format allows films to be viewed in (and uploaded to) different contexts and discipline-specific domains, thus reflecting the multiple identities of the author.

The hand-held camera technique also allows for a lack of planned editing and film direction within the film. The device itself literally records my body's experiencing of 'the shakes' as my inability to hold the camera steady is evident (adding, some might say, to the comedic aspect of the film). Individual ritual is also evidenced in my wearing of the same oversized hat in each clip (a hat recognised as mine in the swimming community worldwide, capitalising on my swimmer identity). This hat is designed to retain heat after the cold immersion, but its ridiculous appearance adds to the unnatural scenario of each video, and its recognition by viewers as an emblem moves it to become a totemic object.

Within channel swimming the ethics of the sport also culminate in encouragement through the use of popular channel swimming sayings and slogans that recognise the adversity of the challenge and reinforce this deviance and a sense of collective belonging: for example "No Pain No Gain", "Nothing Great is Easy", "80 per cent mental, 20 per cent physical".

## Rituals

'Greasing up' is a term used in the channel (and open-water ) swimming community to describe the process of covering the body with Vaseline or a similar anti-chafing product. Historically channel swimmers used 'goose-fat' and as a means of keeping warm during the swim. Photographed or videoed, this preparatory act of greasing can appear through the lens as a ritualistic laying of hands on the body (usually at night time when a channel swim begins). The stills from the Nick Adams video (see **Image 4**), when removed from their swimming context, appear to acquire a quasi-religious ceremonial significance.

The act of the channel swim requires the body to learn, adapt to and perform the associated behaviours of channel training. This includes the form of "feeding" as the endurance aspect requires the body to refuel in a particular and sequential way which, according to the channel swimming rules, must be achieved without touching the boat.

The channel swim, while underway, is measured by the participant swimmer in terms of feeds. Throsby (2012) describes her channel swim and feeding patterns in her blog: "Three feeds ago, my boat pilot had come out of the cabin to tell me that it was time for some hard effort now to push through

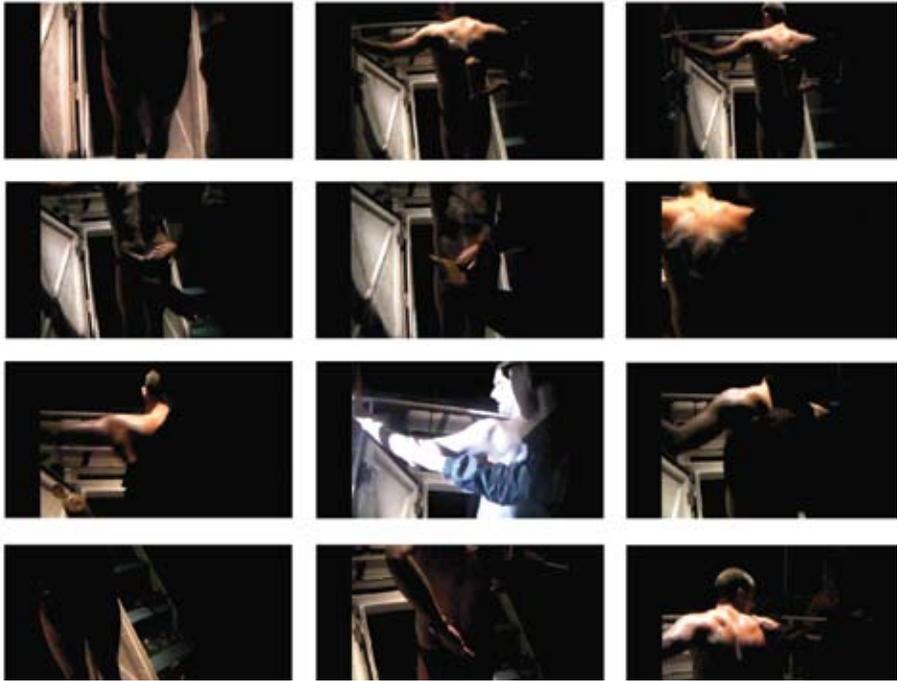


Image 4 *Greasing Up (Nick Adams)*  
Stills from Nick Adams channel swimming video 2011

the difficult tide". The feeds (hourly or however often the swimmer has decided prior to the swim will work best for his/her body) become a measure of the progress of the swim. The feeds act as temporal points within the swim to create an overall timescape; the passing of time is measured by the body's need to refuel, and the success of the early stages of the channel swim are judged on the basis of the swimmer's ability to digest the feed<sup>7</sup>. In this context, Descartes' idea of the 'body as a machine' could be seen as an appropriate equivalence, with the body as an engine to be kept fuelled for the task at hand.

Swimmers select (and sometimes make) their own feeding apparatuses which allow them to avoid touching the boat when they stop for a feed. These items may also relate to the personal choices of the swimmer. For instance a 'basket and pole' system is more appropriate for solid foods, while sports bottles tied to rope or string allow for liquid fuel. These appropriated objects take



*Image 5*      *Standard Relay (2012)*  
*Sculpture based on swimmer's homemade feeding apparatus*

on a sculptural presence and become symbolic during the swim; the appearance of these objects during a swim also marks the passing of time as well as the only points when there is a bridging between the swimmer and boat.

In *Standard Relay (2012)* (see **Image 5**) — both a sculptural piece and a film of the sculpture — the constructed sculpture becomes semi-abstract, retaining traces of the original function of its components, but distanced and transposed via the medium of film, the editing of which reflects the time-based measuring of the duration of a swim. An inertia exists in the slow panning shots which create obvious sequencing with little action, a repetitive imagery in which the feeding sculpture dominates and is centralised as an iconic object. This is at odds with the multi-layered abstract sound that is present within the film. The sound is constructed using audio production methodology such as sound-capture from an actual swim and collaging via digital processes. The placement of sounds alongside the visuals therefore generates a relationship between imagery and sound that is integral to the film itself; it produces a sense of temporal points relevant to stages of the swim and suggests repetitive processes.

### **The authentic body: Channel swimwear rules**

During a channel swim the swimmer's body is expected to be in a 'natural' state, free from the technology of any enhancing equipment, evidencing the

physical capabilities of the swimmer. With the rise in performance enhancing equipment, EC (English Channel) Rules have been developed to control what a 'legal' channel swim can involve. These rules are used in open water swimming worldwide:

No swimmer in a standard attempt to swim the Channel shall be permitted to use or wear any device or swimsuit that may aid his/her speed, buoyancy, heat retention or endurance (such as wetsuit, webbed gloves, paddles, fins, etc). The swimmer is permitted to grease the body before a swim, use goggles and one hat. Nose clips and earplugs are permitted. Any kind of tape on the body is not permitted unless approved by the observer.

The swimmer may wear only one swimsuit in one or two pieces which shall not extend past the shoulder or below the knee. All swimsuits shall be made from textile materials. Caps may not be made from neoprene or any other material which offers similar heat retention properties. (Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation, 2012)

Magdalinski (2009) discusses how the physiological body can be enhanced through technology and how processes of bodily changes and adaption have to be earned within sport. Thus when "equipment" is utilised to enhance performance this can be viewed as technology interfering with the natural sporting body, and results in a tension arising between "nature" and "technology". Within channel swimming the use of such equipment is viewed as 'cheating'; because of this channel swimming is distinctive from other open-water events that may even require participants to wear wetsuits (linked to the rise in triathlon).

In the work *Channel Swimwear Rules* (2012) (see **Image 6**) two large-scale photographs display a swimmer wearing the banned channel swim equipment. The aesthetic construction of the pieces are achieved using appropriated wetsuit advertising methods and stances. The imagery suggests an exaggerated level of body-enhancement, the binary opposite of the natural body, and illustrates the seemingly absurdity of many of the artificial aids when viewed from outside the context of a swimming community (and indeed outside the water environment for which the enhancements are designed).

*Channel Swimwear Rules* was been exhibited in a 'non-art' sporting situation at *The Global Open Water Swimming Conference 2012* in Los Angeles where it was often 'misread' as advertising rather than contemporary artwork. These readings disrupt the relationship between the disciplines of art and sport and facilitate a mixing of the codes recognised within each sphere.



*Image 6 Channel Swimwear Rules (2012)  
Photographs with swimmer wearing banned Channel-swimming  
equipment*

## **Hitting France**

“...an ethnographic mapping of an institution or community is a primary form of site-specific art today” (Foster, 1996: p.185)

An ethnographic approach provides the overarching framework used in the work, although rather than the artist presenting collected data based on the channel swimming community, the data is transcribed and often reframed

into artworks. Here objects are not appropriated and represented. This approach has the potential to enable insight into the sport and inspire consideration of wider notions of identity itself.

Hal Foster (1996) states that artists are often defined by their habitation of 'elsewhere' and acting as the 'other'. He comments on artists who work 'horizontally' in an ethnographic manner:

... one selects a site, enters its culture and learns its language, conceives and presents a project, only to move to the next site where the cycle is repeated. (Foster, 1996: p. 202).

As author of this body of research, and as a subject embedded within the site (community) itself, it is difficult to work horizontally; the vertical approach, that of becoming involved in-depth within one site, while enabling unlimited access, could problematise my position which then becomes distanced from 'the other'. It could be said there is too little objective space in my representations, by my very implication in and familiarity with the channel swimming culture as a sportsperson.

The artist therefore is in a space of intersection, involved in the sport, but attempting to bridge both the subjective and objective artist positions. This is what allows the work to be both informed by and testing of the methodologies of the sport itself, giving the work a stance from which to question the two apparently divergent disciplines of art and sport.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The first person to successfully swim the English Channel without artificial aids was Captain Matthew Webb in 1875.
- <sup>2</sup> There is a worldwide channel swimming forum/chat group with 1200 members internationally
- <sup>3</sup> Abramovic calls her preparations before performances 'cleaning the house': literally preparing herself mentally and physically for the performances that push her body to extremes. The preparation involves a range of processes including meditation, fasting and acts of long durational concentration and silence.
- <sup>4</sup> A Happening (term created by Allan Kaprow in 1957) is a performance event considered art. It can take place in any chosen situation and is overseen by an artist or group. Happenings are often improvised and may involve audience participation.
- <sup>5</sup> A technique used during a Channel swim to ascertain the speed, efficiency and endurance of the swimmer is to count how many strokes a minute a swimmer uses. A stroke is considered to be one arm turn. If the stroke rate drops, it is generally a sign the swimmer is tiring.

- <sup>6</sup> Shortly to be available online.
- <sup>7</sup> Prior to undertaking the swim, the Channel swimmer will practice feeding with carbohydrate energy drinks. These drinks are often difficult to digest and different strengths of the substance are experimented with. Ideally a swimmer must aim not to vomit as this is detrimental to gaining the required calories needed for the swim. It is accepted by swimmers undertaking a Channel swim that they are likely to vomit a number of times during the swim.

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