

A History of the Catalina Channel Swims

Since 1927

by  
Dr. Penny Lee Dean

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the book is to develop a history of the swimming crossings of the Catalina Channel since the first swim was completed in 1927.

On January 15, 1927 George Young won the Wrigley Ocean Marathon swim across the Catalina Channel in 15 hours, 44 minutes, and 30 seconds. Within three months of the Wrigley Ocean Marathon, four swimmers successfully tackled the Catalina Channel.

Between 1927 and 1952 only two men conquered the Channel, but from 1952 to 1958 eleven swimmers crossed the Channel. Numerous attempts were made between 1958 and 1970 but none were successful. In the early 1970's and again in the late 1970's, the men's and women's speed records were rewritten. There were twenty-nine crossings by seventeen swimmers in the 1970's. From 1980 through 1989 there were thirty two individual crossings and twelve relay crossings. The book is further broken into the following sections from 1990 to 1999; 2000 to 2004; 2005 to 2007;2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; Around the Island swims and 2012.

In 2011 the overall relay record was broken and in 2012 the women's record and overall record from Catalina to the mainland was smashed. Numerous records were broken, especially that of the oldest person to swim the Catalina Channel (which was broken three times) and the relay record. From 1927 through the 2012 season there were two hundred and fifty-one (251) people who swam Catalina.

#### **The following conclusions were reached:**

1. The 1927 Wrigley Ocean Marathon swim began the long history of Channel swimming in the United States.
2. In the end of 2012 there had been eighty-five relay crossings and two hundred and fifty-one people swam the Catalina Channel.
3. Female swimmers have been as successful as male swimmers in crossing and setting records for the Catalina Channel.
4. Age is a determinant of speed in swimming the Catalina Channel.
5. The establishment of the Catalina Channel Swimming Federation has aided in the development and furtherance of the Catalina crossing and its history.
6. Pool swimming and the inception of the marathon team aided in development of marathon swimmers in the 1970's.
7. The Catalina Channel swim is comparable to the English Channel in conditions, difficulty, distance, and challenge to the swimmer.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

On Tuesday, August 23, 1875 after being in the water 21 hours and 45 minutes, Matthew Webb stepped ashore in Calais, France. He was the first person to swim the English Channel successfully. Instantly, he became a hero.<sup>1</sup> The challenge, the mystique, and the possibility of instant fame from swimming the Channel began to attract marathon swimmers from all over the world.

In the summer of 1926, Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel. She also broke the existing record set in 1923 by Enrico Tiraboschi of 16 hours and 33 minutes, by completing the distance in 14 hours and 39 minutes. Overnight she became a celebrity; New York even honored her with a ticker tape parade.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the country one of the interested observers was William Wrigley, Jr. Ederle's swim and all the publicity she received intrigued him. He decided to put on the Wrigley Catalina Island Swim. To insure numerous entrants from all over the world, he offered a \$25,000 purse, winner take all. The race, on January 15, 1927, would go from Avalon to the breakwater at Point Vicente, a promontory landmark on the California coast. The straight line distance of the Catalina, or San Pedro Channel, was twenty-two miles, one mile further than the famous English Channel.

Wading into the chilly waters destined for the mainland were 102 swimmers, 87 men and 15 women. Of these, only one entrant completed the crossing. The swim was very successful, not only in publicity and also financially for Wrigley and the Island, but it touched off a new craze in marathon swimming. There was another Channel for marathon swimmers to conquer. It was no longer necessary for them to travel to England with the Catalina Channel in their backyard. Whether for the challenge or the preparation, swimming Catalina has become as important as swimming the English Channel to such top marathon swimmers as Florence Chadwick, Greta Andersen, Tom Park, Lynne Cox, and Penny Lee Dean, John York, Karen Burton,, Chad Hundebly, Pete Huisveld, Todd Robinson and Grace Van Der Byl.

The record dropped from 15 hours and 44 minutes to 7 hours and 15 minutes set by Penny Lee Dean in 1976. Since the 1927 swim, two hundred fifty other swimmers have successfully braved the treacherous Channel, bringing the total number of successful aspirants to two hundred and fifty-one.

#### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this book is to develop a history of the swimming crossings of the Catalina Channel since the first swim was completed in 1927.

#### **Significance of the Work**

The Catalina Channel is the only major channel crossing on the American continent which compares to the English Channel in both distance and difficulty. Furthermore, very little has been written on marathon swimming and even less on the Catalina crossing. The specifics of the crossings of these two hundred fifty-one athletes needed to be recorded before their contributions were lost. This work will enable present and future generations to see by whom and when the Catalina Channel was crossed and what these crossings entailed.

### **Definition of Terms**

Catalina Channel: The San Pedro Channel, as it is officially named, is the 22 miles of ocean separating the Island of Catalina from Point Vicente, a promontory landmark on the California coast.

Marathon Swimming: The art of swimming continuously a minimum of ten miles in any kind of open water (lake, river, sea, etc.). It is permitted to grease the body before a swim, use goggles, wear a cap, ear plugs, and a bathing suit. However, no artificial aid of any kind is allowed nor is any physical contact by another person allowed.

### **Methods and Procedures**

To gather information necessary for this work, the materials available on the two hundred fifty-one successful crossers was collected at the following libraries: California State Polytechnic University at Pomona; California State University at Long Beach; Honnold Library, Pomona College, Claremont; Long Beach Public Library system; Los Angeles Public Library system; Cabrillo Museum, San Pedro; the Avalon Museum, Catalina Island and the Catalina Channel Swimming Federation logs and interviews.

An attempt was made to contact one outstanding athlete who successfully completed the crossing from each of the following selective chronological periods: the early 1950's, the late 1950's, the early 1970's, the late 1970's, the early 1980's, the middle 1980's, the early 1990's, the late 1990's 2000-2004; 2005-2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; Around the Island; 2012 swims. Florence Chadwick, Greta Andersen, Lynne Cox, Frank Reynolds, John York, Dan Slosberg and Pete Huisveld, Todd Robinson, Hank Wise, and Grace Van Der Byl were some of the swimmers who were interviewed. Other swimmers interviewed included Pam Nickle, Ray Falk, Al Guth, Mike Suttle, Dave Clark, Richard Marks, Pat Hines, Kalani Russell, Suzanne Riedinger and Dale Petranech. The interviews also included people such as friends, coaches, and navigators. Chuck Slocombe, aide on Florence Chadwick's swim; John Olguin, Benny Nawahi's coach; John Sonnichsen, Greta Andersen and Lynne Cox's coach, Syndi Goldenson, a successful crosser and the coach of Orca; Siga Albrecht, original coach of Orca; Chuck Liddell, historian, Catalina Island; Richard Yeo, The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Marathon Swimming Chairman 1976-1978; and Mickey Pittman, one of the navigators, were interviewed.

These people were located and personal interviews were used to collect material as it related to the swimmers' contributions to marathon swimming. Interviews were conducted personally or by telephone, and the material obtained was analyzed as to its relevancy to the work. Many extraneous items came up in the interviews which had nothing to do with the development of this publication. Information was then combined with the available literature. Further, the private newspaper collections of Richard Yeo, Chuck Liddell, John York, and Penny Lee Dean were used extensively. The author relied heavily on personal knowledge and acquaintances derived through forty-two years of local, national, and international competition and coaching in marathon swimming.

Once all material was gathered, it was critically analyzed regarding its relevance to the work, and then it was organized into an understandable and readable form.

## CHAPTER 2

### The First Catalina Swim: 1927

Santa Catalina, one of the eight Channel Islands, is located twenty-two miles off the southern California coast. In early February, 1919, William Wrigley, Jr., gained controlling interest in the Santa Catalina Island Company. Originally, he intended to erect "no trespassing" signs in order to have a private resort, but, learning of the large number of tourists who were attracted to the Island each year, he changed his plans. Instead, he invested in the Island's future, hoping to make it a year-round playground.

The problem was that the attendance at the Island was seasonal. In the summer, almost 30,000 people visited the Island. However, in the winter, only 1,500 people were on the Island, most of who were employees. Wrigley needed some way of attracting tourists to his Island in the slack periods of the year. He was looking for a scheme to build his declining profits.<sup>1</sup> Ederle's swim and all the publicity she received intrigued him. This event kept milling around in his mind. At last, Wrigley evolved a plan. On August 12th the following appeared in the New York Times:

William Wrigley, Jr., today issued an invitation to Gertrude Ederle to be the first human being to swim the 23 mile Catalina Channel. Mr. Wrigley said he was setting aside \$5000 for Miss Ederle's project. This sum is intended to underwrite all expenses to the West coast and her training here. "There are no strings on my offer. The Catalina Channel never has been swum. I have been approached a dozen times in the past by swimmers who thought they could do it. I always declined to back them."

It is only fair that this triumph should wait for the wonderful New York girl and be a strictly American triumph. Mr. Wrigley said that the choice of time, and place for the swim would be left to Miss Ederle, but that he thought sometime between October and the Christmas holidays would be suitable.<sup>2</sup>

Between August 12th and August 29th, Wrigley was besieged by swimmers who were interested in his offer to Miss Ederle. He first raised the prize money to \$10,000 for her, then decided to offer \$25,000 for anyone who would make the swim, and finally decided on a mass swim. The handling of the swim was relegated to Joe Patrick.

The swim was officially known as "The Wrigley Ocean Marathon." To insure numerous entrants from all over the world, he offered a \$25,000 purse, winner take all. The race would go from Avalon to the breakwater at Point Vicente, a promontory landmark on the California coast. The straight line distance of the Catalina, or San Pedro Channel, was twenty-two miles; one mile further than the famous English Channel.

The swim was scheduled for January 15, 1927. Hopefully, the publicity would increase not only the sales of his chewing gum, but also the profits of the Catalina resort during the winter months. The swim was very successful, not only in publicity and also financially for Wrigley and his Island, but it touched off a new craze in marathon swimming.

This chapter focuses on the 1927 swim, looking at its organization, its regulations, the nudity, the grease, the participants, the training, the publicity, and other significant aspects of the event.

### **Organization and Regulation of the Wrigley Ocean Marathon**

In the fall of 1926, Wrigley announced his plans for the Wrigley Ocean Marathon. By January 15th, 102 swimmers, 87 men and 15 women, waded into the chilly ocean, destined for the mainland. Of these, only one entrant completed the crossing.

Wrigley's swim was termed the greatest athletic event of modern times. In order to become that successful, it was necessary for the event to be well organized. What would happen if a swimmer became ill, or quit? What was legal, and who would watch? Could an entrant swim in the nude? All these questions and many more had to be answered long before the race began.

In order to check the Channel conditions, an eight member relay team composed of the top California swimmers prepared to swim from Long Beach to Catalina. Each member would swim thirty minutes at a time. On September 10, 1926, the team crossed the Channel in 23 hours and 17 minutes. This was not an encouraging swim. Wrigley thought it would be swum faster.<sup>3</sup>

After the relay swim, a committee was set up to decide upon the course and to determine the regulations which would govern the swim. The race was open to all who entered, whether male or female. Even though no swimming test or proof of ability was required, there were many other requirements.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, swimmers wrote for an entry blank which had to be returned by January 5, 1926. On December 5th, the first of many regulations was issued; "any nonfloating form of suit they desire, or if they prefer, no suit at all."<sup>5</sup> This first regulation resulted from a request by Mrs. Charlotte Moore Schoemmell of New York, who saw no immodesty in competing without a suit. She believed that a suit would hinder her swimming and would only result in chafing her body.

Immediately, numerous other women contestants and women's groups protested this ruling and Mrs. Schoemmell's "indecent" request. On December 16th, in the Los Angeles Times, the Women's Christian Temperance Union resolved:

Believing that the request made by certain entrants in the Catalina swimming contest to be granted nudity for that occasion should be positively denied, in that Miss Gertrude Ederle the world champion swimmer, is competent authority for saying the lack of swimming raiment is not needed and absolutely not to be countenanced, and being confident that such brazen vulgarity is not considered necessary on part of said entrants, but is desired for the publicity that such a shameful act would bring. Therefore, be it resolved: that we of the Los Angeles W.C.T.U. County Executive, a body of Christian women toiling in every way possible to uplift humanity, protest against nudity in any contest particularly in the Catalina race now being arranged for January 15, 1927.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the protests, the committee stuck to its original decision. Two women, however, Ella Stevens and Mrs. C.O. Miderton, were added to the rules committee.

Although she had no intention of swimming the Catalina Channel, Mr. Wrigley graciously invited Miss Ederle to Catalina on December 5, when she was to be in Los Angeles for a vaudeville engagement. She accepted and spent the Sunday with Mr. Wrigley on his yacht, Quest. Miss Ederle even tested the water, a mere 62 degrees. Five days later she stated she would not enter the race due to her theatrical engagements. "I would like to try it as I am confident that I can do it. I don't believe it is as hard as the

Sandy Hook Swim that I made two years ago, against time and many changing tides."<sup>7</sup>

"Sometime later I may make the Catalina swim but I doubt it as somebody will surely make it before long and then it won't be necessary for me to try it."<sup>8</sup> Ederle gave advice to the prospective swimmers.

It's a race, I know, but the pace setters will find out that it's better to take things easy. . . The swimmer who forgets that he or she is in a race will win.

Condition is everything, but too fast a pace or swimming in spurts can bring on the cramps and fatigue. The steady tempo is the best, and forget all about your rivals. The stomach is the key to success or failure. . . Sickness brings on cramps. Either you get sick or you don't, and training has nothing to do with that angle of it. . . Those who do must fight it off or give up. You can't swim when you are seasick. The food question is an individual one. . . Ordinarily, though, I should say that chicken broth is best for food value and runs the smaller risk of turning the stomach. On my swim I had chicken broth, hot chocolate, and two slices of pineapple. . . Personally, I believe there is room for modesty in swimming as in everything else and I would not think of swimming unclad. I wore men's athletic trunks and a brassiere. I think this is the ideal costume.

Grease will not stay long. The grease helps you to stand the shock of entering the water, but it comes off quickly. . . Keep your mouth closed when swimming, at least enough to keep the salt water out. Nothing can upset you like salt water in the stomach. Do not look ahead of you. And if you feel like quitting, just keep right on swimming anyway."<sup>9</sup>

On December 10th, Wrigley raised the purse to \$40,000 by adding a \$15,000 prize for the first woman to complete the swim. If a woman was first, however, the \$15,000 prize would be negated. He did this after speaking to Mrs. Corson, the first mother to swim the English Channel. She felt that a woman could not beat a man. As Wrigley stated in the December 10, 1926, issue of the Los Angeles Times:

Mrs. Corson convinced me that it is very difficult for a good woman swimmer to beat a good man swimmer and that several expert feminine stars would pass up the Catalina swim because of the handicap under which they would compete. With a special prize assured for the women, I expect that several women swim stars will now enter the race.<sup>10</sup>

The committee decided that Mr. Fred Cady, of the Los Angeles Athletic Club would be the head official of the swim and also the starter. On December 14, he submitted his proposals to the rules committee. This included the following regulations, all of which were accepted by the committee:

(1) each swimmer was required to have a boat with one sanctioned official; (2) trunks, rubber caps, goggles, grease, or oil; (3) a power boat could be no closer than fifty yards; (4) the swimmer could have nourishment but no artificial support while eating; (5) at the finish no help could be given--the swimmer had to walk beyond the water line without aid; (6) one half hour before the race, each swimmer had to turn in a certificate from a doctor, stating that the swimmer was in good physical condition; (7) if there was a tie, the committee would apportion the money; (8) the committee's decisions were conclusive; (9) the committee had the right to change the date of the swim; (10) all expenses were paid by the contestant, and (11) entries were due by January 5, 1927.<sup>11</sup> Another regulation required that the boat have the swimmer's number painted on the side,

and the number was to be rigged so that it could be seen at night. This was difficult since numbers were not issued until the day before the race.

Each boat was required to be equipped with: (1) Two woolen blankets, a quilt, and two pillows; (2) First aid kit; (3) Provisions to last for at least three days; (4) At least 10 gallons of water; (5) Fuel enough to last forty hours; (6) Necessary items required by the government: mask head lights, side lights, whistles, and coal oil to take care of side lights if electrical equipment should fail; (7) Life preserver for each and every person aboard; (8) Suitable skiff, not less than 16 feet in length; (9) All bilges should be pumped dry; (10) Signal flares for emergency; (11) Thermos bottles with hot food or ingredients aboard for emergencies; and (12) Towels to assist in lifting greased swimmers out of the water.<sup>12</sup>

The boat had to report to Catalina the night before the swim in order to be checked by the officials. Each official changed boats every few hours so that no official could be enticed into making a deal with the swimmer. The committee decided that pacers, who swim next to the contestant to make the contestant swim faster, were illegal. It was also decided that the starting time of the race was changed from 4:00 p.m. to 11 a.m. since over 100 entries had been received and the starting point of the race was changed to the Isthmus, ten miles northwest of Avalon. This shortened the race by three miles.<sup>13</sup> The departure point was also changed because Avalon Harbor was not suited for the 200 boats and all the sightseers which were expected. The most important aspect for the change was that the gambling odds stated in the newspapers doubted that anyone would even finish the race. If no one completed the swim, the ensuing bad publicity would undermine Wrigley's purpose for the swim. One newspaper article read:

Those who want to witness the finish of the race--providing anybody succeeds in making the swim, which seems a matter of grave doubt, we can only recommend planting themselves on the breakwater with a radio set to receive the news of the progress of the candidates, and with something to keep themselves warm.<sup>14</sup>

On Wall Street, there were wagers on the swim although a fisherman stated the Channel could not be swum.<sup>15</sup> One firm said that no one would finish.<sup>16</sup>

Publicity was very important. It is interesting to note that there was one earlier claim of swimming the Channel.<sup>17</sup> There was not substantial proof; however, either way, Wrigley tried to cover this up so the swim would be considered a novel event; "The Catalina Channel has never been swum."<sup>18</sup>

The committee had to be prepared for illness, an attack upon a swimmer, or possible drowning. In order to prevent these occurrences, Wrigley transformed the steamships Avalon and Cabrillo into hospital ships. Each was equipped with physicians, nurses, and operating rooms. Beyond this, each contestant's boat was provided with a first aid pamphlet. Two speed boats served as ambulances to rush the sick, tired, or injured swimmers to the hospital boats. On the shore, two ambulances were stationed in case a swimmer needed help.<sup>19</sup>

The government agreed to assist in the swim. It loaned eight Coast Guard chasers and two cutters, the Tamaras and the Vaughan, for patrolling the course, engaging in rescues and any other purpose.<sup>20</sup> As the Los Angeles Times stated on January 14th, "Yes sir, it's certainly going to be a tough job on anybody who suddenly wants to drown. About the only way we can figure out how anybody can successfully drown is for him to



outswim a lot of speed boats and then sink down peacefully beneath the waves somewhere near the Hawaiian Islands."21

### **Preparation**

The water temperature was expected to be the eliminating factor in the race. As one swimmer stated, "I believe it is almost physically impossible for any swimmer to remain in the 54 degree water for much longer than eight hours, and it's going to take a good deal more than eight hours to complete the Catalina swim." 22

In order to counter the cold, many contestants decided to use body grease. "Everything from goose grease and Vaseline to the common or garden variety of axle grease is apparently going to be used with various mixtures of lard favored by some."23 One manufacturer of lubricants offered to supply all of the contestants with his product, free of charge.

Fish caused another problem that had to be considered. Sharks and barracuda were prominent in the Channel. Mrs. Charlotte Schoemmell planned to use ten pounds of black axle grease not only to keep warm and facilitate movement, but because she believed that sharks did not attack dark bodies and she did not want to take any chances.

All these problems had to be solved. The race was planned to begin at 11:00 a.m. on January 15, 1927. All precautions against an injury or an illness were taken. The next question was who was going to compete in this feat.

### **The Contestants**

The swim, as stated earlier, was open to anyone, regardless of sex or nationality and the response to Wrigley's swim was magnificent. By the closing date for entries, January 5, 1927, 153 contestants had entered the race.24

Fred Cady stated:

All of which is a manner of saying that more persons are entering the Catalina swim than there is water, and if something isn't done about it, Wrigley will have to play Christopher Columbus and find another good channel to take care of the overflow. Not only that, but from the letters pouring in without end from Canada, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and even Italy, the starter will have to shoot the starting gun in a dozen different languages. If the architect who built the Tower of Babel thought he had a tough job, he ought to try herding the various foreign splashers now taking their dozen strokes a day off Long Beach.25

The swimmers came from all walks of life, from all over the continent, and further. There were over 100 entrants from California. This was a record for the largest number of competitors in a single meet from one state. Thirteen women were entered at one time. According to another source nineteen women were entered at one time.26 (Appendix A). Many of the contestants were not true swimmers. They were attracted by the \$25,000 purse and some could not even swim. Over sixty of the greatest swimmers in the world, however, were present. The entrants included Henry Sullivan and Charles Toth of English Channel fame; Charlotte Schoemmell, the first woman to swim around Manhattan Island; Norman Ross, (nicknamed "the Big Moose"), holder of many national and world swimming records; Leo Purcell and Mark Wheeler, top California swimmers; and George Young, a Canadian national champion. The other variety of "swimmers"

included Eugene Stoppy, a University of Southern California long distance runner who became a long distance swimmer for the event, and Charles Zimmy, a teenage newsboy with no legs.<sup>27</sup>

Many of the contestants came to southern California months before the race in order to become acclimatized. Henry Sullivan was the first to arrive. The swimmers gradually began to gather in the Long Beach area where they swam from the Jackrabbit Pier to the breakwater. The training program ranged from Byron Summers' swimming four miles a day, biking five to six miles, and rowing; to Mrs. Valery Schramm's two to four hours daily and five mile hikes; to Ethel Hertle's occasional swim; and to Umberto "Bert" Rovere's singing and kicking a medicine ball in place of swimming. Rovere was an opera singer who believed that lung development was important.<sup>28</sup>

Similar to the diversity in the training programs was the variety of strokes used by the contestants. Basically, three strokes were used: the slow but enduring breaststroke, the well tested trudgeon, and the new speedy crawl. Henry Sullivan favored the most leisurely of the three strokes, the breaststroke. He averaged forty-five minutes per mile with this stroke. Charles Toth used the trudgeon, which was a bit faster. The speed swimmers such as Norman Ross, George Young, Howard Chaffey, and Leo Purcell favored the crawl, averaging thirty minutes per mile with this new stroke.<sup>29</sup>

Nourishment is very important for a marathon swimmer. After a time, the swimmer becomes dehydrated and needs nutrition to replace the body fluids. The types of food preferred were diverse. An article in the January 9, 1927, issue of the Los Angeles Times declared: "About the only point on which they all agree is that they'll eat anything that makes 'em fat. Every little bit of adipose tissue draped on their frames between now and the start of the race means just that many more calories of heat with which to fight."<sup>30</sup> Food ranged from chili and frijoles to the hot chocolate favored by George Young, or the sponge cake and tea Clarabelle Barrett planned to use.

The rules stated that no artificial support could be given while a swimmer was eating. This meant that the food had to be thrown to the swimmer and the contestants had to tread water or float while eating.

The final ingredient was grease, which was used to protect the swimmer from chafing, to keep the body warmth, and as some believed, to discourage sharks. As stated earlier, Mrs. Schoemmell used a secret formula that would stay on as long as she was in the water, which she hoped would repel sharks. Norman Ross was against the use of grease, saying, "What's the use? The friction of the water would wear it all off within an hour."<sup>31</sup> In addition, his coach, Ernie Brandstein of Stanford, had tested various types of grease, deciding that they would be of no avail to ward off the cold.<sup>32</sup> Many companies invented new formulas of lubricant to protect the swimmers. Garrett, an inventor from Los Angeles, swore that his formula, which was composed of axle grease injected with a secret compound, would keep a swimmer warm indefinitely.<sup>33</sup>

### **Pre-Race Events**

Of the pre-race events, two items first, the predictions of who would be the victor, and second, how the contest would be viewed were important. As Bill Henry stated in his column in the Los Angeles Times on January 6, 1927:

If it were merely a matter of swimming that far, we'd suggest giving the \$25,000

to Norman Ross, and letting the rest of the competitors match for the other prize, but with the cold water the deciding factor, the chance of a lot of fat boys who don't swim so fast look better than those of the Big Moose.<sup>34</sup>

Others felt Ross would win because he was a corpulent giant; he was the fastest swimmer; he had the best management and coaching; and "most important, Ross is of Scotch descent and a Scotsman would swim across the Pacific and fight a shark every fifty yards for twenty-five thousand bucks."<sup>35</sup> Ross, however, thought that the seventeen year old Canadian, George Young, would win, after watching him work out.<sup>36</sup> Fred Cady, on the other hand, picked Mark Wheeler, Norman Ross, and Leo Purcell as the three finishers, but he did not predict in what order they would finish.<sup>37</sup> For the women's prize, Mrs. Charlotte Schoemmell believed that she would easily win, but the other contenders included Clarabelle Barrett and Ethel Hertle.

For spectators, there were three ways to witness the race. First was to view the start of the contest by going to Catalina on Friday, the 14th. The S.S. Cabrillo left Avalon at 9 a.m., allowing the townspeople and visitors a chance to get to the Isthmus in time for the start. The second was to see the swim itself by taking Wrigley's Steamer, the Catalina, which was to leave Wilmington at 10:00 a.m. and return at 3:00 p.m. The return trip was to follow the swimmers' course. Third was to be at the finish point. There were also many private yachts out on the course. In addition, the Avalon would be transmitting non-stop on the radio. There were many opportunities to see or hear about the race. As one newspaper reporter added, ". . . the radio returns will come in much more clearly if the recipient exercises his eardrums incessantly by chewing violently on one of Mr. Wrigley's well-known varieties of jaw muscle developers."<sup>38</sup>

All of the preparations were completed. The swimmers and their boats were to report to the island the night before the race, which was scheduled to commence at 11:00 a.m. on Saturday, January 15, 1927.

### **The Wrigley Ocean Marathon**

In the early hours of January 15th, the swimmers and their boats were transported from Avalon to the Isthmus, where 153 starting spaces had been marked off for the contestants. Over 3500 people crowded the shore to watch as photographs were taken of the eager participants.

Smooth and inviting as a pond at the edge of the island, the water looked less promising further out. A few hundred yards from shore it was choppy. Faint whitecaps could be seen . . . With fog and rough water ahead, the prospect for success was considered poor. When a tug brought in the news earlier that the temperature was 54 degrees, four degrees lower than the average for this time of the year, bets were laid at odds of eight to one that not one of the swimmers would complete the crossing.<sup>39</sup>

The 11:00 a.m. starting time came and went since it was a difficult task to line up 102 swimmers with 102 boats (Appendix B). Fifty-one of the original 153 contestants had dropped out because of the cold water and/or the swift currents. In addition, the numerous rescue and sightseeing boats had to be maneuvered out of the swimmers' course. It was the Coast Guard's job to insure that none of these interfered with the contestants.

As the contestants took their places, many different colors of grease and-suits

could be seen. Eugene Stoppy lined up in a full length suit of underwear coated with grease. To the spectators, this looked very amusing, but to the swimmers it only reinforced how cold the water was. Three women, Mrs. Charlotte Schoemmell, Miss Saga Kolb, and Mrs. Jean McKenzie stood on the beach, wearing nothing but ten pounds of black axle grease, as did many men. As one observer stated:

. . . yes, right out there in front of everybody. But when you looked you wondered why any objection should have been made. The grease covered as well as a bathing.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, with the firing of the gun at 11:21 a.m. the contestants slowly began the grueling race across the Channel. A few started late, thinking a change in the tides would help them.

The leisurely manner in which they advanced to the water's edge at the firing of the starting gun was noticeable. None rushed in. A few when they hit the water began to flail around at a fast clip, of course. But the majority took it easy.<sup>41</sup>

From the Avalon, a minute by minute account was broadcast. As an observer of the start reported:

There has never been a sight in sporting circles of the United States the equal of the one that transpired on the Isthmus of Catalina Island yesterday morning. . . there was a kaleidoscopic series of swiftly changing colorful scenes. No camera man, no newspaper man, and there were plenty of both on hand, could ever hope to tell the complete story in either words or pictures.<sup>42</sup>

It took about three minutes for the lead swimmers to break away. In the lead, unexpectedly, was George Young. About twenty yards behind him was Norman Ross, desperately trying to catch up. The reaction of people on the beach and on the various vessels was one of astonishment, but all were confident that Ross would catch Young before long. Within the first hour, thirty swimmers had dropped out of the race. Young, who was still followed closely by Ross, had changed his course, believing that if he fought a northeast current at the beginning it would enable him to ride a southern current into the coast.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, this was not true. It was later proven by Tom Park, Greta Andersen, and successive record breakers, that this is only a hindrance; that a straight heading is best.

Because of Young's and Ross's direction at 1:20 p.m., Byron Summers was in the lead, McKenzie second, Ross third, and Young fourth. Conrad Wennerberg had stated that Young led the entire way, but according to various newspaper accounts, Ross and Young exchanged the lead every few miles. By 3:00 p.m., forty-seven swimmers had dropped out. Young, who was leading at that time, swam into an oil slick which slowed him down considerably.<sup>44</sup> After making his way through the slick, he had a drink of hot chocolate. By 3:43 p.m., Leo Purcell led, followed by Ross on a more northerly crossing, Young, Summers, and McKenzie. As night fell, the temperature dropped. At around 5:00 p.m. there were only thirty swimmers left in the water.<sup>45</sup>

Hour after hour, a different swimmer was pulled out. The contestants were spread out over fifty square miles and darkness further hampered officials.<sup>46</sup> At 7:00 p.m., Charles Toth left the water. By 8:00 p.m., only twenty swimmers were left. Henry Sullivan gave up at 8:19 p.m.. All had been in the water eight and one-half hours. The 54 to 58 degree water had taken its toll.<sup>47</sup>

Young was in the lead by a half mile to one mile at 9:00 p.m. The conditions

were ideal; a full moon was shining. At 9:45 there were only twelve swimmers still in the water.<sup>48</sup> The \$25,000 prize still drove the weary contestants. Ross and the others hoped that Young would burn out. However, he steadily improved upon his lead. At 11:00 p.m., Young ran into a thick bed of kelp. His trainer was preparing to pull him out of the water when a tug boat pulled alongside.

"George Young?" "We got a telegram from your mother in Toronto. She's listening over the radio. Her telegram says, 'I know you will win, George.'" Young shouted to the tugboat, "'Wire her: 'You bet I will--for you!'"<sup>49</sup>

By midnight, thousands of spectators began to gather at Point Vicente to watch the finish. Loudspeakers were set up to keep the crowd informed. KNX radio announced that Young was five and a half miles from Point Vicente; Ross was one and one-half miles behind him; Peter Meyer, using the trudgeon crawl, was in third place; Clarabelle Barrett was fourth, followed by Margaret Houser and Martha Stager.<sup>50</sup>

Who was this young man in the lead? George Young was a seventeen year-old Canadian amateur swimming champion. He had left his home in Toronto to attempt to win Wrigley's race, after taking part-time jobs to finance his trip to California. He convinced a friend to accompany him and they pooled their resources to buy a second-hand motorcycle with a side car. Young's coach at the West End Y.M.C.A., thought he was foolish; that he would be out of shape before he ever reached California, if he ever did. Young retorted that he would train in "old swimming holes" along the way. With the little savings his crippled mother could donate, \$135, to supplement his earnings and her advice, "Don't fail--whatever you start, finish", Young and his friend left for California.<sup>51</sup>

Numerous times along the way the motorcycle broke down. The boys took odd jobs to pay for the repairs. Finally, the bike broke down beyond repair in Little Rock, Arkansas. Feeling hopeless and discouraged, Young told his troubles to a honeymooning couple, who offered to drive the two boys to California. Later the couple asked for \$1,000.<sup>52</sup>

Once in Los Angeles, a promoter, Henry O'Bryne, offered to pay Young's expenses for the three weeks before the race, to feed and accompany him on the swim in return for forty percent of whatever Young won in the race and earned throughout the ensuing year. Young agreed; O'Bryne immediately sent a contract to the boy's mother for signature.<sup>53</sup>

At 1:11 a.m., Clarabelle Barrett, of New York withdrew; She was nine miles from her goal. Within two and one half miles of his goal, Young saw lights on the shore. Even though he did not know what they were, his trainer and manager, O'Bryne headed Young towards the lights. Thousands of people were flickering their car lights on and off and honking their horns to encourage the young man. In another few miles, Young would win \$25,000, but his promoter would pick up \$10,400 of the prize.<sup>54</sup>

At 2:30 a.m. Young could see what he was heading for, the prize was within his grasp; he would land within a half hour. At this time, Norman Ross, who was desperately trying to catch up, left the water knowing that the conditions were winner take all. He did not want to add to his humiliation.

Meanwhile, Young ran into a kelp bed, but this did not give him too much trouble, as he later confided; "'This wrapped itself around my neck and legs, but that only

added to my determination to win, so I dug in."<sup>55</sup>

As he approached the shore, the judges waded out to shake his hand. At 3:05:30 a.m. Young emerged from the water, having spent 15 hours, 44 minutes, and 30 seconds on his watery journey. It was later determined that he had swum seven miles extra because of poor navigation. With his emergence from the water, a flare was shot to signify his finish. It was estimated that 15,000 spectators were on hand for the finish. "Bedlam broke loose afloat and ashore. Boat whistles, auto horns and human throats joined in a chorus, flares of Roman fire lit the scene and its background of rocks."<sup>56</sup>

Young stated:

I had taken off my bathing suit when I was two and one-half miles from Catalina and forgot that grease and graphite were my only covering as I rose out of the water at the shore, so that I beat it back into the waves to my convoy boat.<sup>57</sup>

Quickly, Young's handlers pulled him into their boat and covered him with blankets. He was taken to the California Yacht Club where he exchanged handshakes for half an hour; then taken to Seaside Hospital to recuperate. The doctors stated that he was in excellent shape, having lost only five pounds in the contest. As Young was settling down to rest, a few swimmers remained in the water: Meyer, Hauser, and Stager. Meyer left the water at 4:20 a.m. with only two miles to go; while the two women left around 6:30 a.m. Hauser had only a mile to go, while Stager had over one and a half miles to go; however, they were not making any progress against the swift currents. These women were in the water for 19 hours, 26 minutes and 19 hours, 6 minutes, respectively. Wrigley, upon seeing the dedication of these two, decided to give them each \$2,500 for their valiant efforts.<sup>58</sup>

Young, when asked how he felt, replied, "Fine. I knew I could do it!"<sup>59</sup> He also commented, "The most discouraging period of the grind came when I was one and one quarter miles from shore when the outflowing tide shoved me back. . . "<sup>60</sup> He also said, "Oh, there were plenty of rough spots, but I finally got to where I was going and today the only ill effect I feel is a little soreness in my shoulder."<sup>61</sup>

Young received the check for \$25,000 at Grauman's Egyptian Theater on Tuesday evening. He had told reporters,

"I put everything I had into this race for my mother. It was not much, perhaps, but it was my all, my amateur standing as a Canadian champion. I wanted to bring her to California."<sup>62</sup>

Mrs. Young never made it to California. Within twenty-four hours, Young had cashed his check and was besieged by every promoter and con man in California. His manager accepted engagements at the Hollywood Theatre and screen tests on his behalf. Young's fame led to showmanship, sensationalism, and news mongering. He returned to Canada, married twice, and died while employed as a park ranger at Niagara Falls in 1972, at age sixty-two.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Young is considered to be the father of marathon swimming, and received the largest prize in any marathon swim.

### Summary

On January 15, 1927, 102 swimmers including fifteen women, entered the chilly waters at the Catalina Isthmus destined to swim the Channel. Of these only one finished, seventeen-year-old George Young. The race was successful for Wrigley and his Santa

Catalina Company. Wrigley's scheme was a novel one. The organization, planning and control for the Wrigley Ocean Marathon was enormous. The complexities of the swim included participants and their training, the regulations for controlling the swim, the publicity, and all of the other significant aspects of the swim which had to be dealt with and portrayed to the public. Further this race sparked an interest in the Catalina Channel. It initiated a long history of crossings, closing the distance between the Island and the mainland.