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The Lady of the Lakes

English Channel Swimmer
Bridgette Hobart Janeczko
Takes on the Finger Lakes
to Promote Her Alma Mater

By Brendan O'Meara

Sunrise Sunset
Teach a Kid to Fish
Family Tales

The Lady of the Lakes

English Channel Swimmer Bridgette Hobart Janeczko Takes on the Finger Lakes to Promote Her Alma Mater

By Brendan O'Meara

Bridgette Hobart, a young woman with natural skill for swimming open water, found her stroke. Hobart was so fluid it was as if she was part of the water. In 1979, still in high school, she was aptly named Athlete of the Week by the *Press & Sun-Bulletin*, the newspaper from her hometown of Binghamton, New York. She told the reporter with the optimism shared by the youthful, “So

when I’m sixty-one, it’ll be fifty years in swimming and I’m going to do the English Channel.”

She grew up near the shores of the Finger Lakes, fresh waters where the weeds in the shallows reach out and brush your underbelly as if to pull you down beneath the surface.

Hobart was never short of ambition, always an “achiever,” as friends were wont to call her. And everyone

who read the story about her determined goal of swimming for twelve, thirteen, fourteen straight hours from England to France left hoping that she would, in fact, complete the swim.

Her step-grandmother, a fiery woman whose ever-shortening cigarettes crackled a brilliant orange right down to the filter, clipped the article and stowed it away where it would remain for close to thirty years.

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Up for the challenge: Bridgette Hobart Janeczko, accompanied by her husband Bob, swims Canandaigua Lake, the first lake in her bid to swim all of New York's nine swimmable Finger Lakes in one season.

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The morning after: Bridgette Hobart Janeczko holding the pebbles she collected at her landing spot in France, a tradition for swimmers who have crossed the English Channel.



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The open water seemed boundless and a frontier worth exploring. Back when Hobart told the newspaper about her goal, open water swimming hadn't been the ubiquitous test of endurance it is today, but rather an esoteric, fringe sport left to people with a gift for fish-like ease in the water.

Man has looked to the West and in that gaze saw a destiny worth manifesting. Man has looked up at K2 and Everest with thoughts of reaching the earth's ceiling. And, long ago, man looked out across vast expanses of open water in pursuit of the distant horizon, a Siren's call luring him farther out to sea.

In the late 1800s, man saw a new aquatic challenge, a new test. He looked out over the English Channel and knew France and England were separated by such a narrow strip of water that it could be touched if they had courage enough to stretch past known comfort, to reach.

Years ago, in 1926, a twenty-one year old named Gertrude "Trudy" Ederle, daughter to a New York City butcher, had not only the natural gift of swimming the American crawl, but an uncanny, inversely proportional reaction to distance swimming: the farther she went, the stronger and faster she became. That year she became the first woman to swim across the English Channel.

People had tried—and mainly failed—at swimming the Channel. It was only natural that a distance swimmer of her silken abilities be coached to swim the Channel, to

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At the finish: Says Bridgette Hobart Janeczko of her Cayuga Lake swim, "Claire [de Boer, above right] surprised me at the end by hitching a ride out to my support boat and jumping in as a support swimmer for an hour, then met up with me after my finish...Claire is the first woman to swim Cayuga lake—31 years ago—so it was awesome having her come and support me."

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become the first woman to navigate the frigid water separating the two historic rivals in the great battles for balance of power from the Battle of Hastings to Napoleon's conquests.

Once bitter enemies, the two had become fierce allies in the War to End All Wars that had ended on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month just eight years earlier.

Mines, relics of the Great War, still trolled below the surface, a bellicose reminder of how dangerous the Channel can be. Threats always lurk below the surface.

Ederle failed in her first attempt amid heated controversy. Did her Channel coach sabotage her run out of jealousy as a bitter old man who couldn't stand how someone could swim the Channel using the American crawl, let alone a woman?

She would try again, in 1926,

and this time make it from the shores of France to the beaches of Dover, England, becoming the first woman—and the fastest *person*—ever to swim the roughly twenty-four miles from coast to coast.

Ederle showed what was possible and proved to be an element of disruption opening the door for the future.

Time.

Tides rushed in and erased the footprints. Sea foam lathered beachfronts and dissolved into the surf as quickly as it surfaced. Sea mammals and fish slipped through the deep and turbulent waters. Jellyfish bobbed on the Atlantic currents, sinking low in colder weather and rising up like venomous bubbles in the warmth of day. The Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation says, "It is

incredibly rare for a Channel swimmer to be significantly affected by jellyfish. It is more of a psychological worry, rather than a real risk."

Young mothers delivered babies, old mothers passed away. Couples married, couples divorced. Space shuttles blew up, buildings burned down. Jobs took hold and didn't relent and dreams once so vivid and within reach, were pulled out with the riptide and down into the depths, swept away by ocean currents.

Bridgette Hobart Janeczko, a CPA and president of Paradigm Technology Consulting, joined the rat race and saw her visions of open water swimming flutter away as more pressing engagements filled her ledger. She went through different phases: bodybuilding, running, but swimming, something so prevalent in her youth, rarely came up for air.

Her grandmother, still pulling long drags off her cigarettes in 2007, developed lung cancer and didn't have long to live. She told Hobart Janeczko not to give the terminally ill get-well cards because, "That's denial."

Hobart Janeczko, then forty-five, didn't give her grandmother get-well cards, but she did visit her in Binghamton most weekends. That's when she rummaged through old newspaper clips and saw the quote from the *Press & Sun-Bulletin*, "...I'm going to do the English Channel."

Her grandmother read the part that said, "So when I'm 61..." and told her granddaughter, "You better get going on that. If you manage to find time to come to Binghamton to watch me die, you might as well start swimming again."

Hobart Janeczko said she'd keep her word.

And so she did.

Hobart Janeczko slowly reacquainted herself with the sport in warmer temperatures. Twelve miles in Key West, twenty-four miles in Tampa Bay, ten kilometers in Bermuda. Each climb north brought the temperature of

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the water closer to the Channel.

While training, Bob Janeczko, her husband of thirteen years, paddled beside her in a touring kayak and provided her with food and water, keeping her safe from boat traffic and monitoring her stroke rate, sixty per minute being perfect. He wouldn't paddle in the Channel, but he'd keep an eye out all the same from the pilot boat.

The waters of the English Channel were fifty-two degrees as Hobart Janeczko plunged into them near Dover, England.

It was July of 2013, six years after the passing of her grandmother, whose dying wish was for her granddaughter to swim again and find balance in her life.

Hobart Janeczko started brilliantly, one stroke right after the other in perfect rhythm. Her husband counted her strokes: sixty per minute, sixty per minute, sixty per minute.

One hour passed, two, three, four. She reached the terrible middle where Dover is no longer in view and neither is Cap Gris Nez on the French Coast. Janeczko kept his eyes fixed on the water: sixty per minute, sixty per minute. Perfect.

Hobart Janeczko kept swimming, noticing below her the viscous blobs of jellyfish. They were everywhere, like zombies that hadn't noticed fresh meat nearby. So she swam over them, stealthily as a shark.

Five hours in, six hours in, and the water warmed as the sun beat down on the surface. Sensing the newfound warmth, the jellyfish floated to the surface. Hobart Janeczko, once swimming above them, now swam amongst them.

Janeczko recalls, "I believe we had been seeing jellyfish already by the time we got to that six-hour feed. Within minutes of that, though, they were there in real numbers—a jellyfish every few feet for as far as I could see in every direction. No way to avoid them—so Bridgette was just swimming through them."

Thousands of them spread over the surface of the water and the ones nearest her made their presence known. The jellyfish stung her again and again, but still she kept on to what she thought was her constant rhythm, sixty strokes, always breathing on the right.

Her husband kept count: Sixty strokes, sixty strokes, fifty-some strokes. Ten minutes into the field of jellies, he counted forty-eights, forty-nines. Something was amiss. Her left side was greatly impaired. A handicapped left side means she can't fully turn her head to breathe on the right side.

It didn't take long for Janeczko to see what was happening: the jellies' stings had paralyzed his wife. If he didn't step in soon, there wouldn't be a way for her to get a full breath; she could even drown.

He hustled to the pilot and told him that the swim was over, that he had to pull her out. The pilot looked incredulous because the great pace Hobart Janeczko had made up to that point had been textbook Channel swimming. *See you in France.*

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FRI. SEPT 25, 2015

- 4 p.m. Food and Vendor Booths Open
- 5 p.m. Hot Air Balloon Launch
- 7:30 p.m. Soccer TBA
- 7:30 p.m. Prism Concert
- 8-11 p.m. Square Dance: Cowanesque Valley Boys Pavilion at Smythe Park
- Time TBA Chris Clark Bicycle Stunt Show

SAT. SEPT 26, 2015

- 6-10 a.m. Breakfast Mansfield Fire Hall
- 6 a.m. Hot Air Balloon Launch
- 7:30-8:15 a.m. Run Past Hunger 5K Run/Walk (Registration)
- 8:30 a.m. Run Past Hunger 5K Run/Walk (Start)
- 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Book Sale Mansfield Free Public Library
- 10:30 a.m. 1890s/ MU Homecoming Parade Main St.
- 11 to 2 p.m. Alumni Tent Party
- 11:30 a.m. Alumni Softball Game
- Noon East West Karate Demonstration
- 1 p.m. Football: MU vs Navy (Crowning of Homecoming King and Queen at Halftime)
- 1:30 p.m. Patsy Cline Tribute by Penny Eckman
- 4 p.m. Clyde Peeling's Reptiland
- 5 p.m. Hot Air Balloon Launch
- 6 p.m. High School Soccer - JV Boys
- 6:30 p.m. Women's Field Hockey - Van Norman Field
- 7:30 p.m. Prism Concert Steadman Theater
- 7:30 p.m. High School Soccer - Varsity Boys
- 8:30 p.m. World's First Night Football Game Re-enactment
- 8:45 p.m. Fireworks (Approximately) Smythe Park

This Schedule Brought To You By



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Once a swimmer is touched by another person the swim is over, and Janeczko could stand back no longer.

"From where I was standing, it was an easy call," he says.

Six hours into the swim, from the water mined with thousands of jellyfish, Hobart Janeczko was pulled aboard the boat, which turned back toward England and away from Cap Griz Nez.

She didn't know she wasn't in France. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We're halfway," Janeczko said.

They gave her some tea and some Benadryl. The approximately two-hour trip back to England stung worse than the jellyfish.

She vowed to return.

More focused than ever, but saddled by a fear of the ever-present jellyfish, Hobart Janeczko waited one year, and, on September 14, 2014, at age fifty-two, she made her second trip. This time she came equipped with a team that had an Australian swimmer and pharmacist who could wield an epi-pen should the jellyfish strike again.

The water was warmer by a few degrees, and her stroke rates were as steady as her heartbeat. While charging through the changing shifts in current, Hobart Janeczko had the knowledge and confidence of significant long swims behind her. She had completed the 28.5-mile swim around Manhattan in eight hours and twenty minutes. She slayed the Catalina Channel's 20.2 miles in eleven hours and twenty-seven minutes. Should she complete this English Channel swim she would become just the 102nd person ever to complete this Triple Crown of open water swimming.

Sixty strokes per minute, sixty per minute, Hobart Janeczko passed the six-hour mark marred by the jellyfish a year prior and kept on. Devoid of the drama from the previous year, her stroke held pace as she drew closer and closer to France.

The skies were clear with a little haze frosting the air. The lighthouse on Cap Gris Nez stood proud like a waiting sentinel. Seagulls cawed overhead as the sun set behind them to the west.

Hobart Janeczko didn't make landfall on a sandy shore, but instead found natural land on rocks. Her body had knifed through the water for thirteen hours and twenty-eight minutes. She breached the water and crawled atop the rocks and raised her hand up to the sky.

What next? What can follow the most iconic open water swim in the world? What could possibly hold more meaning?

For Hobart Janeczko, a graduate of Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, and someone who grew up near the Finger Lakes, her next task would be decidedly domestic. She would swim all nine swimmable Finger Lakes (two are

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un-swimmable since they're used for drinking water) in one season.

One man, Russell Chafee, had reportedly swum them all in the 1950s and 1960s, but never in one season. He's credited as the first man to swim Cape Cod Bay, and now Hobart Janeczko planned to swim all the lakes he did in a tighter window.

She conquered the 8 Bridges Swim down the Hudson River, seven days, seven stages, one hundred and twenty miles. This became the most important measuring stick because of the successive nature of the race.

"I never doubted I could do any lake by itself, so going into the 8 Bridges, I learned I could swim over time," Hobart Janeczko says.

For this Finger Lakes swim, which she named the Nazareth Finger Lakes Challenge to promote the opening of the college's new wellness and rehabilitation institute, she recruited her roommate and swim teammate from college, Linda Annable, to ensure all wrinkles were ironed out. Annable, a sprinter in college, counted laps for Hobart Janeczko by holding signs under the water.

"She knows I'm organized," says Annable. "Give me a task and I get it done. I'll follow the rules. The last time on the boat there was too much weight on the boat. I try to be like the airlines: limit certain bags, you can't take this, you can't take that."

Hobart Janeczko has completed nearly half of the lakes already, with Cayuga being the longest to date. She had started at night and needed to wait for some partiers to speed their boats off the lake.

She swam through the dark and through weeds, but no jellyfish. Cayuga Lake's near thirty-eight miles took twenty hours and thirty-three minutes. The August Cayuga swim followed Canandaigua, Keuka, and Skaneateles lakes in July.

Seneca Lake is the last of the majors, about the same length as Cayuga, and, according to Janeczko, is "the long pole of the tent. It could be pretty cold. This is the big part. She gets Seneca done, she'll do the other ones." Scheduled for the end of August, it will be followed this month by the smaller lakes Honeoye, Conesus, Otisco, and Owasco.

Endurance swimming isn't so much a physical sport as a mental one. How else can she swim for over twenty hours and not lose her mind? She breaks it up into thirty-minute chunks and, like any good swimmer, just relaxes in the water, "like a noodle," she says.

If you let it, the water will support you, hold you up, and carry you to shore.

Award-winning writer Brendan O'Meara is the author of *Six Weeks in Saratoga: How Three-Year-Old Filly Rachel Alexandra Beat the Boys and Became Horse of the Year.*