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# All hail the water warrior

*Michigan woman awash in belated accolades after swimming the English Channel*

It was 11 hours, 31 minutes and seven seconds of swimming in 58-degree salt water seasoned with marine fuel and heaven knows what else.

There were rules and regulations — No wetsuit! Don't touch the swimmer! — and



NEAL RUBIN

jellyfish the size of extra-large pizzas, and by the end, Jenny Birmelin's shoulders felt like they'd been harpooned

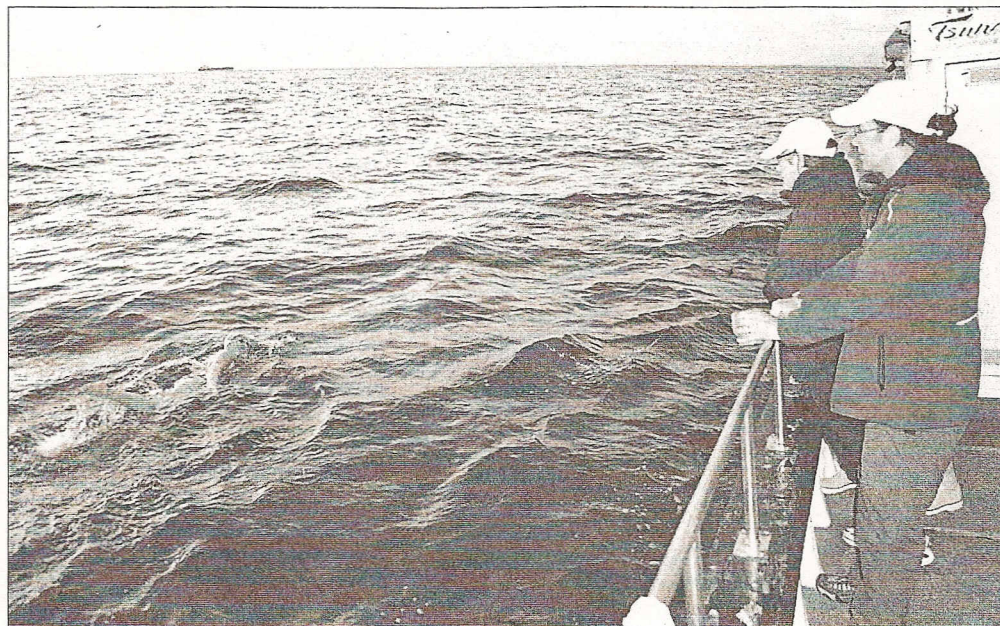
with kebab skewers.

Last August, Birmelin sketched an Olde English D on the ceiling of an English pub where only those who've swum the English Channel are allowed to scrawl graffiti. Today, the middle school math teacher from Farmington Hills is in a comic strip. May 6, she'll throw out the first pitch at a Detroit Tigers game.

Those are good and cool and deserved things, the plump fruits of years of planning and work. Birmelin, 34, will tell you she is goal-oriented, competitive and driven — six months pregnant, she's practicing her pitching three days a week — and she had only one flickering moment of doubt as she became the first Michigan woman to make the crossing.

That was at the 4½-hour mark, when the water turned noticeably colder and she'd burned through her carbs and her body started consuming itself. What's worse, she thought: The half-hour Boat Ride of Failure back to England, or swimming six or eight hours more to France?

Onward she went, grabbing sustenance along the way from a Tigers souvenir cup in a net at the end of a stick. Her ultimate reward was deep personal satisfaction and, back home, a large quotient of indifference. When she bought the license



Lynn Frikker

Jenny Birmelin swims the English Channel as her crew looks on from the chase boat.

plate for her green Ford Escape that says ENGCHNL, the bored clerk at the Secretary of State office didn't even ask why.

But she knows, her students know, and now the readers of the 200 newspapers that carry "Frazz" know. It's a start.

## Comic strip fame

Jef Mallett of Huntington Woods, the creator of "Frazz," knows Birmelin from triathlons and swim meets. That's how she found herself in the



Birmelin

comics, and how she came to be drinking apple juice in a bagel shop with a reporter who wondered one thing more than any other:

Was it fun? Was it more than just endurable to grind through the chop in a time that tied for the fastest crossing by an American all year?

"Yeah," she says, and her eyes actually flash at the thought.

She was awash in the elements, she says, with just a cap,

a swimsuit, ear plugs and the Vaseline-and-lanolin sludge her aunt mixed in a crock pot. Her husband, Noah, who would swim the last stretch with her, was on the chase boat with a few friends.

"Your senses are so heightened," she says, that the sight of a freighter or a cheer from the boat seem like the most important thing on Earth. And the only thing better than testing yourself, training your mind to overcome your body's logical rebellion, is passing the exam.

nrubin@detnews.com  
(313) 222-1874



Jef Mallett

Jef Mallett of Huntington Woods, the creator of "Frazz," knows Jenny Birmelin from triathlons and swim meets and included her in his comic strip, which runs in 200 newspapers, including The Detroit News.