

This account taken from Oliver's Blog:

New York World Record – 28/9/2011

My first thoughts are to thank the team that made this possible. I had two great kayakers, Margaret Mann and the legendary Richard Clifford. I had wonderful crew support from my great buddy Knowles Tivendale, who brought his whole family out to NY from Melbourne, and my ever supportive brother-in-law Tim Freeman. Logistically the swim was masterminded by the dynamo Morty Berger who plotted and planned the course and tides to perfection. And my constant inspiration and motivator my darling wife Vickie.

I'm not a believer in fate, I've always felt you make your own choices and luck but somehow the closer the swim came the more it seemed to transform from a simple race into a genuine belief that circumstances had conspired to make the record attempt a reality. When I first was invited to race I believed the record well beyond me, after all, only the previous year two professional long distance champions had fallen considerably short, if Peter Stoychev the record holder for the fastest English Channel crossing and Mark Warkentin, a 2008 Olympic swimmer, had failed, I didn't fancy my chances. However the tides were better this year, plenty of rain and optimal lunar influences meant we had some of the most favourable conditions for years, at least on paper. Lessons had been learnt from the previous years race and several areas for improvement were anticipated. In the days before the swim I swam in the New York waters and I found myself not only believing that I could break the record but perhaps it was meant to be this way.

I kept my feet on the ground, I knew I would have to earn any success and I had an extremely competent rival, Rondi Davies, to beat also. Rondi is an Australian living in New York and a very experienced, successful long distance swimmer.

The morning of the race arrived and I felt excited and only a little nervous, keen more than anything to get the race underway. The start time was 2.14 pm to coincide with the tidal movements, Rondi would start approx 10min ahead to ensure we had no assistance by drafting or pushing each other along. The weather was overcast but warm and the water at about 21deg very comfortable, ideal for a long hard race. Rondi started bang on schedule, the tide was starting to build up the Harlem and before long she was out of sight. Our boat hovered in position, I had rinsed and re-rinsed the goggles, we drifted slightly and had to remanouvere the boat, exactly 11min after Rondi they counted me down and I started the swim.

The Manhattan swim can be divided into 3 roughly equal parts being the 3 main river systems. I had studied the time predictions and knew where I needed to be in each river to be on track for the record. The first river was the Harlem. There is always a risk of going out too hard in a race, especially when the adrenaline surges, I wanted to swim hard throughout but I knew I needed to get into a steady rhythm and work through the first part of the race. I felt very comfortable at the start, the Harlem was a great loosener,

there are a dozen or so bridges to swim under that cross the river, each bridge you pass makes you feel like you are making progress and provides easy landmarks along the way. My feeding regime was energy drinks every 30minutes with gels hourly. The first 30min flew by and when Richard signalled the first feed I couldn't believe we had been going 30minutes already. At the 1 hour feed I grabbed a quick drink but as I kicked away my right foot cramped. It was a potential disaster, I've never been bothered by cramps in the open water, I was well hydrated, I had been resting up and staying off my feet, this shouldn't have been a problem! If the cramps got worse I would be reduced to arms only swimming and could forget about winning the race let alone the record. I tried to stretch my calf while I swam while easing back my kick strength. The cramp finally settled but every now and again it twinged and each time it sent a surge of anxiety through me as I thought is this it? Is this the end of my race?

The upper part of the Harlem went by quickly, we rounded the tip of Manhattan and I knew we were bang on time - approx 1 & 3/4 hrs. Morty had warned that getting into the Hudson might be hard work, the river would be in full flow and may be working against us coming out of the Harlem. As it was we passed under the final bridge and I felt a great surge of fresh water hit me from my right. We were pushed south, I knew the tide would weaken the further we travelled, we had to make the most of the help while we had it, I also knew it might help Rondi more than me as although I had closed her lead down slightly she had reached the Hudson 6 minutes earlier and would have had more time in the fast water before it eased off. The Hudson had been a tough slog in June, it was the last part of the race and by then my eyes were so sore I could barely see my kayakers let alone the shoreline. This time we made great early progress and again the landmarks - the George Washington Bridge and city skyscrapers passed by at regular intervals. The Hudson wasn't reading the script though, the wind was picking up from the South and East and blowing against us. Great swells of waves started to drive into us. I was starting to feel the effects of a hard 3hrs of swimming and the conditions were making it even tougher. It takes so much more effort to swim in choppy conditions and I had to concentrate on holding as smooth a stroke as possible while not being deterred by the rough water. I told myself I still had a trailing current so not to worry about the 'lumpy' conditions. Eventually the Manhattan piers came into sight and the Battery (the southern tip of NY) loomed in the distance. We moved close into the shore and I hit the 4hour feed right at the bottom of NY which I knew meant we were still on target. Richard got hit by some huge backwash from a ferry and disappeared momentarily from view, I was being tossed around like the proverbial cork but I wasn't stopping for anything and a second later Richard reappeared not looking any the worse for the excitement. We reached the enormous Staten Island ferry which very kindly waited until we had passed before pulling out and we entered the final part of the race, the East River.

The sun was setting as we reached the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, at the next feed I asked Richard how far ahead Rondi was, "2min" was the reply which I thought meant I had nearly caught her but in fact she was still 9 minutes ahead and had made time on me in the Hudson. She continued to pull away until my overall lead was reduced to only 7

seconds. With no way of knowing where Rondi was and believing myself well ahead of her my concern had switched to the record. I was telling myself I had 1hr to go if I kept on pace. I was feeling exhausted, but I knew this was where I would 'earn' this swim, I thought of Grant my cousin who I dedicated this swim to, I thought of Vickie, I told myself I would never have this opportunity again and I found some extra strength. It was soon completely dark and I was relying on the city lights and glow sticks on the kayaks to see anything. We hit 5hours, 30min to go, I told myself. I stole a look up and saw the large Queensboro bridge in the distance. I knew that was some way short of the finish and just hoped the East river was still flowing fast beneath me. I drove on and on, every time I felt myself fading I gritted my teeth and lifted the effort. We hit 5 hrs and 30min and I still couldn't see the finish. Unknown to me the current had dropped to a crawl and if I was going to break the record it would be with no help at the end right when I needed it. Richard egged me on one last time, "You have 1 mile to go, this is it, I want to see you vomiting when you cross the line!"

I was mentally ticking off the minutes, 5 minutes passed and in the dark I had no idea where we were. 10minutes passed, I was so completely spent I thought I'd have to roll onto my back with exhaustion, 12min, 13min, I really had no idea how much further to go or how long I had been swimming, I just knew I was almost out of time. I could hear Margaret yelling at my right, I could see Richard smacking his kayak and waving me forward, faster, faster he was motioning. Suddenly my right hand smacked into the side of Margaret's kayak and I looked up, there was the official support boat, literally right in front of me. Morty was yelling at me "here, here you have to finish up here" I spun my arms 5 more times and crossed the finish line. I looked up, utterly spent. Morty leant over the side and said "You did it, Rondi broke the record and you just beat her time by about a minute". I heard him clearly but I asked him to repeat himself anyway, I almost couldn't believe it. It was the hardest most intense race of my life, I had never pushed myself that hard for so long before and I had beaten the 16year old record by 1minute and 23sec or as Richard liked to point out later, "actually you beat a 10minute old record by 45seconds".

After 5 and 3/4hrs I beat Shelley's time by less than a minute and a half! So many things had to go right for this swim, the tides, the currents, the conditions, water temp, weather. It was plotted down to the last minute and I was guided round by possibly the most experienced Manhattan kayaker in the world! Only the rough conditions in the Hudson were less than optimal and I swam at my absolute limit for the whole day. Maybe it was meant to be, maybe I made my own luck, maybe fate smiled on me. One day, next year, or the year after or maybe several years from now someone will beat my time, you can't be the fastest forever. Shelley was the fastest for 16years, Rondi, 10 minutes. But for now I have the record. I couldn't have done it without Richard, Morty, my whole support crew, a bit of luck and a lot of work. It still hasn't really sunk in, I'm not really sure what to make of it but I like what my twin brother said when I spoke to him afterwards "Well it's nice to know what I'm capable of".

Material taken from Cross Currents Newsletter (NYC Swim)

MANHATTAN ISLAND RECORD SWIM Q&A WITH RONDI DAVIES AND OLIVER WILKINSON

On September 28, history was made. After a 16-year run, Australian Shelly Taylor-Smith's record for the fastest swim around Manhattan Island came down in a flurry of white water and long strokes during NYC Swim's Manhattan Record Attempt.

An Australian-American who lives in New York, Rondi Davies, 41, broke Taylor-Smith's record in a time of 5:44:47 seconds. She had an 11-minute head start against competitor Ollie Wilkinson so held the new overall record holder for 10 minutes, before Ollie finished in 5:44:02, a scant 1 minute 27 seconds faster than Taylor-Smith's 1995 standard.

Both swimmers have appeared in this newsletter before (Rondi was profiled in 2005 , and Ollie in September, just before the record swim.) In this edition of *Cross Currents*, we find out what propelled them to their record finishes.

NYC Swim: *Rondi, you also participated in a record attempt last summer, swimming with legendary Bulgarian swimmer Petar Stoychev , who holds the record for the fastest English Channel crossing, and Mark Warkentin, eighth place finisher in the 10K open water event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Aside from actually breaking the record this time, how was this year's race different from last summer's?*



RD: Last year was a big unknown in many ways. I treated it somewhat like a test swim with a little bit of hope the record may fall, but not too much concern. I swam hard, had a great time, and was thrilled to be in an event with Petar Stoychev, who is an idol to me. The event was on September 10, so we swam under the Tribute in Lights at the World Trade Center, and the Staten Island Ferry veered off course for us (which is unheard of). To top it off, Petar and I raced along the Harlem River together for the last 45 minutes of the swim.

This year was a lot more low-key, which I really liked. We learned so much from last year, so it was just a matter of getting down to business.

The event was incredibly well organized and the team of people on the water were exceptional. In particular, I had an amazing crew that included two kayakers and four friends on the support boat who were busy the whole time cheering and looking out for me. It was great to swim with Ollie and meet him and his team. I had some anxieties about the water since it had not settled down after the floods from Tropical Storm Irene. The temperatures had been uneven and there was a lot of large debris. But that all worked out fine.

NYC Swim: *Ollie, you finished fourth in the June MIMS. How was this swim different?*



OW: June was my first experience with MIMS, and it was a huge learning curve from the point of view of familiarity with the waterways, the peculiarity of the different river systems, how the race was organized, and so on. I was also swimming the June race with the mentality of just completing it, first and foremost, with doing well against the field as a secondary consideration. In the Match Race, I had none of the anxiety of an unknown event and my mentality was to win the race and finish feeling that I had spent my all trying to break the record.

NYC Swim: *How did you prepare for the race?*

RD: I did a 100+ mile, 7-day stage swim called 8 Bridges along the Hudson River 10 weeks before the record attempt. I had some decent fitness before 8 Bridges, but it definitely gave me some great endurance. After some weeks of rest, I got back to training with two workouts a week focused on quality and speed work. I also did some open water races and increased my mileage (peaking at 60 kilometers per week). I also kept up with some running, about 20 to 30 miles per week.

OW: My preparation for this race focused on both kilometers in training and speed work over middle distances. I was still covering 45 to 50 kilometers per week, but weekday sessions were in the pool with a moderate to high intensity in most sessions and then longer aerobic swims on the weekends in lakes to maintain the open water training. I also had an interim race at the start of September – the 10.5-mile lake Windermere swim, which I knew would take about 4 hours. I wanted to race as hard as I could in that event to practice swimming at a higher intensity for longer than I am used to. It was a final chance to fine-tune my feeding regime that I hadn't got quite right in June

NYC Swim: *What did you focus on during the swim?*

OW: I broke the swim into three stages. The first stage was the Harlem, where I tried to maintain a fast but steady tempo, working into the swim. My plan was to get into the Hudson feeling comfortable but in good time. The second stage in the Hudson was the key stage. I expected to feel tired in this section and knew the water could be choppy. I tried to focus on maintaining the tempo without hurting myself and keeping my technique efficient, particularly when the water got rougher. The third stage was the East River. I figured if I could get myself there in 4 hours or 4 hours and 15 minutes, then the record was on and the focus was simply to swim as hard and fast as possible to the end. Every time I felt my tempo drop, I had to pick up the pace. I tried to use any thought process and motivation I could to force myself to swim hard to the finish. The East River was not fun!

RD: I focused on meeting the landmarks at the given times, so I knew if I was on pace or not. It was really nice to know the course so well because as soon as I ticked one landmark off the list, I was focused on reaching the next. I also tried to keep up-tempo songs in my head that kept my stroke rate up. There were a few times when I realized I had a really slow song playing so I would change the track.

NYC Swim: *What was the toughest part of the race?*

RD: Between 34th Street and the Battery in the Hudson we ran into some very large swells from the evening ferry traffic. At points I was getting launched into the air and it felt like I was slowed down by this, which was frustrating. I could see I was getting behind the record through this passage. After the Battery, the chop died down, it got dark and quiet of boat traffic, and I swam as hard as I could for the last hour and a half.

OW: The East River was the toughest. From the four-and-a-half-hour mark, I was swimming flat-out. I felt like I was “red-lining” it for the last hour and a quarter. Towards the end, I was so exhausted I thought I would have to roll over and stop, but I kept pushing on in the belief the record was still in reach.

NYC Swim: *What did you eat and drink during the swim?*

RD: I had feedings every 20 minutes of sports drinks, Gu, bananas, and ibuprofen.

OW: I used a Maltodextrin energy drink every 30 minutes and PowerBar gels every hour starting from the 30-minute feed.

NYC Swim: *How did it feel to break the record?*

RD: The final stretch through the East River and Hell Gate seemed to take forever. I knew I'd be close to or would just miss the record, so I was particularly thrilled once I finished and saw I had broken it.

Growing up as a swimmer in Australia, Shelley Taylor-Smith was a household name. She's a very accomplished marathon swimmer who has done a lot for the sport, in particular for women's visibility and recognition. Her record stood for 16 years, which made it feel very out-of-reach. For these reasons it's very special to me to have broken it, and joining the record books with her for this particular swim is a thrill and a privilege.

OW: Unreal! I had to ask Morty to repeat himself even though I heard him the first time. A part of me felt like I was going to break it and was relieved to have made it. Another part of me still can't quite believe it.

NYC Swim: *Do you think your record will be broken next season?*

RD: There's a great crop of young and eager open water swimmers out there, so I have no doubt the record will be broken again soon. I'm not sure we'll have such a good tide in 2012, but it should surely get taken down in 2013 or 2014.

OW: Morty told me the tides wouldn't be good for at least two years, so hopefully not next season. But at some stage it's inevitable. Shelley had the record for 16 years, Rondi just 10 minutes. With a bit of luck I'll have it for a couple of years. Is a decade too much to ask?