

## **Dreaming of jelly babies: English Channel swimming and the challenges and comforts of food**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak today...It's an honour to be here.

Before I start, I wanted to check that everyone knows what a jelly baby is...if you don't know (and a lot of Americans, for example, haven't come across them), the next five minutes of my talk might be rather bewildering, so I've brought some along so you have a look, and a taste. I suspect that a jelly baby has no place at reception like this, and in the British Library too, so I apologise if I'm lowering the tone....



I'm going to start with a short fieldnotes narrative from my English Channel swim in September 2010:

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe – these rhythmic triplets, the soundtrack of swimming. I had lost track of how many hours I'd been going. I had started at 2 that morning, jumping into the inky-black night-time water, and swimming into a beautiful dawn and through the day; the light was now starting to soften, and I guessed it was about 4pm. France was in sight every time I breathed to the left, and had been for hours, but a stubborn tide was blocking my progress, and a stiff wind was whipping up white-crested waves head on. My day of swimming was broken down in my mind into manageable half hour

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chunks...the time period between each feed, lowered down to me on a rope by my crew. 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 the difficult tide. I had picked up my stroke rate in an attempt to muster something approximating a sprint, and my crew had stood on the deck, clapping and cheering me on; at every feed, they told me I looked fantastic, that I was flying – a generous and welcome fiction. Stroke, stroke, breathe; stroke, stroke, breathe. But I was getting tired now, and sore – not injury-sore, but all-over fatigued; every part of me felt nauseated and grey with tiredness. On every 6<sup>th</sup> stroke, I breathed towards the boat, snatching a visual snapshot of the scene on board and scouring it for clues; in unguarded moments, my crew looked worried. They knew what I didn't – that the tide was supposed to have turned an hour ago, sweeping me up to the French shore; but it hadn't (and bizarrely, anomalously, didn't that day). I could see their huddled conversations with the boat pilot and felt a rising panic that after all these hours, after all of those months of training, perhaps this wasn't going to be my day after all. Stroke, stroke, breathe; stroke, stroke, breathe – trying to keep up the faster pace. Needing to halt a rising, energy-sapping panic, it was time for my swimming strategy of last resort, saved and rehearsed for just such a moment, to get me through to the next feed...I emptied my head as much as I could, half-closed my eyes, and imagined an enormous, green jelly baby. I scrutinised it carefully in slow, meticulous detail – little block feet, pudgy knees, rounded pot belly, button-nosed face, a jellied curl of hair on the crown, arms by its sides, round, fingerless hands. I turned it over in my mind to look at the bottom of its feet, then its flat back, its head and rounded shoulders from above. Then I imagined biting into it – just the left foot. I imagined the tooth-marked bright green jelly exposed inside, and the thin line of starchy white crust left behind. I imagined the handful of calories running into my own left foot. Next, the left leg, from ankle to knee; from knee to hip; then the right leg...slowly, incrementally, deliberately, until it was all gone, the cute jelly head forming the final bite. My crew signalled the next feed time by holding up the feeding bottle and rope spool; another half hour done.

When I tell people that I have swum the Channel, there's a cluster of very common questions that often follow: do you wear a wetsuit? (No). Do you cover yourself in

goose fat? (No...and people often seem very disappointed by this, which is intriguing...). How do you go to the toilet? (Use your imagination). Do you have a boat with you? (Yes). And...what and how do you eat?

Eating on a Channel swim poses a number of problems – nutritionally, and practically. Minimally, you have to have a means of getting nutrition to the swimmer from the deck of a rolling boat without the swimmer having to touch the boat or the people on it (which would invalidate the swim); and you have to have a form of easily digestible and quickly consumable nutrition that provides energy in a slow and steady way without putting stress on the stomach. But beyond these rather practical issues, food also plays a much more *affective*, comforting role too – both in material reality since food provides energy that makes you feel better, and, as with the big green jelly baby, imaginatively. Food, then, is part of a swimmer's repertoire not only for necessary sustenance during a swim, but also for dealing with inevitable moments of discomfort, and occasionally despair, that can occur during a long swim. I have heard of flagging swimmers magically revived by a cup of tea mid-Channel (usually English swimmers...), or in one case, by a cup of home-made rice pudding prepared to a family recipe. These are foods that have a material effect on the body, but which also carry emotional or nostalgic resonances for particular swimmers. Food, then, is a challenge and a comfort, and what I want to do today is, firstly, show you *how* feeding happens; then to think about the *what and why* of feeding – what people eat, and what functions food performs.

I'm assuming that most people have never seen a Channel swim, nor have too much of a sense of what it involves or how it is done in practice. There is no reason why you should – it is, by any measure, a minority practice, and one which by definition, happens out of general sight – for example, only 5 people saw me swim the Channel, and three of those were paid by me to be there. Since the first crossing by Matthew Webb in 1875, there have been 1693 successful solo crossings by a total of 1246 people. This figure includes the first two successful crossings of this season last week; it also includes people who've done it more than once, or who have done double, or in three cases, triple consecutive crossings. So it's been swum by quite a few people, but not so many, and it is far from the more mainstream sports that comprise the upcoming Olympics for example (although 10km open water swimming debuted as

an Olympic sport in Beijing). In September 2010, I became the 1153<sup>rd</sup> person to swim the Channel in time of 16 hours and 9 minutes (the average crossing time is about 13 ½ hours....but with the exception of the elite end of the sport, crossing times are generally secondary for most people – including me - to the simple goal of completion).

Now, I want to show you a short film that we made of my English Channel swim, firstly just to give you a bit of a sense of the anatomy of a swim, but also, to show you how the feeds happen in practice – there are two in the film. My partner, Peter, was doing most of the videoing, as well as looking after me, and my friend, Sam, was also on board as crew for me; you'll also see a brief but vociferous vignette of my boat pilot, Paul, who comes out to give me a talking to at one point. Scorese I'm not, so apologies for the lack of sophistication...I should also point out that poor Peter was filming under very difficult conditions, as you'll see, leading to some rather unsteady shots...but he definitely caught the tone of the day...

[play film: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RNeV7ljT\\_w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RNeV7ljT_w) ]

As you can see from the film, feeding is a fairly low tech affair – a bottle, some 3mm rope, and a garden-twine dispenser as a spool. We also had a second spool with a plastic camping cup on the end of the rope, in which could be placed small snacks and treats, or medications such as painkillers. When he swam the Channel for the first time in 1875, Captain Matthew Webb was fortified by beef tea, the occasional slice of bread and butter, and regular nips of brandy. He also celebrated his successful swim with a glass of port wine, and then later, a cigar...so hardly the modern athlete! The first woman to swim the Channel – Gertrude Ederle, in 1926 – supped on chicken broth and at one point gnawed on a leg of fried chicken. For her first swim, she also had a four-piece band on board the boat who Ederle instructed to play 'real American jazz – hard-boiled music. Nothing in a minor chord for me.' Sadly, the musicians got ferociously sea-sick and were replaced by a gramophone for her successful swim.





The musicians, brandy, bread and butter and deep fried meat have now given way to specialist ‘designer’ technical foods that enable you to take in maximum energy whilst placing the stomach and intestines under minimal stress. Like most swimmers, I use one that is almost 100% maltodextrin – a complex carbohydrate in unflavoured

powdered form. This is mixed up in advance with water at double the recommended strength, along with a splash of blackcurrant squash for flavouring (and I should say that I had so much of this during my Channel swim that after my swim, it was weeks before I could bring myself to consume anything blackcurrant flavoured!). Then, on the swim, where a single feed might involve 300mls of drink, the crew add 150 mls of the double strength mix to a drinks bottle, add in another 150mls of hot water from a pump flask, shake...and you’re good to go. For the elite marathon swimmers, feeds are every 8-10 mins, involving a single mouthful of energy drink and taking only a few seconds. For the less speedy, most feed every 30-45 mins (I do every 30), although still aiming to be as quick as possible – stopping swimming to feed means that the body starts to cool, plus the tides may start pulling you off in the wrong direction, forcing you to make up the distance when you start swimming again.

The goal with swim nutrition is not to replace all of the calories that you are expending – during a 16 hour swim like mine, you are probably expending 8-10,000 calories of energy, and it’s simply not possible to replace all of that. Instead, you eat up and hydrate well beforehand, supplement with liquid feeds during the swim, and then rely on the body’s own learned capacities, enhanced through training, to metabolise fat for energy.

What I’ve described so far is swimming nutrition as necessary energy; food as functional fuel, calculated and delivered in a quite mechanical way.

But as a group of food sociologists will not be surprised to hear, food in marathon swimming is SO much more than this, and I want to focus briefly on 2 aspects of this: food as comfort; and food as sociality.

The idea of food for comfort is something that tends to be frowned upon in these anti-obesity times; ‘comfort eating’ is much more commonly seen as a ‘problem’ or a psychological flaw to be eradicated in the relentless attack on obesity. But what these condemnations ignore is what we all already know – that sometimes food really does make you feel better, and that that’s not always a bad thing. And in my research with swimmers, as well as through my own experiences, I have been struck by the powerful comforts of food, and not just to satiate hunger. This is evidenced in the way that most swimmers supplement their liquid feeds with small, easily digestible snacks – common favourites include: half a banana; a bite-size milky way; a chocolate mini roll; a tinned peach slice; some runny porridge or rice pudding; and of course, a couple of jelly babies. These snacks help by putting something solid into an empty stomach; they can sooth the tongue and mouth, which become swollen and ulcerated after prolonged exposure to seawater; they provide a bit of variety from the monotony of the flavoured drink; they can offer reassuring resonances with nostalgic experiences of care and comfort (a cup of tea). I think of this as the comfort of small things – they are essentially treats, and it is nice to be treated. On a more emotional level, even the imagination of food can be comforting – as with the big green jelly baby...or any other distracting food fantasy. I don’t believe that I gain a material energy boost through the imagined consumption of the big green jelly baby or that the mind produces and controls matter in that way. But the big green jelly baby passes the time happily, and - perhaps its most marked effect – it makes me laugh. I’m not sure what a psychotherapist would have to say about a middle aged, childless woman like myself gaining inspiration from the consumption of a confectionary infant, but the fact is: jelly babies are inherently funny, and a bit ridiculous. It helps to lighten the mood. And this is why Sam’s designation of ‘the hour of power’ in the film is so brilliant – it makes us all laugh at a difficult moment.

Post-swim food is equally and idiosyncratically comfort oriented. In the course of the research, I have been asking swimmers what they want to eat after a long training swim. The answers ranged from the generic (McDonalds; an all-day breakfast) to the highly specific (a hard boiled egg rolled in pepper and salt; a Mr Kipling cherry bakewell tart). In my case, I turn first to specialist recovery shakes that aid the body’s repair; without it, I find that my arms twitch hopelessly at night. But then I seek out

foods which provide both comfort and restoration simultaneously – cheese on toast (my personal favourite); cold custard and bananas; mint-chocolate chip ice-cream. Post-swim, it seems, I have the palate of an 8 year old. (Although in my defence, this is strictly immediately post swim, and I focus on much more sensible nutrition at meal times more generally – cereals, salads, vegetable proteins etc).



And then, there is food as sociality. One of the key aspects to the process of feeding during a swim is that you have to be *fed*. Feeds are a point of connection, however briefly, to the crew who are taking care of you....and it is nice to be taken care of. Feeds are also an opportunity to make broader connections – in the film, you can hear Peter and Sam calling out the names of people who are sending messages via Twitter and text, and who are following the swim online via the shipping websites. There is also a post-training swim sociality through food that is a key element of the training culture. In Dover, for example, where large groups of swimmers gather to train every



weekend through the summer, long harbour swims of 6 or 7 hours are followed by the liberal sharing of treats and snacks; during these times, those who've had a bad day on the water receive reassurance and encouragement; good swims are celebrated. Food is one aspect of the currency of this sociality; the person who comes bearing cakes will never be short of swimming companions.

There's so much more, and perhaps more seriously, that I could say about food and swimming: the ways in which body fat is valued as a performance asset within the community even while it's despised outside of it; the lack of reliable scientific research about nutritional needs within such a minority sport; the lack of discussion within the community of food quality and provenance in favour of the more immediate imperative for energy intake. But these are more serious conversations for another day and these are all things that I'm working on elsewhere as part of my research. So, I want to end with a brief list of three things I didn't know about food

before I took up swimming, but which I know now... So if you ever decide to do a long sea swim, this is my advice to you...

1. If you want to get the taste of salt out of your mouth after a swim, look no further than a black jelly baby, or a red wiggly worm.
2. Never eat a raw tomato after a long sea swim - the inside of the mouth is raw and swollen, and the acid REALLY hurts.
3. And finally, never underestimate the power of a big, green jelly baby, or indeed, the comfort of small things, when you're in the middle of a big thing.