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SPORTS

Cowichan double swimmers endured hallucinations, sleep and hypothermia



Susan Simmons embarks on the 70-kilometre Cowichan Lake Double on Aug. 22. — Image Credit: Brian Mycroft Photo

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by [Travis Paterson](#) - Saanich News
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There were hallucinations, the scare of falling asleep mid-stroke and hypothermia.

But amidst it all, there was no quitting as marathon swimmers [Alex Cape](#) and [Susan Simmons](#) accomplished a 70-kilometre Cowichan Lake double: a non-stop, 31-hour adventure from Friday, Aug. 22 to Saturday, Aug. 23.

“The both of us are beat up, we’re tired,” said Simmons, whose neck was so chafed it was still cushioned under a heap of fresh gauze and bandages five days later.

The Victoria duo started and ended the epic swim on the beach at Lake Cowichan, and were

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still recovering nearly two weeks later.

While the two are awaiting confirmation that the swim is among the top 15 per cent of open water



distances ever completed, there was no waiting to confirm they had joined an exclusive group of only 120 people to swim 24-hours straight.

There were a lot of mental challenges and it definitely dragged on at points, but I'm so glad we did it," said Cape, 34.

Cape reached the turnaround point of Heather Campground at about 5:30 a.m. on Saturday after a 2:45 p.m. start the previous day.

Simmons, 49, reached the same point shortly after. It was about two hours longer than the time it took them to do the same 34-km stretch in July 2013, and Cape was worried.

"The support and safety crew were comforting. I was wondering what's wrong, but they were calm," Cape said.

Each had their own safety crew of kayaks and "sherpas," a kayaker or outrigger who would run food to the swimmers from a bigger boat. And though they trained together at Thetis Lake four times a week and accomplished the incredible swim together, they experienced uniquely harrowing moments in Cowichan Lake.

"As soon as we hit 24 hours, I had my safety boat come near me so I could radio Alex and tell her, in the water," Simmons said.

Simmons, who works in Saanich, endured several hallucinations. On Saturday morning, she fought the urge to sleep and succumbed twice, all while visions of flying bats raced back and forth below her.



By Saturday evening and with just a few hours to go, Simmons witnessed the figures of angels and devils on the horizon. She knew they were hallucinations, but that didn't make them go away.

"I had to laugh in my head (when I thought): 'Am I dying? Because I keep seeing angels and devils and being told to swim to the light,'" Simmons said.

As it turned out, the light was real, where a welcoming party awaited her onshore.

Cape also experienced hallucinations during the final hours of her swim, like the changing colours of her support kayaks and multiple swimmers near the water.

To be fair, they were joined by swimmers, some for up to 10-km stretches.

"There was just so much to it, so many little things that had to happen, and so much trust that I had to give to my safety team and crew," Cape said.

Simmons agreed. "I was totally cognitive, but I couldn't make a rational decision," she said. "And giving up that control is not easy for me to do."

There were about 100 friends, family and various supporters, most with volunteer roles. Surprisingly few were aware that Simmons nearly backed out of the swim before it started. She had damaged her left shoulder in early August and thought it was beyond repair in time

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for the swim.

Ironically, Simmons managed to mend the shoulder but finished the swim with a sprained right ankle instead, likely due to the overuse of her ‘thumper kick,’ to compensate for the weakness in her swimming catch.

She credits active release therapy for resurrecting it in time for Cowichan.

“I hadn’t told anyone about my shoulder. It was so bad I couldn’t lift the arm more than 20 degrees. I actually swam just twice in the three week lead-up, doing six kilometres total instead of the scheduled taper of 40, 30 and 15 km (respectively),” Simmons said.

The shoulder weakness caused chafing consistent with a second degree burn. As Simmons’ left arm came over her head, her goggles rubbed against her shoulder and neck, skinning her as she swam.

“I’m using antibiotics and staying out of the sun and ocean for at least two weeks,” she said.

Cape is recovering from her own list of injuries. She passed out upon exiting the water and experienced convulsions, and her internal temperature dropped to 34.9 degrees.

“I’ve worked with B.C. Ambulance before so it was funny being in the truck as a patient and not as a paramedic,” said Cape, an army paramedic.

She eventually recovered and was released at 3 a.m. from hospital.

“It’s not about changing my life, I know who I am, and what I do,” Cape said. “But it was an amazing adventure with so many different experiences, emotions and stages along the way. It was very exciting and interesting, sharing it with everyone. We’re thankful they shared it with us and proud of what we all did.”

Cape’s role in the accomplishment has been overlooked at times, as Simmons picks up added attention for living with multiple sclerosis. Twenty years ago, Simmons was blind in one eye and nearly confined to a wheelchair before she took control of her life through swimming and diet.

“For me, it was amazing to see how excited and serious everyone was about this,” Simmons said. “We had so many people doing so many jobs. It was really something else.”

For more on the incredible swimming accomplishment by Cape and Simmons and the difficulties they faced, visit us online at saanichnews.com

Web Extra

Susan's Story:

Simmons' progress stuttered at midnight of the first run when her stomach cramped and one of her observers had the know-how to reset her stomach. Simmons would sip ginger ale. Then swim 10 stokes and eat a bite of food. Swim 10 strokes and have a shot of ginger ale. That was repeated for the better part of two hours.

In the morning, about 8 or 9 a.m., Simmons fought sleep, and actually succumbed twice.

"All of a sudden I realized I'd fallen asleep, however briefly. I notified the safety crew. It only happened twice and soon the sun came out fully, it was easier then."

Hallucinations that morning included flying bats, or flounder, swimming from beneath her up ahead, and then slowing down and swimming beneath her again. It was a pattern that may have had to do with the light.

Simmons managed a stronger swim during the day, despite multiple aches and pains. She



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actually made up most of the distance on Cape that was created during the stomach cramp episode. Then she started hallucinating again. This time it was twilight and she saw white figures on the horizon which she made out to be nuns. Then they became black figures which she made out to be devils. Eventually she saw a white and blue light, and laughed in her head, 'Am I dying? because I keep seeing angles and devils and being told to 'swim to the light.' I knew I was hallucinating, but that didn't stop it."

It turned out the light was real, and her support crew really was saying 'swim to the light.'

"I thought, 'oh don't say that!," she laughed.

Simmons had no idea she was cold. "That's how it is with hypothermia, you don't know."

Alex's Story:

It was a much smoother sail for Cape until she hit the narrower part of the lake at about noon on Saturday.

Waves upset Cape, who's less comfortable swimming in the chop than Simmons.

"It got ugly," she said. "The waves picked up, and we knew that would happen. The waves come from off shore in that narrow part. I was trying to time my breathing and strokes with the waves but after a while it was rougher.

"There was a point later on, around five or six in the afternoon, every time I turned to breath I'd get water in my noise, waves would wash over my head. It was pounding my spirits, it was demoralizing."

It led to hallucinations on Saturday afternoon and a serious consideration to get out of the water.

"I fought sleepiness on Saturday afternoon and late evening."

"When it was so wavy I strained my shoulders to do get my head up so my shoulders and neck are sore. With about 12 km to go I could barely lift my right arm out of the water and I only breathed on the left side, but the water smoothed out and I was okay."

When Cape finished, she went into convulsions, consistent with the early stages of hypothermia, and was whisked away in an ambulance.

"That was funny because I had worked with B.C. Ambulance so to be in the truck as a patient was new."

There were no bandages for Cape, just rashes of chafe on her shoulders, collar bones, ribs, and arm pits, all from the swim suit.

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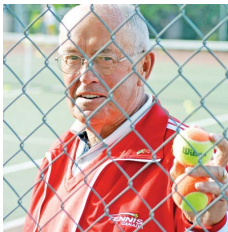
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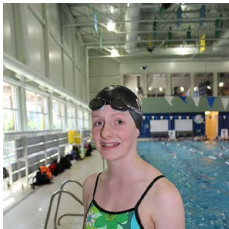
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