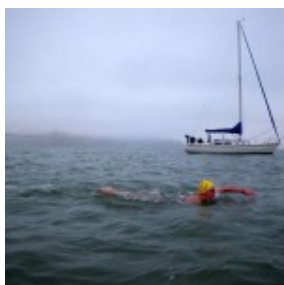


Tahoe City woman attempting to make swimming history

By Patricia Yollin

Karen Rogers is one of the few females in the world who covets the physique of a well-blubbered walrus. That's because she'll be in the ocean at least 15 hours, if all goes well, when she tries on Friday to become the first woman to swim from the Farallon Islands to San Francisco's Aquatic Park – a distance of more than 30 miles in treacherous, bone-chilling water.

"This is something I've thought about for many, many years," said the 43-year-old Rogers, who has lived in Tahoe City 20 years. "It's just a feeling I get when I'm in the water. I don't really believe I belong on land. I don't feel very evolved."



Karen Rogers of Tahoe City is going to swim from the Farallon Islands to San Francisco on July 2. Photos provided by Karen Rogers

Over the decades, at least eight people have attempted to swim

from the Farallones to the California mainland. Only Stuart Evans and Ted Erikson succeeded. A six-person relay ended on June 19 when one member of the Night Train Swimmers got hypothermia.

It took Evans 13 hours and 46 minutes to swim from the Farallon Islands to Bolinas Point in August 1967. The following month Erikson spent 14 hours and 38 minutes in the water, ending his swim below the center span of the Golden Gate Bridge. His two previous efforts had failed.

He said water temperatures dropped as he approached the bay during his first aborted attempt. He became disoriented and was pulled out of the water.

“The nurse on board could not find a pulse, so I was reported dead. I was deep into hypothermia and really not in contact with the world,” recalled Erikson, 82, of Chicago. “And we had two shark encounters, driven off or killed with a very serious .357 Magnum. My second attempt was halted by long, high swells that made me so seasick that I threw up feedings and became too weak to continue.”

Rogers said her coldest swim so far occurred in 41-degree Lake Tahoe water on Inauguration Day 2009. The duration of a later 21.5-mile effort traversing the length of the lake: 10 hours and 50 minutes.

“I decided it was time to wash away everything and start new, so I went down to the lake,” said Rogers, who has two sons, 16 and 18. She grew up in the Bay Area, in Orinda, and belongs to the South End Rowing Club in San Francisco. She is self-employed, specializing in restaurant accounting. Soon, she’d like to start a program to get teenage girls into the open water.

In May, Rogers swam 23 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge to the San Mateo Bridge in seven hours and 21 minutes. The Farallones swim, however, is the most ambitious she’s

attempted. She'll start around 2 or 3am, touch the island if the waves don't knock her around – "it's not really a great place to be bleeding" – and contend with water in the low 50s for much of her journey.

"This is probably the most challenging swim that's ever been done," said Chris "El Sharko" Blakeslee, 60, who crossed the English Channel in 2004 and, as Rogers' team leader, is the only person authorized to end her attempt. "But she has a body type conducive to cold-water swimming, she's older – you need to have that mental ability to gauge yourself – she has stamina, and she's very focused. All those things together make her an ideal candidate."

He conceded the undertaking would seem deranged to most people. Even at the South End Rowing Club, he said, some members consider it a little extreme.

"But I think it's a noble goal," said Blakeslee, who will keep a close eye on Rogers' stroke count and look for sudden drops that could signal trouble.

The challenges, as Rogers sees it, include cold water, the sheer duration of the swim, strong winds, high waves, fog, tides, the seasickness that's plagued her recently in the ocean and various forms of sea life.

"The great white sharks are still on vacation in Hawaii, or are on their way back," she said. "But there may be a couple renegade ones. I've been rammed by sea lions before, and they've given me a pretty good charley horse. And if I were to swim into a jellyfish bloom, it wreaks havoc on your nervous system."

But Rogers is ready. To get in shape physically, she has relied on running, mountain biking, Pilates, yoga, stretching and swimming in pools and San Francisco Bay. She also has tried to add an extra layer of insulation to her 5-foot-7 frame, eating everything from avocados to coconut ice cream

with guava syrup. She currently weighs 172 pounds.

To prepare mentally, she uses visualization techniques. Once she stared at a painting of Bolinas Ridge all day. And she frequently gazes at a wall full of maps.

“Every day I sit next to the creek by my house,” Rogers said. “I just think about my swim and all the things that could happen and how I’m going to remedy those situations when I’m in the water. But my favorite part of marathon swimming, really, is not thinking about anything: the disassociation in the water for many hours. You just hear the water going past your head.”

Rogers compared the experience to a working meditation – and one that’s crucial in the ocean.

“You can get a lot of wind and chop in the bay, but you can always see land,” she said. “Out in the open ocean, you don’t have that. You have to work through it within yourself. I really like that. I just think sometimes I’m missing a dorsal fin to guide me a little bit.”

She’ll wear only a bathing suit, cap, goggles and earplugs, according to English Channel federation rules, and be accompanied by a large fishing boat, a 62-foot-sailboat and a crew of 17, including five kayakers – they’ll take turns navigating and providing liquid feedings every half-hour from the end of a line. She is paying for the \$10,000 Farallones venture with her savings and private donations.

Bob Roper, the 71-year-old head of logistics for the team, has belonged to the South End Rowing Club for 42 years and still holds the record for the fastest swim from San Francisco to Marin County under the Golden Gate Bridge. He knows, better than most, what Rogers is facing.

“This is a huge, huge attempt,” he said. “It’s not going to be a walk in the park. It’s much better to go in warmer water a

little later in the year, but by then the men in the gray flannel suits will be back. But even when the sharks return, it doesn't mean a swimmer will be on their menu."

Walt Schneebeli, 84-year-old historian of the Dolphin Club, the South End's longtime rival, said, "It's a very difficult thing to do. Our best swimmer has never tried to do this. The hardest part will be the last part. You get swept here and there."

Frequently, Rogers is asked if she's planning to tackle the English Channel. The answer is always no.

"I can't quite get my head out of California," she said. "I'm just a hometown girl who doesn't really want to travel too far to have a challenging experience. There's so much great open-water swimming right here. I really can't even think past that."

Patricia Yollin is a freelance writer based in the Bay Area.

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