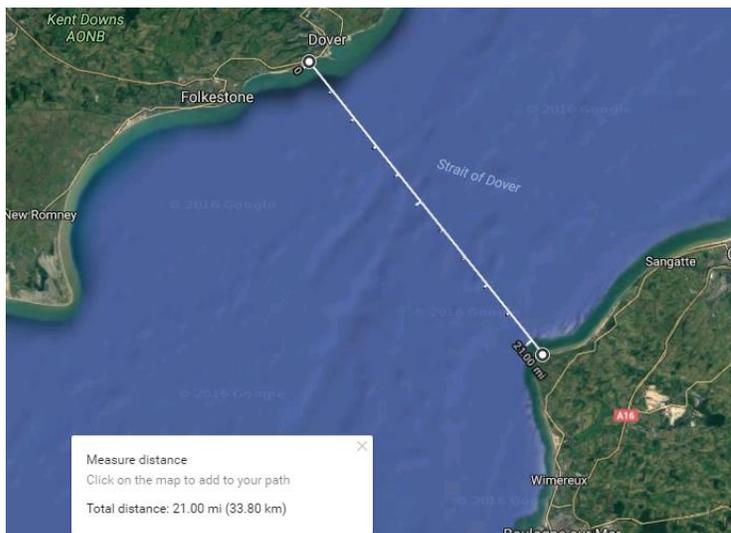


Well hello again there Sharks. Coach Andy is back with the latest blog on the Channel adventure. It's been some time since my last update, and that was my mistake. I know you are shocked but yes it is possible for a coach to be wrong. But only about as often as a rocking horse produces dung 😊 The good news is that rather than stopping me and asking questions you can now email me at: channelupdates@northshoreymca.org and I'll answer questions in this blog. Cheers!

A quick recap:

It's 21 miles from England to France as the crow flies. But this fictional crow does not have to deal with wind, waves, jellyfish, salt water, cold, currents, tides, shipping and assorted debris. You can't swim the other way because France banned it. Wetsuits are not permitted, nor is any buoyancy aid or artificial insulation of some form. Just a standard swim suit, goggles and a latex or silicone swim cap. No physical support of any description is permitted during the swim, although for very limited durations and only at specific intervals, another swimmer may swim alongside but slightly behind you.



In my last update I said I was going to talk about qualifying swims, training camps, our training plan, the Dover experience and crewing for a Channel crossing last summer – they'll have to wait for future blogs while in this one I answer the following frequently asked / most pertinent questions:

“You didn't answer the shark question properly. Are there any REAL sharks in the English Channel?”

“Why has it been so long since the last update?”

“Have you booked your crossing yet?”

Are there any REAL sharks in the English Channel?

So YNS Masters Sharks aside there are about 30 species of shark either native to or seasonally visiting British waters. They range in size from the Basking Shark, the world's second largest fish which can grow up to 40ft. Yes I said 40ft (it feeds on plankton though 😊) to the Blackmouthed Catshark which only grows to about 2ft.

The full list is (take a big breath): Angelshark, Angular Roughshark, Basking Shark, Birdbeak Dogfish, Black Dogfish, Blackmouth Catshark, Blue Shark, Bluntnose Sixgill Shark, Bramble Shark, Common Smoothhound, Demon Catsharks, Frilled Shark, Great Lanternshark, Greenland Shark, Gulper Shark, Kitefin Shark, Knifetooth Dogfish, Leafscale Gulper Shark, Longnose Velvet Dogfish, Nursehound, Porbeagle Shark, Portuguese Dogfish, Sailfin Roughshark, Sharpnose Sevengill Shark, Shortfin Mako Shark, Smallspotted Catshark, Smooth Hammerhead Shark, Spiny Dogfish, Starry Smoothhound, Thresher Shark, Tope, Velvet Belly Lanternshark. Phew! Sounds like the last one was named in the 1970's (ask your parents)

I sense the questioners really want to know about dangerous sharks... ..well most dangerous sharks prefer tropical to temperate waters and British waters are too cool. Even though ideal for Great White's they've not been seen. Yet.



That said the Mako and Hammerhead are summer and occasional visitors, respectively. No Tiger Sharks though.

According to the International Shark Attack File there have only been two unprovoked shark attacks in England, since 1847, neither of which proved fatal. To put it in perspective: on average each year in the UK (population ~ 64 million) 29 people drown in their bathtub and 5 are killed by stings from bees, wasps or hornets. Admittedly the whole population does not swim the English Channel each year but the point is sharks are not a significant danger (the water is just too cold – and THAT is the biggest danger).

“Why has it been so long since the last update?”

I had some medical issues. At this point I want to acknowledge that plenty of other people have suffered and bravely battled more adverse medical conditions than I experienced – you may know of some of them, they may be in your family. I take my hat off to them.

While struggling with the medical problems I fell into the trap of waiting for perfect information before writing this next blog – that was a mistake, I should be sharing the journey. Don't make the same mistake as me – something is always an infinite improvement over nothing. I'm back at it now!

In any journey towards a goal there will be setbacks, some indeed may be terminal for that goal, but there is a world out there for the taking for those of us who choose to rise above our challenges. How you respond to challenge is a true test of your character. Maybe you missed your National or Age Group cut this year – how you respond to this adversity is your choice. Quit or fight? Who do you aspire to be?

Remember what's on the back of the team T-shirts: “In the end we only regret the chances we didn't take” Don't have regrets! I regret not undertaking this goal earlier, but I will not regret that I didn't try.

So what happened?

I'd been struggling with crippling pain since February 2016. The doctors thought it was a back disk problem but in June it was diagnosed that my left hip had reached the end of its useful life and the muscle spasms around it were crushing the nerves in my leg and lower back. It's gutting to be only 44 years old, fit, and to be told “You have no good options left. You need total hip replacement. ASAP”. Channel was off.

A standard hip replacement (posterior or anterior) wouldn't work for me. I wanted to be able to ski, skate, bike, swim and do even simple things like cross my legs for the next 50 years of my life. Fortunately there is a procedure that would allow this and I could get in for surgery in October 2016. It would be touch and go with the rehab but the Channel was on again! Then just after I wrote the last update:

My surgeon got injured and the operation was pushed out to January 2017. Channel was off again.

My hip failed while brushing my teeth (?!?). 911 called and I was rescued from my bedroom, spent several hours in the ER and thereafter confined to the sofa on the ground floor 24 hours per day. I was bumped to, and then up, the operating list of a different surgeon, the one who invented the type of hip replacement I wanted. October surgery. Channel back on again!

I was mishandled after the surgery whilst still under the general anesthetic and the new hip was dislocated before I came to – cue extreme pain and a hard job explaining to the nurses that something was badly wrong before I was x-rayed and sedated. Revision surgery would need to be performed in December or Jan and I was under severe mobility restrictions. Channel was off again.

Hip dislocated at home 5 days after surgery. Another 911 call to be rescued from my own bedroom again upside down on a stretcher – well at least I was able to say to the police, fire and EMTs that “we must stop meeting like this”. I found myself back in the NEBH OR later that day, via Salem ER, and when I came around that evening I was told that my hip wouldn’t stay in and I needed emergency revision surgery the next day. They were a little perplexed when I pumped the air and yelled “YES!”. The Channel was back on!

Revision surgery went well but there were consequences – my left leg is now longer than my right and for weeks I was exhausted, healing took much longer due to the additional trauma, and seeing how my leg was affected left me down. In December I rejoined the Masters team and started to build with the objective of making 100x100 on New Years Day. Too much too fast! My right shoulder developed tendonitis (after 3 months of being forced to sleep on it) and more painfully so did my new hip. I swam 0x100. Channel off again.

Jan was spent rehabilitating and then in Feb I started to swim. I’m now up to 35,000+ yds per week. Channel on again!

I’ll be completely honest and say that there has been more than one occasion through this emotional rollercoaster of the last 6 months where I felt utterly beaten and reduced to tears – there will be moments still to come, I’m sure. Somehow I’ve been able to muster the energy, gird my loins for battle and begin digging myself out again. That somehow isn’t really a secret. I chose to fight, not quit. And in the darkest moments it really helped to know how many people (Sharks, family and friends) were out there willing me on – I can’t let you down! That’s the power of a public goal 😊

Where are you today?

At this point I will not be as strong or as swift as I had planned to be. I wanted to be at 50,000+ yds per week of swimming and aiming for a sub 11 hour crossing. A crossing is a binary thing so any crossing time will do – but it does mean that my probability of success is materially, adversely impacted.

Tommy is still going great guns - which gives me a target in practice 😊

“Have you booked your crossing yet?”

Yes. 2 years ago already! More on this next week - I’m off to swim some laps and figure out which bit of my technique is making my shoulder angry – speak soon!

Got a question? Or ever wondered how....? ask questions at: channelupdates@northshoreymca.org and I’ll answer them in this blog