

Gifted athlete turns to swimming after knee injury

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from PORTRAIT on page LS1
high school in Mississauga, she was on the track team as a sprinter. She competed on a provincial level, and had the potential to compete on an international level, when the combination of a knee injury and her growing role within her family derailed her dream and forced her to make some hard decisions about her future.

After graduating from Milton District Highschool in 1978, where her family had moved years earlier, she entered the University of Guelph and began work on an Honours degree in Human Kinetics. A doctor suggested that she take up swimming to keep in shape, but Kim missed the challenge and discipline of her running days.

"I had always been inspired by Marilyn Bell, and the whole idea of marathon swimming," she says. When she approached Alan Fairweather, Aquatics Supervisor at the University of Guelph, he was less than floored by her plans to someday swim Lake Ontario, but he agreed to coach her.

Swimming for charity

Her first fundraising swim was from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Marilyn Bell Park in August of 1985, a distance of 57.9 kms which she completed in 18 hours and 34 minutes. This was followed in July of 1986 by a crossing of Lac St. Jean in Quebec, a professional race, as one of six countries represented. She completed the 32 km crossing in 16:43:10. Her next major fundraising swim was from Barrie to Orillia, a distance of 48.3 kms, which she completed in 17:14:00 in July of 1987. This crossing was the subject of a video titled "Into The Dawn" an allusion to both the fact that she was raising funds for the mentally challenged, and also to the fact that a marathon swimmer begins her crossing at night, so that the water is warmer when she finishes. A substantial amount of body heat is lost during a crossing, and hypothermia is a constant threat.

In 1988, she became the first woman and the first Canadian to compete a double-crossing of Lake Erie, 56.3 kms from Pt. Albino, Ont. to Sturgeon Pt. N.Y., and back to Crystal Beach Ont. This took 18 hours, and wrapped up most of the challenges facing her at home. Her greatest challenge, and ultimately her greatest triumph, still lay ahead of her, a continent away.

Measure of a marathon

"Marilyn Bell once told me that in order to really consider yourself a marathon swimmer," Kim says with a smile, "you have to cross the English Channel."

The 22 mile Channel crossing was set for September 7th, and the lions share of corporate sponsorship came from MacDonald's of Guelph. She was hoping to raise \$100,000 for Guelph's two hospitals. Her previous marathon swims raised \$25,000 for the Arthritis Society of Ontario and \$27,000 for the former Ontario and Guelph and District Association for the Mentally Retarded.

Shortly before she was slated to cross the Channel, she lost two friends with stunning swiftness. Harold Adrian, her former landlord, became a close friend to her when she moved to Guelph from Milton, and it was he who helped her formulate some of her deeply-held Christian beliefs. Audrey Henson was a client at the group home where she works. She shared many talks with the two of them prior to her swim, and both supported her.

Swimming at night is hypnotic. The sky and the sea are the same inky black, and Kim's only point of reference was the light on the boat that guided her.

"What went through my mind in the water?" she muses. "Bible verses, messages from friends, almost anything that kept my mind of the monotony of each stroke. It was pitch black," she adds. "I really couldn't see a thing." Midway through the swim, she collided with something very large and very hard in the water. She did not have the presence of mind to consider the possibility

that she had collided with a shark, which was fortunate for her. "My first thought was, did I hit Gord? (her pacer-swimmer) I think he worried about sharks," she laughs. "It was only later I heard that a number of seals were spotted off the coast of France. It's probably just as well that I didn't know. This way I didn't have to worry about whether or not seals were dangerous."

Unknown drive

The rules of a Channel-Cross stipulate that if the swimmer touches the side of a lifeboat, or the pacer-swimmer, she is instantly disqualified. Kim was fed once every hour by her support crew, who pushed out a small raft, attached to two 8 foot poles, with hot or cold liquid supplements, like Ensure, Gatorade, or Coke.

"It was like I had a little tray," she says. "You become very dehydrated in the water, in addition to losing body heat. You're not aware of being thirsty, because the water is so cold. But you are. The swim was completed in 16 hours and thirty three

minutes, and ultimately raised \$75,000 for the hospitals.

What drives her? She isn't sure, beyond the most cursory reference to a desire to stimulate and challenge herself. This might be an acceptable explanation for someone more selfish and superficial than Kim Middleton, but the question begs for a deeper answer. And in much the way she herself has grown into her swimming, she may have to grow in experience before she can provide one. An intensely spiritual woman, Kim Middleton sees herself on a path of self discovery, of which the swimming is only a small part.

Kim thinks about God when she is in the water, not necessarily praying that she will finish, though there is that aspect to it, but also feeling God above her, below her in the water, indeed all around her and deep inside as well.

Spiritual faith

"Where I see God, always, is in nature," she says softly. "I used to think about God as a person. Now I see God as a spirit, outside of us, and in our hearts, too." Her faith, the core of

her being, has pulled her through countless crises in her life, always drawing her back to solid footing and helping her draw strength and purpose.

She has not discounted the possibility of entering the ministry at some later date, but says, "There are really many different ways to minister, aren't there? As many as there are ways to worship. The work I do here in the residential program is a form of ministry, to me. Raising money for the causes I've swam for, challenging myself. These are all forms of ministry. Whatever direction my life will take, I need to challenge myself."

She admits that she is unsure about whether or not she will continue on the marathon swim circuit. At 30, she has already swam some of the most challenging bodies of water in the world, and she did it, partly, because it was there. It may not have been the Olympics, but dreams don't die for Kim Middleton. They just change. Like she herself changes.

"I may need to do something a little different for awhile," she says quietly. "I need some time to listen to myself and find out what direction



Photo by DOMINIQUE BAY
At 30, Kim Middleton is contemplating her future.

God wants me to go. And what direction I want to go. I've been concentrating on swimming exclusively for the past few years. I need to find out what comes next. Whether that includes swimming, I don't know yet. But I need some new challenges."

She laughs suddenly, joyously. "There are all kinds of challenges" she says in a clear, warm voice. "Aren't there?"

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