

SWIMMING LEGEND

This July marks the 20th anniversary of Nicholas Farrugia's historic swim from Sicily to Gozo. The swim, recognised by The International Federation of long-distance swimming as a 'world first record', and was splashed on The New York Times.

Nicky's big venture got off to a bad start. On the way to the airport, nauseous with the excitement and build-up to his big day, he was sick. Once in Italy, his luggage containing grease, goggles and swimming gear didn't arrive. And that night a combination of American G.I.s on a rowdy pub-crawl nearby and nerves kept him awake. Next morning, at 6 am on the 27th of July 1985 accompanied enthusiastically by an unexpected Sicilian send-off, Nicky plunged into the sea. Two trawlers, shouldering Nicky chugged out of Punta Secca in Marine di Ragusa, one of them hauling a stainless steel and aluminium shark cage starboard. A convoy of local fishing crafts and a patrol boat of the Sicilian Armed forces escorted the trawlers, cheering Nicky on as far as the territorial water borders. There they were substituted by two Maltese patrol boats, preventing big vessels from crossing Nicky's path, although at one point, a tanker failed to heed the cautionary signals and passed dangerously close. Early on in the swim the shark cage which had cost Lm 2300, had to be abandoned as it was slowing the trawler down. The original tugboat commissioned to haul it, had pulled out, on the eve of the event. The decision was made to sink the cage, enabling the trawler to catch up and Nicky who had intended to use it at night, bravely decided to do without it. Nothing was going to hinder him from completing his swim.

The months of preparation stood Nicky in good stead, and buoyed by the supporting Sicilians, the first few hours passed by "in a flash". At intervals 'feeds' consisting of fruit juice, baby food, mashed biscuits in coffee/tea were handed out to him in a cup suspended on a pole. To pace and motivate himself, Nicky broke up his swim into segments. "In the first part, when you're settling into the swim you think about your technique. Then you start to think about the next liquid feed." Throughout the swim there was continuous communication with the boat via a blackboard. His team would write jokes spurring him on and counting his strokes. "Whenever the going got tough, I would think of Nicole –his daughter-, the smile she had on her face whenever I got home, the funny things she would say. You think about the people you love to be surrounded by and the special moments together" To keep his morale high Nicky told jokes to himself, and credits an outer body experience he had whilst in the water as one of the best highlights of his endeavour. "With experience, you teach yourself to just rest whilst swimming. Suddenly, I was watching myself swim from above. Physically my body was there, not my mind. That is a moment when you come very close to God. It's brief. A whistle, a shout, something distracts you and you are back to reality." For a protective talisman, Nicky had the same medallion of the Isla Redentur, sewn into his swimming trunks that he carried with him on the channel swims. "Whenever I got tired, I used to pray to the Redentur."

As night fell, the trawler's spotlights were turned towards the sky, so that Nicky would be able to direct himself on course, but also not to attract big fish to the surface. "Swimming by night is a completely different story. You are swimming on a tired body, the darkness of the sea is a downer." At dusk, Dr Debono scribbled a message on the blackboard. "Never mind, only 25 miles to go" it read. Nicky whose stroke had been flagging, was furious. Only afterwards did he realise that Dr. Debono a psychiatrist had written the dispiriting message on purpose. "Psyching me up that way was a means of keeping me alert." Dr Debono needn't have bothered. The sea had its own brutal tactics in store to keep Nicky awake and afloat. He encountered thousands of jellyfish. Swimming and screaming simultaneously, his body was stung "left, right and centre". His deep olive skin still bears the scars of that encounter today. Nicky knew that if he as so much touched one of the trawlers, let alone climbed aboard he would be disqualified. Jack Chowne from the English Channel Swimming Association was there to authenticate and monitor the swim. There was nothing to do but endure the torture. "I remember asking God, why? But thanks to the jelly fish I stayed awake." The idea had been that during the night, the guys on board would take it in turns to swim alongside Nicky and pace him. Needless to say nobody volunteered when they saw the ordeal Nicky was going through.

Within eight miles of Gozo, a blue-fin shark was sighted. All aboard agreed not to panic. Nicky didn't see the shark but espied one of the crew hoist a sharpshooter rifle. He knew something was up, especially since one of the boats started to circle him. Joe Vassallo, a friend from Rabat wrote "don't worry, keep swimming" on the blackboard. They had him covered. Any lesser mortal would have been walking on water to get out of a possibly nasty predicament. Nicky stayed put and except from a host of sea turtles swimming underneath, swam unaccompanied by toothy predators.

Six hours out of Gozo, Nicky's Scottish wife Lynn, caught up with her husband to support him home on the final leg of his swim. Together with her and Carlo Azzopardi of Calypso Cruises, one of Nicky's favourite uncles nicknamed 'iz-znai', had travelled all the way over from Australia unbeknown to Nicky. His presence urging and cajoling Nicky on was a tremendous boost. Nicky's mum Doris attended by an entourage of family and friends was nearby on another boat with Father Hilary who was filming the event with TV Malta. Appropriately for it was the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, Nicky's mum, like a figure-head on the prow of the boat kept yelling out to him "Ejja Nicky Il-Madonna tghinek" (C'mon Nick, our Lady will help you). The hundreds of boats and small craft, streaming banners "welcome home champ" that had turned out en masse to see Nicky complete his challenge, took up the chant. Overhead a helicopter swirled round and round, and the shore in Malsalforn where the current decided Nicky would land, was thronged with people, jostling to give him a helping hand out. Shouting frantically over the din, Jack Chowne kept on urging the spectators not to, as according to the rules laid down by the federation Nicky had to clear the water and come ashore unaided by anyone to qualify for a world record.

Nicky emerged from the sea at Qbajjar in Marsalforn midday on the 28th of July 1985. His epic swim had taken him 30 hours 17 minutes to complete, much earlier than projected. A plaque commemorating his grand feat marks the spot where he alighted.

To date, several people amongst them a girl from New Zealand; have tried to emulate Nicky's achievement. No one has succeeded.