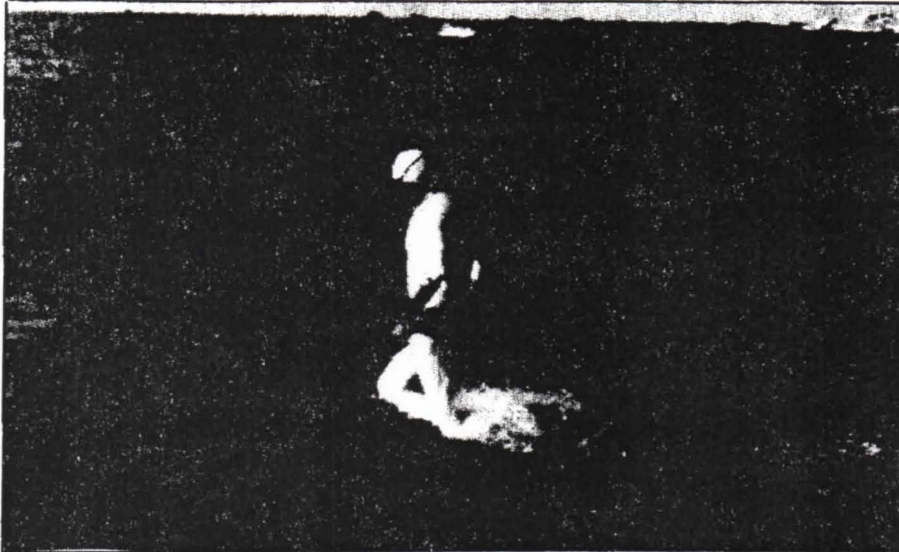


Impossibility Challenger

ACROSS THE CHANNEL

- TRISHUL CHERNS



Adhiratha Keefe heads off to France

Vasanti Niemz, 28, of Heidelberg, West Germany and 38 year old Adhiratha Keefe of Jamaica, New York swam the English Channel in September of 1985. Both students of Sri Chinmoy are marathoners. They took up the challenge of swimming the Channel four and a half months prior to their successes.

Vasanti, who works as a translator, became the first German woman to swim the English Channel. She did it on September 9, 1985 in 16 hours and 55 minutes. Her best marathon time is 4 hours and 40 minutes. She has also completed 2 twelve-hour race walks.

Adhiratha, Chief of Records Management for UNICEF, crossed the Channel in 14 hours and 51 minutes on September 10, 1985. His ten-year ultra-sport career has taken him through 10 marathons, 4 ultramarathons and 4, 24-hour cycling races. Six foot, six inches and weighing 210 pounds. Adhiratha's best marathon time is 3 hours 27 minutes.

What was the challenge of swimming the English Channel for you?

Vasanti:

I was looking for something to take me to my ultimate limits. I wanted to have an experience to transcend myself physically and spiritually. I had run one marathon and walked in two twelve-hour racewalks, but they were not on the same scale. Then, I got a leg injury last year when I was training for the New York City Marathon. I had to do something, so I switched to swimming. Then one day my meditation teacher, Sri Chinmoy, brought up the idea of someone swimming the English Channel. I was thrilled by the idea because I

have had a great love of the water since I was a child. Many members of our Marathon Team had done remarkable things, so I felt that maybe this was my opportunity. I felt that I could train for this event in a short period of time if I took a spiritual attitude.

What were the conditions like for you in this ordeal?

Adhiratha:

First of all, for me, the water was very cold. I had been training in 74°F water for about a month beforehand. Starting in April I trained in 50°F water, but in the northeastern part of the United States the water gets warmer as the summer goes on.

There was nothing I could do except over-train the distance since there wasn't any place where I could swim in cold water. But I did go to Dover ten days early. The first day I could only stay in an hour, the next day I stayed in 4½ hours and the following day, 7 hours. From there I had to taper down. So I was becoming acclimatized to the water before the event, but it still was cold for me. I trained without grease and a cap, but then on the day of the event, I did use grease and a cap. I believe the temperature that day was in the upper 50's. I didn't check because I basically didn't want to know while I was doing it. When I receive a copy of the report from the Observer* all that information will be given. The weather I had was excellent. They had been waiting for that sort of weather all summer long. I was told that they usually have had a hundred challengers in the last few years, but this year they had only 33 and 18 of those went on the two days when Vasanti and I tried. There were 10 on her day, and I believe 6 or 8 on mine.

**The Observer is the official organisation which monitors and verifies all Channel crossing attempts.*

What was the hardest and the easiest part of the swim?

Vasanti:

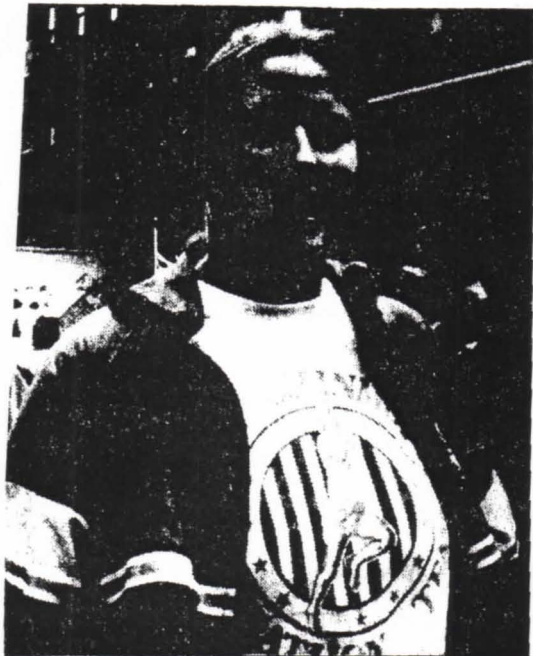
The hardest part for me actually was the first two hours because I had no idea what the whole swim was going to be like. Then after 3 or 4 hours they were telling me that I had a good pace and that I could probably make it in 12 hours. And as I had reckoned I could make it in 16 hours, I was very happy with 12 hours prospect. And so it was really easy for me. After 6 hours when I could already see the French coast, I had the feeling that I had already done the swim. I only had to continue swimming and just finish it. But I had the feeling that inwardly, or in the inner world, I had already done the swim. Then, just one point came after 12 hours when I realised that I was not getting very much closer to the shore because the tide was starting to get against me. Then I started thinking - how many more miles, how much longer will it take me? But it wasn't really bad. After one hour or so I just continued swimming without thinking "how far is it?"

Adhiratha:

The hardest part of the swim for me came at 6 hours, and that's when I realised that I might have three times the distance, time wise, to go and maybe more, and that I was very cold and my mind said "if I get three times this cold I don't think I will be able to make it." That was the hardest part

- to just keep going. The easiest part was finishing. Once I touched the bottom and I was going to the shore, knowing that I was going to make it, was the most important thing.

What is your background in endurance events for this event, such as swimming and running?



Vasanti Niemz - First German woman to swim the Channel

Vasanti:

My training, which I only started in April, consisted of a couple of longer swims. I had two 5-hour swims and two actual trials where I wanted to test my capacity for the Channel. There was an 8-hour swim and a 12-hour swim. This 12-hour swim especially gave me a lot of confidence for the Channel because I knew I could stay in the water for at least twelve hours and that my capacity and strength had increased. So this was quite a good preparation. Other than swimming, I just did the marathon and the two 12-hour walks where I also had good experiences revealing my strong endurance.

Adhiratha:

Well I have done about 10 marathons since 1977 and four ultramarathons of up to 50 miles. Also I have done three or four long distance bicycle races, doing as much as 315 miles in one day. With regard to swimming, a few years ago I swam 10 kilometres, and participated in two triathlons with the maximum distance, I believe, of a mile and a half. Before doing the Channel I did a training event that Sri Chinmoy asked us to do in preparation for the Channel swim and that was a 13-mile swim and an 18-mile swim. By the end of May I was able to do a 13-mile

swim. At the end of June I attempted an 18-mile swim in the cold water, and of the people who tried, I got the furthest; but it was only 6 miles. Two weeks later we tried it in warmer water and I was able (as well as some of my friends) to complete the 18 miles.

Do running and swimming complement each other?

Vasanti:

Yes, they complement each other when you have running injuries. Swimming gives you strength and improves your breathing. I did not run for 4½ months while training for the Channel, yet I ran a personal best for two miles, just recently, with only four days of training. If one is overweight, rotating swimming and running is good because it saves one's joints from the constant pounding.

Adhiratha:

I think running the marathon and doing the other distance events prepared me mentally to do the Channel. I learned from doing the marathon that when you start to have certain types of pain, you have to find another way to run so that you don't stress that particular limb. And the same is true with swimming. If you start to have pain in your shoulder, you try to pull more with your arms. And if it's in your wrists, you pull more with your upper arm and you roll your body more to get more leverage out of your shoulders. So you start to learn after being hours and hours in the water how, if one thing starts to hurt for a while, you try to take the weight on another part of your body.

Were there any secrets that aided you in this event?

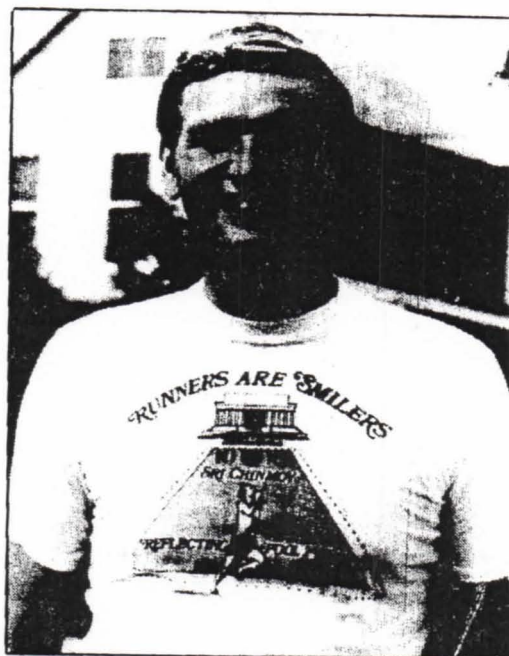
Vasanti:

There was one secret. My meditation teacher wrote the Channel Song especially for our Channel swim, and I learned it before the swim. Then during the swim I kept singing it to myself. I had had the experience before in the 12-hour walk that music can help you a lot in overcoming pains or overcoming mental fatigue. Singing the song to myself, I think, helped me a great deal in keeping up a good spirit.

Adhiratha:

It was the distance training I'd done in other events and the meditation. Together, those two things, and the fact I'd seen Sri Chinmoy himself do many things that people said they didn't think he'd do, such as going from being a champion sprinter to doing marathons; and then taking up tennis when he'd never played tennis. He has started to lift weights in the last year,

and now he's up to pressing 200 pounds with one hand. Basically, so many things that he's done - when I was having difficulties with my stroke, I'd sometimes think of watching Sri Chinmoy in a marathon, and how he keeps going. And I thought of him lifting weights sometimes, and that helped me, too.



Adhiratha Keefe swam the Channel as a birthday present to the U.N.

About your diet - what was your preparation before the event, and what did you eat and drink during the event?

Vasanti:

My preparation consisted of taking lots of vitamins and minerals, tofu for protein, fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grain bread and brown rice. I've been a vegetarian for four years, so I just ate my usual food so I could have a good performance. And right before the swim I did do a bit of carbo-loading - lots of pasta just like you do before a marathon. During the swim I was given mostly liquids - vitamin drinks, protein drinks, and lots of fruit sugar.

Adhiratha:

Well, I'm a vegetarian and I've been one for about 15 years. In July I spoke to Vasanti on the phone and she told me that lots of really good swimmers who were coming to try the Channel weren't making it because they were too thin, so she said, "get fat." I'm quite thin naturally, so I knew I had to eat more. It was quite a strange situation because most of the time we runners try to lose weight. I remember years ago when I was training for the marathon, I tried to take off weight. So, I

started talking to people that had gained weight and asked them what their secret was. They said to eat as many times a day as I could and to sleep right after eating. The Sumo wrestlers who were here in New York talked about how they gained weight. I read that and thought how I could apply it. I ate a lot of cheese type of things, potatoes and pasta. I didn't go in for a lot of candies and sugary things, but anything solid that I thought would help me gain weight I ate, along with protein powder and some food supplements.

Before the event I drank a lot of liquids and even while waiting for the pilot to come I drank a quart of liquid - some ERG type of drink. During the event, I was given mostly mashed fruit in juices, extra honey, sugar and after six hours they were giving me more and more sugar and hot chocolate along with pears and bananas. I was fed every hour and after six hours, every forty-five minutes, and after twelve hours, every half hour.

Did you have any spiritual experiences during the event?

Vasanti:

What occurred to me during the swim very often was that the swim was in some ways like a metaphor for the spiritual life. That you always try to reach the goal. When you swim you cannot think all the time, "how far is the goal?" The thing is you just have to keep moving and not get discouraged, even if the tide's against you and you don't make very much progress, just the fact that you keep on going. That is what really gives you joy. You don't have any joy if you just think, "Oh how far do I still have to go?" The joy is if you really keep it up. Also it is amazing how much power one really has when one has joy. At seven hours in the swim, I had so much joy and had no exhaustion at all. If one can keep up a meditative, positive attitude, one can go beyond one's limits easily. The swim has definitely changed me - it made me a better person. It increased and channelled my energies and gave me an inner purification.

Adhiratha:

The most important experience that I had was waiting for the boat to arrive. The boat was basically an hour later than the pilot had expected to arrive on the shore. This gave me the opportunity to practise a walking meditation up and down the beach. I just tried to focus on my heart and I tried to be aware that I had done everything that I could do - done my training, and to be accepting of where my

training was, and just to sort of enjoy this event as much as I could. Many times in Queens, where I live, I had walked in just such a walking meditation where Sri Chinmoy was present. Walking on the beach in a meditative state I felt like I was in Queens and that Sri Chinmoy was watching me. So that was really important - to feel that you're half way around the world and you are just on another beach. You have trained on the beach in Queens. I was in England to do the event, but I felt like I was on a beach at home.

What does it feel like to be the first German woman to cross the English Channel?

Vasanti:

I hope it inspires people. I am amazed that no German woman has completed it before. I hope it shows that meditation and sports go together quite well.

What do you recommend for someone who wants to swim the Channel?

Adhiratha:

First they have to figure out why they want to do it. Then they have to examine all of the possibilities - what needs to be done, then make a decision and commitment. This has to be the most important thing for them for the next six months. Then they have to set about getting themselves


ready for all the possibilities and mentally they have to be able to accept that, doing all that, they might still fail. Otherwise it will be torture with the idea that they might fail. They must feel that they'll gain enough from the training whether they succeed or not and that the determination they build will be worth it to them. Then they'll be able to do it.

What is your next challenge?

Vasanti:

I have to see. I was thinking already about going back to the Channel and training for better speed and improve the time - or maybe even double. But then you really have to improve the speed. Otherwise I might go back to running and try for a good marathon or else the triathlon. I have to see.

Adhiratha:

I'm not sure yet. Well I'm starting to train for the New York City Marathon. I'll see what happens. I'll see what inner feeling I get, and possibly Sri Chinmoy will say something. 

Interestingly, Sri Chinmoy did say something. Next year there will be a Sri Chinmoy Superman Ultimate Triathlon - first swim the English Channel, then bike 150 miles and finish up with a 50 mile run!

Runners are Smilers (Weekly 3.2km Races)

Melbourne: Ph (03) 825 476

Mondays 6.30 p.m.

Collingwood Athletic Club Track
Heidelberg Rd, Elifton Hill

Canberra: Ph (06) 435 5161

Tuesdays 5 p.m.