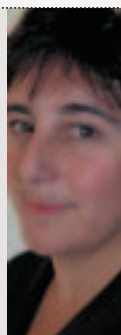


Marathon man

Distance swimming started out as an activity to stay fit and healthy but has turned into a passion for Terry O'Brien, who recently took on the English Channel. SUE WEBSTER reports



Terry O'Brien spent \$20,000 to be smeared with pig fat before swimming 15 hours across the world's busiest shipping lane. It makes an ASIC audit seem like a viable alternative.

The suburban Melbourne financial planner realised a dream when he waded into 18 degree waters off Dover last August, determined to become the 41st Australian making the 54,000 swim strokes from England to France.

"Swimming the English Channel is the dream of every open water swimmer," the 50-year-old said. "But only 30 per cent finish it."

O'Brien was almost one of the failures, due to the fickle British weather. "You've only got a seven-day window for your attempt, and for the first three to four days I scored gale force winds."

He simply had to wait.

"I'd waited 18 months for this. I'd trained hard with my coach John van Wiese and my training partner – 2003 English Channel swimmer Alby Bardoel. I'd had to bulk up and I'd increased my weight from 70kg to 85kg."

Then there was the outlay of the airfare, accommodation and hiring the accompanying boat.

"I realised you can get over there and not even swim. But then it magically cleared up."

On the last day allowed him, O'Brien was slathered with a cold-beating mixture of lano-

lin and pig fat (no wetsuits are allowed for official crossings) and cheered off by his band of supporters, including business partner Terry McMaster.

"It's like the League of Nations over there, there's Czechs, Japanese, Americans. Everyone congregates on the beach at Dover. Everyone wants you to do it. There's no competition."

Just as well, the existing record is seven hours and four minutes. At one stage, when O'Brien was going well, the support team estimated he might make it in 12 hours.

"They were wrapt with me on the boat because I was swimming 60 strokes to the minute. Normally when you're tired, you do 30-40 strokes to the minute.

"But then the Channel sent in this little tide that sends you back to England. For two hours I went nowhere. Then the Channel God let me in."

The tide changes every six hours, making the 32km stretch deceptive. O'Brien said: "You swim twice as far because the tides are tremendous. And it's the busiest shipping lane in the world. Luckily I swam on a Sunday, so there wasn't much traffic. Apparently when those big ships go past they throw back a wake of almost one-metre waves.

"There was lots of debris in the water and quite a few jellyfish – stinging ones like blue bottles – but I was okay with that.

"You get to the first shipping lane, where the ships are heading one way, from Germany to France. That took 4.5 hours to cross. Then you cross a separation lane, that takes a couple of hours, and then you go into the second shipping lane where they sail to Germany. And that's when the tiredness occurred."

If he gave in, it would be a waste of the 1,200-plus kilometres of training he'd done, and the 400 hours of swimming he'd put in for this attempt.

But he wasn't struggling alone. "Terry McMaster did four lots of half-hour swims with me. The rules say you have to swim the first hour by yourself then someone can join you for small sections.

The practice's 'IT website guru' John Haywood (who had swum the Channel twice) was also there swimming alongside at the finish. It was a team effort, even down to using Terry McMaster's home lap pool for training in bayside Melbourne.

The group meets regularly for early-morning swims in Port Phillip Bay – water that sometimes proves even colder than the Channel.

"The worst swims I've ever had to endure were two hours in water of eight or nine degrees off Brighton beach at Melbourne. Your body is just screaming at the end."

But it wasn't screaming enough when O'Brien joined Australia's longest open-water event – the swim from Cottesloe beach in Western Australia to Rottnest Island. It was one of the worst years in the race's history for bad weather.

"The longer you went on, the worse it got," O'Brien said. "Apart from the early finishers, all the other swimmers pulled out because it was too rough. But I didn't know any better, so I kept going!"

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It took him 11.5 hours. "I got lost due to hypothermia. It affects you so that you don't know where you are. Upon finishing, I didn't know what all the fuss was about."

Hypothermia. Lost. Storm at sea. Why?

"A lot of people have suggested it's a mid-life crisis sport. But what I find is that this sport is different to any other. You get passionate about it. It pits you against yourself," he says.

"I want to live until I'm 100 and cold water swimming helps prolong your life.

"You spend 30 minutes exerting yourself in 8 to 9 degree water and then you take a sauna, I tell you, you just feel fantastic. The endorphins race to the head and into your brain and you feel great for the rest of the day.

"There's no weight bearing, like other exercise. It's like yoga in the water. I recommend it to anyone growing old."

He speaks with some gravity because Terry O'Brien very nearly didn't grow old.

1995 and the father of three girls, the youngest a baby, suffered a stroke – aged 39.

"All through my teenage years I used to get these headaches but what I know now was a series of mini-strokes," he says. "I had a stressful job as a financial planner for a bank. We had to meet enormous targets and I packed it up – I had a major stroke.

But O'Brien was lucky that he suffered his stroke when he was young, healthy and able to fight back.

A keen sportsman, he enjoyed running and won professional races, more over distance than sprinting. He played VFA footy with his local team and tasted defeat in the 1977 VFA grand final. He only gave up those sports when he dislocated his hip, which led to bad osteo-arthritis.

The stroke changed things on the work

front, too. After a stint at Count, O'Brien started MCA Financial Planners through MCA Accountants in Dandenong in October 2001, and was joined by Terry McMaster in 2004.

"I got offered equity in the financial planning practice and I brought Terry in because he was the ideas man... and for his contacts!"

He describes the other Terry as "a well-to-do solicitor and accountant offering specialist financial planning to doctors and dentists".

On the other hand, O'Brien, a BEc from Monash University, operates as a one-man band at the other end of the demographic scale, in working-class Dandenong. "Staff? I don't need them yet."

The pair each holds 35 per cent, with a firm of accountants holding 30 per cent in an independent joint venture offering planning and investment services to financial planners and accountants.

Their company, MCA, was born from the FSR licence requirements of 2002.

The company now provides low-cost proper authorities, allowing members to pay only for the services required.

O'Brien explains the philosophy: "We try to simplify it as much as possible. For example, we use index funds; it's half the costs, half the ongoing MERs, no exit fees and the client knows where it's going. There are a lot of advisers worth their salt who make the right calls with active managers but when you look at the active managed funds and the index, on average the index outperforms them all.

"Platforms? We've got relations with nearly all of them. But by using our indexing strategy, we don't need wholesaling. With an Australian share fund we can get down to .5 per cent MER and we're getting a master fund with the availability of 20-30 fund managers."

MCA charges for the compliance service – "\$8,000 to give them their ticket," O'Brien says. "When it comes to individual fund or share research within the dealer's wide recommended list, we allow them to outsource it.

It's the same with professional indemnity cover or plan software.

"It's a very popular model, a good model for financial planners and accountants who are comfortable with what they're doing. They don't need you to do research on the hundreds of products out there; they just want to go their way."

MCA does not require its members to market managed funds or insurance products. There are no conditions or requirements for minimum funds under management or monthly or annual sales targets. MCA does not interfere with the conduct of the member's practice in any way, except to require the member to comply with the Corporations Act and other relevant legislation.

O'Brien says: "About 30 per cent of my time is spent giving advice and 70 per cent spent building the dealer group.

The number of authorised representatives has risen since October 2002 from "just me" to about 30, with O'Brien travelling as far away as Emerald in Queensland to undertake a compliance check.

Through associates, MCA can link its planners to a network of related services including SMSF formation, administration and marketing, wills and estate planning services, insurance and property syndicates.

Future plans?

"More of the same," says O'Brien. Succession planning hasn't figured in his thoughts though. "I'm only young. Possibly my daughters might be interested, but they'd hate to work for their dad."

And future plans for swimming? The two Terrys are planning to tackle the Rottneest Island swim again this year.

Um ... Cottlesloe beach ... isn't that where sharks eat swimmers?

"Come on, which self-respecting shark would eat a financial planner?" he jokes. ♣



Terry O'Brien (second from right) with his Channel swim support team: John Haywood (left), Terry McMaster (second from left) and Alby Bardoe (right).