

SWIMMING WITH MADAME BUTTERFLY

By Richard Taylor

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Richard Taylor joins marathoner Vicki Keith for a (relatively) short plunge in Lake Ontario.



Photo by Ian MacAlpine for Canadian Press

Vicki Keith takes a meal break of peanut butter near Oswego, New York this week during her ill-fated marathon swim.

The night before, I couldn't sleep. It wasn't just because I was thinking about the dark immensity of Lake Ontario where I'd be swimming at dawn with Vicki Keith, the greatest living marathon swimmer, celebrated humanitarian and national treasure. Unconsciously I was trying to get my head around the idea that, a few weeks after our swim, Vicki was planning to cross the lake in an audacious, 40 to 50 hour swim from Oswego, New York to Kingston. She was hoping to do 80 kilometers of butterfly to beat her own world record.

Most good swimmers are happy if they can manage a couple of exhausting 25-metre laps of butterfly in a pool. Modified from the breast stroke in the '50s, the butterfly is a sprint stroke that wasn't meant for long distance. What would motivate a 44-year-old legend to shed the comfort of retirement to train for a year, and then butterfly for days and nights alone across so much open, unpredictable water?

My uneasy feelings about Vicki's planned fundraising swim in August would prove to be warranted.

But in early July, I was eager to swim with her and learn more about the phenomenon known as Vicki Keith. She has received the Order of Canada, and been inducted into the International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame. A plaque has been erected in Toronto at her most famous arrival and departure - Vicki Keith Point. She holds 14 world record swims, including all the Great Lakes in 61 summer days of 1988, the English and Catalina Channels, the frigid Strait of Juan de Fuca, and a 129-hour 45-minute continuous pool swim in Kingston, Ontario.

In Australia, she did a 13.5-hour circumnavigation of Sydney Harbour. After only 2 hours of knuckle and toe scraping inside a shark cage, she cheerily told the organisers that she'd prefer to swim without it. When she finally got out of the occasionally polluted waters of the harbour, an Australian reporter described her as, 'resembling the business end of a dipstick'.



Photo by Dale Taylor

At dawn on July 8, the sky was a roiling cauldron of impending storm clouds without a hint of sunshine to perk us up. I'd been staying with friends near Kingston at the opposite end of Amherst Island from Vicki's charming house that faces only water and sky. At the Stella Bay ferry dock, we met Vicki

and her husband John, a retired policeman and amateur marathon swimmer. On this Bay of Quinte side of Amherst Island, Lake Ontario is warmer, more predictable and less scary.

In better weather a few days earlier, in water that ranged from 66 to 76 degrees Fahrenheit, she had knocked off a comfortable 20-kilometer butterfly. Though she preferred to swim alone so that she could focus on the mental discipline and the pace she needed to zone into for the Lake Ontario crossing, Vicki had agreed to allow me to swim alongside her while John accompanied us in his kayak.

As everyone who has met her says. Vicki is really a nice person. Aside from training for The Swim, her schedule is filled with public speaking events in classrooms and boardrooms, volunteer work, teaching and coaching disabled athletes, and endless fundraising. She hopes to raise another \$200,000 to help opportunities for special needs children and bring her lifetime fundraising to \$1 million.

Though remarkably humble, she has the warm, cocky, sunny disposition of a young girl inside the body of a determined, driven woman. Because of the summer's heat wave and her open water training, she is as tanned as a Polynesian, with perfect white teeth and an infectious smile.

As the ferry churned out from the jetty, Vicki and I waded in and lunged forward into its wake to begin our two-hour swim. I dropped below the surface to marvel at Vicki's butterfly underwater: simultaneously, she looked like a strong, graceful woman, a streamlined dolphin and a soaring bird.

Because Vicki was swimming her pace in training for the 80-kilometer crossing, it was not quite brisk enough to keep my skinny body from freezing in two hours. Over the years and all around the world I'd been lucky enough to swim a lot of open water, but I need to swim hard to keep warm.

Vicki had said that each long swim induces a kind of hypothermia and hallucinations. For a moment I panicked. Would I have to wimp out and get hauled into the boat with John part way through our swim? On shore, when I had brought up my concerns about getting cold, Vicki had rolled her eyes and smiled before teasing me with the notion that her disabled athletes feel the cold more, and that surely I could cope with a two-hour skiddle.

But after half an hour, in warm glassy conditions, I was already feeling the chill of the lake (and definite shrinkage). I reminded myself that both Vicki and I are Pisces, born on the 26 and 25 of February. When you swim long distance, you have a lot of time to ruminate, and for a while I was comforted by Vicki's concept of "breaking down impossible distance goals into manageable units" which I'd done for 2.5-kilometer ocean swims, or five-kilometer lake swims. Still, I shuddered at the thought of Vicki swimming up to 50 gruelling hours, much of it in the dark. So I stroked over to chat with John who serenely paddled in his two-person kayak.

In 2003, at the age of 52, John swam across Lake Erie, then a month later, Lake Ontario to earn \$85,000 to buy sports wheelchairs for the Kingston Y basketball program. He's a quiet, big, strong, fit, ex-cop who does much of the behind-the-scenes work for the charities and organizations he and Vicki have nurtured. He told me that last winter a sensitivity to chlorine had forced him to stop swimming.

From time to time John gazed at the gnarly, ancient cedars along the island shoreline, but he never stopped keeping an eye on Vicki's progress, or the gathering rain clouds above.

Suddenly Vicki shouted, "John, how long have we been swimming?" and he said, "Fifty-nine minutes". Like a sailor, a surfer, or anyone who intimately knows an environment that can nurture or kill them, she had judged the exact halfway point of our two-hour swim, and the window of tolerable weather.

Because of a remarkable passion for swimming, and the ability to instil the notion that "water is freedom" for disabled kids, in early August Vicki Keith hoped to once again swim in the full glare of public attention. But in early July, butterflying soulfully through Lake Ontario with me, she simply looked up at the storm clouds and said, "Let's go back, Rick."

We turned around, and as a result of the wind, the waves and a strong current, swimming back felt effortless, and glorious.

A few weeks later, at 7 a.m. this past Tuesday, Vicki entered the water at Oswego to begin her epic swim to Kingston.

During a marathon, she'll modify her butterfly stroke a number of ways to help alleviate fatigue and increase circulation. Every couple of hours she'll curl into fetal position to relieve tension in her lower back, then tread

water for about five minutes, joking with her crew while they toss her fruit cups, water, Powerade, hot chocolate, soup, cookies, peanut butter or cheese. During her 80-kilometer marathon, Vicki had told me, she was planning to swim “from snack to snack” and to repeat her mantra that she's "doing it for the kids" to help keep her mind off the deep dark waters of the lake, the wind, currents, waves, wildlife, the cold, pollution, cramps, chaffing, stiff joints, the burning sun, the night and boredom.

But this time she ran into such huge waves on Lake Ontario that 22 of her 27 crewmembers became sea sick. The winds let up during the latter part of the day, but at night they intensified and she swam into trains of three-meter waves. Most of the night she was violently ill with seasickness. Even though she choked down antacids, she couldn't eat, and her energy was depleted. For several minutes her crew lost sight of Vicki in the dangerous troughs of waves.

After courageously swimming in punishing conditions for almost 24 hours, Vicki climbed into a boat Wednesday morning. Having surfed in mountainous waves, I know how scary it must have been in the chaotic waters of the open lake. One can only imagine Vicki's feelings, knowing that so many people and so much time and energy had been expended for this swim to raise money for her disabled kids.

Of course, Vicki being Vicki, she doesn't see her aborted crossing as a failure but "a good training session" for the 80-kilometer shoreline swim she now hopes to do, maybe from Belleville to Kingston.

I've had the great honour and pleasure of swimming with Vicki. As a selfless gesture to help others, her lake swim was a huge success. And we can believe Vicki when she says that she will try again later this summer. At www.penguinscanfly.ca Vicki is accepting donations to raise funds for a swimming pool so that her disabled athletes can find freedom in the water.

POSTSCRIPT: Since this article was published, Vicki Keith asked Richard Taylor to crew her second attempt to swim Lake Ontario. He helped crew Vicki for 64 hours and 77 km to break her own world record on Aug. 17 2005.

Richard Taylor's last book was House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life. He's working on a new one about swimming called Water and Desire.