

Polar Bear Challenge

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The annual Polar Bear Swim/Challenge has historically been steeped in both lore and intrigue. Over the three winter months, December 21 to March 21, and particularly the last week of the Polar Bear, one would have to turn a blind eye to not notice the number of members consumed by a compulsion to finish. Days off, illness, business trips and winter vacations often led to a mental frenzy of math recalculations ensuring completion by March 21. I always thought the PB could provide a great case study on OCD for anyone studying behavioral psychology. The PB, after all, became all about.... the squares.

When I joined the club in 1978, it was to become a lifetime and lifestyle commitment, and to that end, a personal challenge to participate in every annual Golden Gate, Alcatraz and Polar Bear Swim. Unfortunately, within a few years, due to weather conditions and unforeseen events, the streak of consecutive completions abruptly ceased, with only the PB streak remaining unscathed.

In 1979, I became one half of the swim commission for the next six years. In those early years, given my work with the American Red Cross, I was able to obtain what became for years our official ledger for recording our PB miles: the Red Cross's 50 mile swim chart. That was also the time when "squares" became the currency when discussing how much you swam.

Mind you, the winters "back in the day" were much colder than the winters we're experiencing now. Water would regularly dip well below 50 degrees; a particular distinction infamously tagged as the "Mendoza Line" by the late Commodore, Lou Marcelli. Whenever the air was cold enough on dark early mornings and you found frost on your car windshield, you knew it often meant that the footbath would probably have a solid layer of ice on top. Whoever had the misfortune of breaking ice first, in the early morning before sunrise, would surely experience a vice-like throbbing pain that could make you forget how cold your swim was.

Sometime during the 90s, another PB theme was introduced, though the name hasn't really stuck as much as the concept has remained, as the

culminating threshold of cold: the "Huang Index." Add the daily ambient air temperature to the water temperature for the total. Under 100 degrees is cold. For reference, the lowest I recorded was 87 degrees without factoring wind chill. On the other extreme, for comparison, while once visiting Hawai'i, I got the combined temperatures at 157 degrees.

For about 12 years now, the early (around 6am) swimmers wager on who can guess the lowest water temp and the lowest combined water/air temperature (to a tenth of a degree) for the winter.

Historically, when the PB started in 1974, as I gather from unverified stories and sources, you had to swim 17 miles to earn a furry toy polar bear that was mounted onto a 2" cubed white marble block that represented an ice chunk. Traditionally awarded to all first-time or "virgin" swimmers, subsequent PB completions got you another larger block to build your iceberg PB trophy. Between 1974 and 1978, PB miles grew to 21, then to 24 miles. During my tenure as swim commissioner, and being much younger, I felt that the PB could be a bit more of a challenge, so we raised the mileage, first from 24 to 30 miles in 1980, then to 40 in 1984 where it has remained since. The latter changes, needless to say, led to plenty of club drama, being quite controversial with many members who were ready to hang us.

Unbeknownst to any but to my fellow swim commissioner, Tom Hofmann, it was my intention before I left the commission to have the PB

completion miles be bumped to 50 miles -- simply because that was what the Red Cross chart had room for, therefore leaving what seemed like ten miles of unfinished business on March 21st, a waste of paper. And 50 was a good solid round number. The idea, however, was nixed for fear of unknown repercussions. It was around that time that the PB swim became the PB challenge.

At the time when the PB was bumped to 40 miles, many old timers were upset, complaining it was elitist and discriminatory, which I can relate to now. As a direct result of the 40-mile change, there was created the Old Goat PB option, where you only have to swim 20 miles and be at least 60 years young.

Around the turn of the 21st century there was created another gift to dotage, the Life Begins at 40 award, given to the swimmer whose years of age over 40 multiplied by her/his number of miles over 40 is greatest.

Fast forward to present years, and you have members now completing the PB in three days and some swimming hundreds of miles throughout the winter. Despite the trending of warmer winters, I feel this coming winter, sans sauna, will be the most challenging.

In 2018, the PB was unofficially/officially changed to the Tom Hofmann Annual Polar Bear Swim in honor of Tom's years of selfless dedication to the Dolphin Club.

My PB iceberg...43 consecutive years and counting



The famous Inuit carvings of dancing bears may actually be swimming.