

Headline: Dutchman swims epic ice-skating course threatened by climate change

Byline: Agence France-Presse

Published Date: 03:22 AM June 25, 2019

Section: sports

Word Count: 3779

Content:

Dutch long distance swimmer and former World Champion Maarten van der Weijden (top) passes Stavoren during his second attempt to swim along the Elfstedentocht, a journey of over 200 kilometers in Stavoren, The Netherlands, on June 22, 2019. – In August 2018, the swimmer raised more than five million euros for cancer research, even though he did not finish the journey. (Photo by Vincent Jannink / ANP / AFP) / Netherlands OUT

Dutch long distance swimmer and former World Champion Maarten van der Weijden (top) passes Stavoren during his second attempt to swim along the Elfstedentocht, a journey of over 200 kilometers in Stavoren, The Netherlands, on June 22, 2019. – In August 2018, the swimmer raised more than five million euros for cancer research, even though he did not finish the journey. (Photo by Vincent Jannink / ANP / AFP) / Netherlands OUT

A Dutchman on Monday completed a marathon swim along the route of the country's most famed ice skating race — which has not been held for two decades as climate change bites.

Instead of skating the daunting "Elfstedentocht" (Eleven cities race), Olympic gold marathon swimmer Maarten van der Weijden ploughed his way through all 195 kilometres (121 miles) of its murky canals.

Van der Weijden embarked on the epic journey across northern Friesland province on Friday afternoon and finally finished it on Monday evening, as the Netherlands basked in a heatwave.

"It took a long time but it was also very special and very beautiful," the 38-year-old was quoted as saying by broadcaster NOS.

Van der Weijden is a cancer survivor who overcame leukaemia to win a gold medal in the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing in the 10-kilometre open water race.

His feat of endurance raised 3.9 million euros for cancer research.

It is Van der Weijden's second bid to complete the route after failing last year.

This time he said he had slept and eaten more, and worn a warmer wetsuit, Dutch news agency ANP reported.

"I love swimming, helping others and setting goals for myself," he told the Christian-based broadcaster EO in a recent interview.

The swimmer followed the same route as the Elfstedentocht, one of the Netherlands' most beloved traditions which is now enduring a record-equalling drought.

The previous edition was in 1997, the last time the ice was thick enough to support both skaters and the hundreds of thousands of spectators that the event normally attracts.

With meteorologists predicting ever-warmer weather due to global warming, it is uncertain when another Elfstedentocht will be held again on ice.

In the meantime, Van der Weijden's alternative marathon along the course has captured the country's imagination, with supporters cheering him on along his route.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte hailed the swimmer's "incredible performance", saying on Twitter: "The whole of the Netherlands is swimming with you!"

Completing the skating race is seen as a major achievement and so important that soldiers are allowed to wear its medal, called the "Elfstedenkruisje" (Eleven cities cross), on their military uniforms.

Participants qualify for the medal after collecting stamps on a card from all the 11 cities around Friesland with the start and end in the city of Leeuwarden.

Unfortunately for Van der Weijden, the famously rule-abiding Dutch say he will not receive an Elfstedenkruisje at the end of his epic swim.

"Perhaps he deserves a cross, but he won't get one," Immie Jonkman, chairwoman of the Eleven cities marathon, told Frisian regional radio.

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"Our cross is only for people who have skated the marathon. Although we applaud him, we cannot make an exception."