

THE BIG SWIM

How an annual cross channel relay swim raises money to help save the ocean



Story and Photos By Helena Day Breese



Kayaks tied down for the outward journey across the channel. Kayakers paddle along side swimmers providing support and safety.

It's 1:30 in the morning. I'm standing on the platform of a dive boat anchored off Santa Cruz Island, staring down into the inky black sea.

Any moment now I'll have to jump in. This could be a life-changing experience, I tell myself. Can I do it?

I'll flop into the cold sea and start swimming toward the small, winking light on the island shore a quarter mile away. Most people would equate a cold water dunk in the middle of the night to a nightmare, so it's surprising I've got plenty of company - some 60 swimmers are waiting to take their turns behind me; and we will swim, one short stretch at a time, through the night, into the dawn and on into the day until our relay team has made it across the entire Santa Barbara Channel and stands once more on the California mainland.



A young swimmer starts his night time swim.

“What possessed me to do this?” I ask myself. I'm all decked out in my new, sleek and very tight wetsuit emblazoned with the words 'Iron Man.' Aptly named, I decide, considering the marathon effort it took me to get into it. So now I look the part, but I certainly don't feel it. “Too late to think about that

now!” chides the voice in my head. But I know what to do: I’ll place the blame squarely on the head of a man called Emilio Casanueva and let him explain...

“It all started in the summer of 2003 with a lunchtime ocean swim,” says Emilio. “I invited my friends, Frank Catahna and Daniel Belding, to join me and soon it became a regular lunch hour activity. We enjoyed this so much we decided to swim on Sundays at Butterfly Beach and ask others to join us.” But despite the promise of great camaraderie, a bracing swim and a tempting after-swim snack of fruit, cream cheese and bagels, “No one came,” sighs Emilio. Undeterred, the threesome, dubbed “The Ocean Ducks” by Emilio, swam on, on through the winter in unusually cold 50-degree water, and on into the summer of 2004. By that time, though, Emilio had decided he wanted to do more than just swim.

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“I have a great love and respect for the ocean,” says Emilio. “I wanted to share this experience with others and at the same time raise awareness of the need to care for our water. I wanted to do a swim that was a fundraiser for an ocean-caring non-profit organization – one that would take our receipts. I came up with the idea of the BIG SWIM.”

The BIG SWIM would be a relay swim across the Santa Barbara Channel. Each swimmer would go 20 minutes, flanked by kayakers for support. The event would start at Santa Cruz Island and end at Goleta Beach - a distance of 26 miles. Anyone could participate if they were able to swim for 20 minutes, pay the registration fee, and agree to raise additional funds through sponsorship. Emilio floated the idea by his swimming buddies, “And they said I was crazy!” he laughs. “But I strongly believed people would love this opportunity to swim in the channel and at the same time do something to help protect our marvelous ocean.”

“I knew I had to find two things quickly to make it happen that summer,” says Emilio. “I needed a suitable boat and I needed a non-profit with goals that matched mine, one that would be willing and able to take our money. I was sure finding just the right boat was going to be the harder part, but it turned out just the opposite,” he chuckles.

“I approached organization after organization and they all told me the venture was too dangerous,” says Emilio –

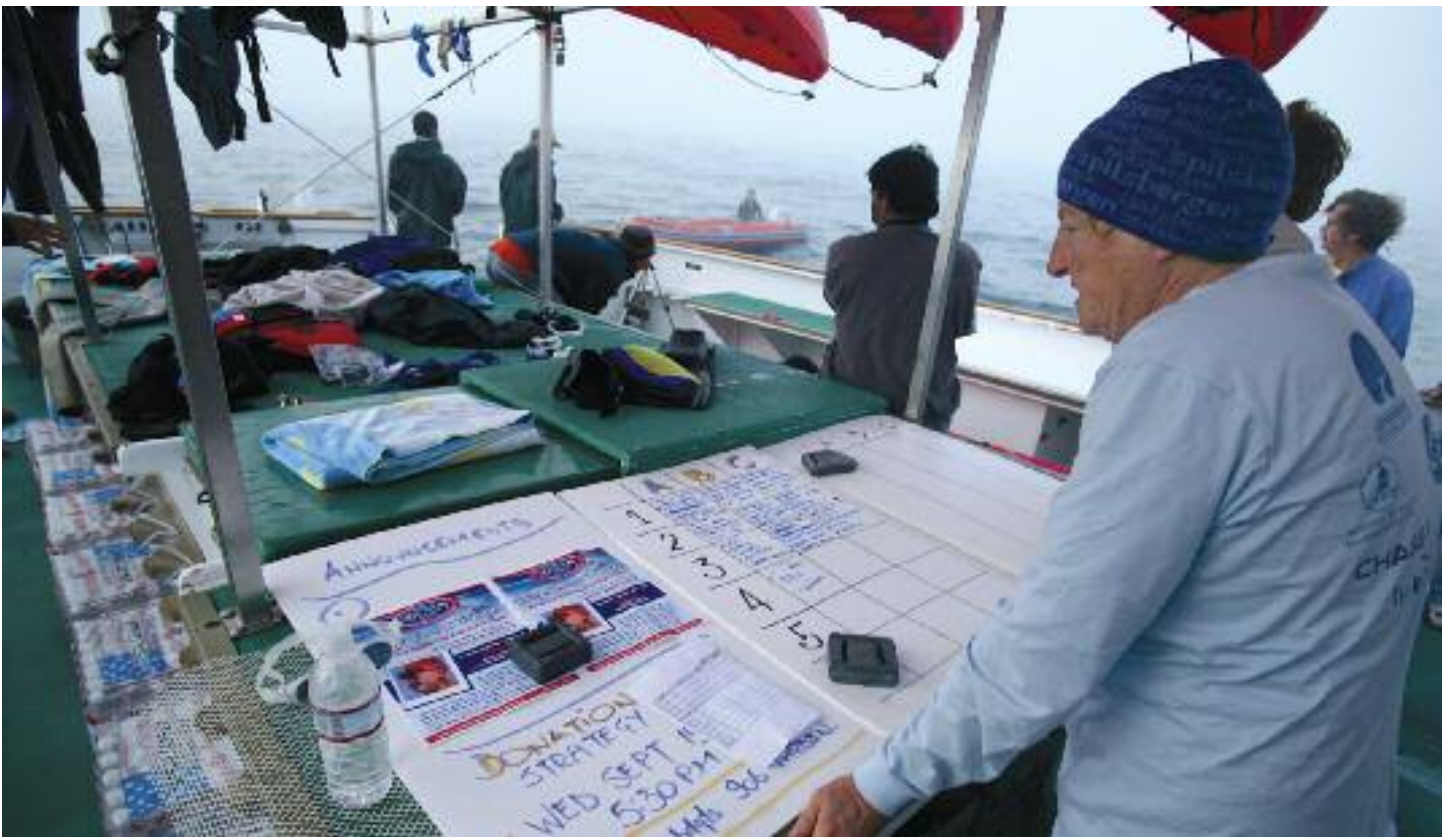


Swimmers' names on the swimming roster.



Emilio, Daniel, and Daniel's wife Linda recruiting for THE BIG SWIM.

“I approached organization after organization and they all told me the venture was too dangerous.”



A swimmer checks the swimming roster.

“Until I met Robert Ferris of the Community Environmental Council (CEC). Bob immediately liked the idea and said he’d take our money.”

The boat came as a stroke of good fortune. “There are not that many boats to choose from in Santa Barbara and we had been told the bad news that there was nothing available at such short notice except ‘The Vacarro,’ a rough old cattle boat that had plied the Channel Islands back in the last century,” says Emilio. “Out of desperation I asked the owner of Truth Aquatics, a local company of dive boats, to check availability one more time and, like magic, ‘The Conception’ – a dive boat with all the amenities onboard to nurture a group of swimmers – had a cancellation. I wasted no time plunking down a \$1,000 deposit out of my own money,” he says. “And finally, we had our boat and we had our not-for-profit. Everyone cheered and that’s when I knew the BIG SWIM was really going to happen.”

Now all Emilio needed were the players - the swimmers and kayakers whose enthusiasm and financial contributions would make the BIG SWIM an all-around success. For help with recruitment he turned again to his two swimming buddies. “We had no money and only two months to find enough people to make this work,” says Emilio. “But word of mouth is a strong force and we took every opportunity to talk to people and to hand out flyers. At the same time, Sigrid Wright at the CEC

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helped us find the necessary insurance for the event and undertook all the related paperwork.

“In the end we had to turn people away,” says Emilio. “This was an event that anyone who could swim could take part in. We had parents and their children, old and young, people who just swim for fun and competitive swimmers. And, I found out at one of our practice sessions that the nighttime swim section sign-ups were going to be huge; since it’s such an unusual thing to do. Altogether we recruited 68 swimmers and 12 kayakers, as well as a masseur, a yoga instructor, and a chiropractor.”

Of course, every good story has to have a cliffhanger and the story of the BIG SWIM is no exception. “Everything was going tip top,” says Emilio, “and the event is seven days away when the board of the CEC asks to see our insurance coverage. The CEC expert on such matters looked our policy over and declared it inadequate.”

“I am in despair,” says Emilio. “Finding the original insurance had been so difficult I could not see what we could do about

“Parents and their children, old and young, people who just swim and competitive swimmers – all took part.”



swim for fun and



this. I thought, how am I going to tell everyone that the event is cancelled? But Sigrid got right back to work on the problem and, can you believe it, with 24 hours to spare, she found better insurance with another company and we still use them to this day.” The BIG SWIM was on.

“The crossing was incredible,” says Emilio. “The water was 71 degrees and absolutely flat; dolphins joined us as if to welcome us to the channel; and we had a huge crowd of people waiting to greet us at the finish at Leadbetter Beach. Everyone was so excited. We held an awards ceremony and everyone had a wonderful evening. The day after the event was windy and the sea turned choppy. The BIG SWIM was obviously meant to be.”

In fact, The BIG SWIM was so successful, “We had to repeat it,” says Emilio. And repeat it we have - 5 times! Each year Emilio has approached a different non-profit organization to be the beneficiary of the BIG SWIM receipts. Recipients have so far included the CEC, The Channel Keepers and the Environmental Defense Center. The Marine National Sanctuaries and Heal the Ocean will be the beneficiaries of the BIG SWIM in 2008.



Left: Swimmers are ferried out to join the waiting kayakers.

Which leads us to how I found myself taking this mid-night plunge: Like a lot of other people, I got caught up in the wake of Emilio's BIG SWIM. Last summer I took a class in ocean swimming through Santa Barbara City College. My instructor, Ingrid Schmidt, participated in the first BIG SWIM and started teaching her ocean swimming class not long after. When Ingrid described her experience swimming in the Santa Barbara Channel I knew it was something I had to do.

But the BIG SWIM ripples are spreading farther than even Emilio could have imagined. As news of the event has trickled through the international open water swimming community, interest has built about swimming in the Santa Barbara Channel. As a result, Emilio has found himself helping long-distance swimmers from all over the world achieve not only channel crossings but inter-channel swims as well.

"Last month a married couple from Australia became the first to swim the 6 miles between Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands," says Emilio, "and there are plenty more 'firsts' still to be had in our local waters," he says. "But ocean swimming is not all about obtaining a first or a fastest crossing," says Emilio. "It is about the experience of swimming in open water, water that is alive and beautiful, that gives you energy, and challenges everyone in different ways."

Not long ago, Emilio decided it was time to take his ocean swimming experiences one stroke further and founded The Santa Barbara Channel Swimming Association (SBCSA), a not-for-profit organization. In the two years since its formation, SBCSA has assisted swimmers from Ireland, the UK, Australia and India, as well as swimmers from right here in Santa Barbara. SBCSA provides the necessary support boat, kayakers and observers, following the rules of the venerable English Channel Swimming Association. "My goal is to help Santa Barbara become known as the swimmers' paradise," says Emilio.

Nowadays, the 9 am Sunday swim at Butterfly Beach is quite the social scene. Emilio's bagels, cream cheese and fruit are still there, but now they share a table generously spread with donated potluck dishes. A huddle of post-dip, towel-wrapped swimmers forms around the food for a chat and the Ocean Ducks banner flutters merrily over the scene. "People have started to show up. On a good day in the summer we can have over 40 people. The BIG SWIM event is what did it," says Emilio with a big smile.

And yes, I did jump in! Despite my fancy wetsuit, the cold of the water took my breath away. Now I'm deter-



Hot food and a warm cabin put a smile on a swimmers face.

minedly swimming my plodding breaststroke toward that light on the Santa Cruz shore. A reassuring kayaker paddles quietly besides me. Flashes of phosphorescence mark the progress of his blades. I flip over on my back and, looking up, see the glittering arc of the Milky Way, seemingly perfectly aligned with my course. In fact, everything feels perfectly aligned with everything else right now. This *is* a life-changing experience.



Breakfast at Butterfly Beach after a Sunday morning Ocean Ducks swim.