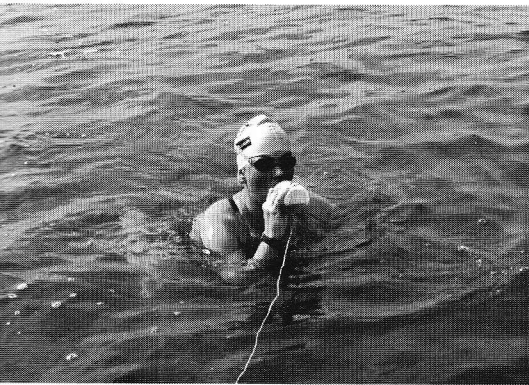


# Becoming a channel swimmer



It is 10am on a Sunday morning in early May; the clouds are low and grey, and a stiff wind is licking across the water in Dover Harbour, blowing white spray off the tops of the waves as they wash up the stony beach. I am one of over 50 people standing around at the top of the beach, stripping down to our swimming costumes, and chattering apprehensively. We are all training for English Channel swims, but on mornings like this, it doesn't always seem like the great idea it was when we signed up for it. Someone blows a whistle to get our attention, and we are given our instructions for the day by the volunteer beach crew who oversee the training sessions – we are to swim either 5km, or for 1 hour 45 minutes, whichever comes first. The water, we are told, is a nippy 10.5 degrees – the cold winter and late spring have left the temperatures several degrees lower than in previous years, but our Channel swims are only months away so cold is not allowed to interrupt the incremental build-up of time in the water. We line up to have Vaseline applied to our armpits and under costume straps to stop chafing, and then head for the water's edge. There is a moment, right then, when each of us wants to turn around. I torment myself with the thought that in less than 10 minutes, I could be back in my campervan drinking hot coffee and reading a good book. But peer pressure prevails, and we wade into the water, some diving in immediately, while others enter slowly, splashing water up their arms, body and face to try and lessen the shock of the cold on the body. I walk up to my knees and then throw myself forwards in a dive – like ripping off a band-aid. My body reacts involuntarily to the

cold – I begin hyperventilating; a sharp ache burns across my forehead like eating cold ice-cream; muscles contract sharply, drawing my hands into a claw. I keep my head under and force myself to breathe out in a slow trickle of bubbles, taking a few quick short strokes to stretch the muscles back out. For 10 minutes, I feel desperately sorry for myself, but then gradually, I find a rhythm, and by 30 minutes, I know I'll make the swim. At the end of the first hour, the sun pokes through the clouds and the water flattens; I entertain myself with the patterns of the sunlight passing through the water and enjoy the intoxicating, rhythmic motion and sound of swimming.

An hour and 40 minutes later, I beach myself inelegantly on the pebbles, and stumble clumsily up the beach, my feet, hands and face numb from the cold. Like everyone, I head straight for my bag, and immediately start changing. No-one talks – it takes concentration when you're cold, and we all know that we only have a 5-10 minute window to get wrapped up warm before the cold blood in our arms and legs starts circulating back to the core organs, producing a temporary drop in body temperature that causes uncontrollable shivering. I am soon wrapped up in sweatshirts, a padded coat and two woolly hats, and am concentrating hard, trying to pour hot chocolate from a flask into a cup with shaking hands and drink it without spilling. By 20 minutes later, the beach is littered with clusters of heavily wrapped up people, some in sleeping bags or bundled in blankets, warming themselves in the sun; people walking along the beachfront stop and stare at us, bemused. We share around the snacks and hot drinks that we have brought and laze about chatting about our swims and about training; advice and tips are exchanged; good swims are celebrated and those who had a difficult day get encouragement and support; we reassure each other that it will be warmer soon. I look around at my oddly dressed, still-quivering swimming colleagues and can't believe my luck, both at being part of this amazing, eccentric community of swimmers, and that this personal Channel swimming project has recently become a fully fledged (auto-) ethnographic research project.

Funded by the ESRC over the next two and half years, I am researching the process of becoming (or trying to become) a Channel swimmer through the observation of training sites, interviews with swimmers, and the analysis of training blogs and other written accounts, as well as through my own bodily experience of the process. The fieldwork will be carried out across a range of locations, including specialist training camps in Malta, Jersey and Cork, and with training communities throughout the UK, and in Australia and the US. I'm going to be investigating what motivates people to engage with an extreme sport like Channel swimming; how the body needs to change (be changed) in order to be able to do the swim; what identity work is done through those processes; and what the gendered dimensions of those processes and transformations (or attempted transformations) are. In particular, I'm interested in exploring the gendered implications of purposefully developing a body that has both ample body fat (for its insulating properties) and upper body musculature, how that embodiment is (mis)read both within and outside of the Channel swimming community, and what this can tell us about what constitutes a 'fit' body, and a body that 'fits', in the contemporary context of a 'war on obesity'. The project is a very new departure for me, bringing work and leisure together around something that I am intensely involved in personally, whilst at the same time centralizing my own body in my research in ways which can be potentially, and unpredictably, discomforting. But regardless of whether or not I successfully become a Channel swimmer this summer, the whole thing is an exciting adventure that I wouldn't have missed for the world... perhaps with the exception of those chilly, anticipatory moments on the shoreline...

**Karen Throsby**  
University of Warwick

You can read Karen's training blog @ [www.thelongswim.blogspot.com/](http://www.thelongswim.blogspot.com/)

