

COOK STRAIT

BY SCOTT COLEMAN

On February 8, 2007, I became the oldest person and only the third American to complete the 16-nautical-mile Cook Strait Swim.

I depart Miami on Super Bowl Sunday with Gene Sardzinski, who has crewed for me on all my long swims. We arrive in New Zealand on their national independence day.

After a nap and lunch, we phone Philip Rush, the organizer of the swim, who holds the record for a three-way English Channel Crossing. He tells us I will be the first swimmer that day. A doctor doing research on hypothermia

some sort of New Zealand grease. Gene applies sunscreen before the grease, and I hear Philip comment that he has bullets for sharks. They load gear into the inflatable, and I step in. It is still dark.

We approach the rocky shore but do not land. “Just swim over to those rocks,” Philip says. I jump in. The water is cool. About a minute later, I begin swimming.

At first, my goggles leak. After the third feed, I ask Gene to prepare my other goggles. “Three-point-four kilometers in the first hour,” Philip yells. I feel good and pick up the pace. There is a bright sun.

As we get closer, the tidal flow picks up to five knots — too fast to swim against — so I swim at an angle toward the shore. I am exhausted and have trouble focusing. After being in the water for nine hours, my instinct is to swim directly toward the goal rather than angling away from it.

At the pre-swim meeting, Philip indicated that because of the rocky coast, I would not have to land and stand up. “Just get close,” he told me. Now I wonder what that means. Philip and Gene yell at me to keep swimming. I come close but miss the island by 400 yards.

Despite the sun, my body temperature has dropped to 93 degrees. I can barely move my arms. “Follow me around the rocks,” Philip orders. The tide is flowing so fast I have trouble swimming with the inflatable. He leads me out of the current and finds an eddy. “Go swim to that point,” Philip directs. “That will be the finish.”

After 10 hours and 26 minutes, I touch the rocks and hear cheering as my nausea culminates in a huge eruption. Somehow, I swim back to the inflatable and grab hold. Philip pats me on the head, a gesture that means job well done. ■

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comes to the hotel the night before to assess my physical condition. She gives me a capsule that contains a thermometer to monitor my body temperature.

On swim day, the wake-up call comes at 3 a.m. We pack up food and gear, and go down to meet Philip, who is towing the orange inflatable boat that will accompany me. At the marina, we meet the doctor and the captain of a boat that will take us into the strait. The captain indicates we will do a north-south swim because of the tides.

The weather is perfect: flat seas and no wind. I will be feeding every 15 minutes. The thermometer checks out. Philip has brought

The water is clear, but I do not see anything. Only an occasional shadow swimming under me.

After the second hour, I feel faint and decide to slow down. My rhythm is good. I can see the shore of the south island as we inch closer. From the orange inflatable, Philip is gesturing to me. Gene handles the feedings and takes pictures.

At five-and-a-half hours, the salt water has taken its toll, and I vomit. Not terrible, but I drink only water at the next feeding. The water temperature is changing rapidly here. Maybe it’s the currents. It interrupts my rhythm and wears me down.