

Champion of the Channel

- 1 In 1926 an editor at the *London Daily News* predicted that Gertrude Ederle, an American swimmer with eighteen world records and three Olympic medals, would fail in her attempt to swim across the English Channel. He claimed that “even the most uncompromising champion of the rights and capacities of women must admit that in contests of physical skill, speed and endurance they must remain forever the weaker sex.” Yet, at only nineteen years old, Ederle not only became the first woman to accomplish this feat, she also broke the men’s record by two hours. Gertrude Ederle’s triumphant swim across the English Channel was a testimony to her determination, innovative spirit, and passion for swimming.
- 2 Crossing the English Channel is a daunting task for any swimmer. At its narrowest point, the channel measures twenty-one miles across. Its icy waters hover around sixty degrees Fahrenheit, and its unruly tides and currents toss swimmers about like bobbing corks. Stinging jellyfish, seaweed, and floating debris from shipwrecks and lost cargoes present added hazards.
- 3 For decades the channel’s perils have defeated countless swimmers. Ederle, too, failed in her first attempt to cross the channel in 1925. Just six miles short of finishing, she became ill, and her coach had to haul her out of the water. Undeterred, Ederle decided to try again. Ederle knew that if she did not complete the challenge this time, she might never get the opportunity to set this record, because a rival female swimmer was preparing to make her second attempt at the crossing as well.
- 4 To prepare for the marathon swim, Ederle found ways to improve her equipment. She and her sister Meg discovered that melted candle wax perfectly sealed goggle edges, effectively waterproofing Ederle’s goggles against hammering waves. The sisters also designed a two-piece silk swimsuit for Ederle. During her first channel-crossing attempt she had worn a standard one-piece swimsuit that, after the lengthy hours of swimming across the channel, had stretched out, filling with water and creating drag, making an already challenging task almost insurmountable. Unlike the cumbersome typical bathing suit, this silk invention weighed little and allowed for easy movement.
- 5 On August 6, 1926, Ederle waded into the channel near Cape Gris-Nez, France. At first she shivered in the bone-chilling water even though she had covered her body in eight layers of grease for insulation. Her limbs felt stiff. Her strokes were irregular. Driving forward, she fought to clear her mind and find what she called her “sphere,” a place where the sea became her only companion and the shrieks of gulls and the humming of boat engines faded away. Using a new overhand stroke called the American crawl, Ederle eventually settled into a steady pace, briskly breaking through waves.
- 6 Throughout Ederle’s swim, two tugboats accompanied her. One carried newspaper reporters who wired dispatches of her progress to shore. The other, displaying a sign that read “This way, ole kid!” with an arrow pointing forward, transported her coach, family, and friends. Her coach played songs, such as “Yes, We Have No Bananas,” on a phonograph so that Ederle could time her strokes to the rhythm. Using a net, her coach also passed her baby bottles of broth for nourishment.
- 7 For hours Ederle swam, dodging debris with an amused smile. However, as she neared the English shore, a sudden fierce storm erupted. The tides and waves forced Ederle backward, and she fought the stubborn swells for several hours. The salty water caused her tongue to swell and inflamed her ears. Yet Ederle felt indescribably happy as she churned through the sea. Finally, as she neared the English shore, the storm abated, and the tide turned. No longer fighting against her, the sea pushed her toward the shore and victory.

- 8 After fourteen hours and thirty-one minutes, Ederle, on wobbly legs, stepped onto the English shore. The waiting crowd roared, honked their automobile horns, blasted their tugboat whistles, and set off flares that flashed in the sky. Ederle had swum into history.
- 9 When Ederle returned to New York, she received a parade, where thousands of people shouted “Trudy!” Not only were everyday American citizens proud of Ederle, but she also inspired them to be more active. Over the next few years, more than 60,000 people credited her with motivating them to earn their American Red Cross swimming certificates. Gertrude Ederle’s accomplishment proved to the world that with determination and passion, it was possible for a person to achieve his or her goals.

SOLO SWIMS ACROSS THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

Earliest Speed Records		
Year	Swimmer	Time
1875	Matthew Webb (M)	21 hours, 45 minutes
1923	Enrico Tiraboschi (M)	16 hours, 33 minutes
1926	Gertrude Ederle (F)	14 hours, 31 minutes
1926	Arnst Vierkotter (M)	12 hours, 38 minutes
Current Speed Records		
Year	Swimmer	Time
2012	Trent Grimsey (M)	6 hours, 55 minutes
2006	Yveta Hlavacova (F)	7 hours, 25 minutes