

{ ON THE COVER }



# THE COLD WAR

South African extreme swimmers are redrawing the frontiers of human endurance. **Tiara Walters** met one of these lunatics, Ryan Stramrood, ahead of his crossing from Russia to Alaska

Photographs: **Roger Horrocks**

In an amateur video of extreme swimmer Ryan Stramrood's ice mile inside the Antarctic Circle in May, you watch him skirt the coast of death.

Shattered and disorientated, he climbs back aboard a cruise ship after ploughing through an expanse of -1°C water.

He staggers past the applauding support crew.

Clad in a speedo, cap and goggles adorned with the South African flag, he is all hulking shoulders and battle-axe biceps — a ripped embodiment of macho patriotism.

Stramrood is blanketed and slumped in the ship's medical unit. He has spent 32 minutes crawling through subzero purgatory. A normal human being's system would have been shocked into panic and submission within two minutes.

Half an hour earlier, he was a robust, garrulous athlete with lively brown eyes. Now his gaze is dull and vacant as he stares down hypothermia.

"Look at me. Look at me," says the expedition doctor, desperation in his voice. Stramrood audibly slurps in air and expels it.

His swim was dogged by iceberg floes and the unwanted attentions of a leopard seal — which

probably couldn't believe its luck when 87kg of homo sapien muscle flopped into its mostly meatless mitts. (Stramrood stopped short of klapping it on the schnozz to dissuade it, but it was a dicey moment.)

"Do you know who I am? Ryan, do you know who I am?" asks the doctor.

Stramrood finally responds with a grunt. The entire medical cabin, packed with his comrades, breathes a sigh of relief. He is still there.

He is hauled off to a hot shower that lasts 45 minutes. Life returns.

This is a 40-year-old man with a toddler son and vivacious wife. How big must his internal dragon be that he goes to such lengths to slay it? This is the less glamorous, arguably insane side to extreme ice-swimming. Don't be deceived by the slick media packaging of the exploits of Lewis Pugh — the "Human Polar Bear" — celebrated in an Investec TV commercial. (For the record, there are no polar bears in the Antarctic.)

"There's nothing nice about swimming in ultra-cold water," says Stramrood. "But I guess that's why I like it. Anyone can swim a distance, but it's extremely hard to swim without a wetsuit in those

conditions. You might as well be naked."

He's an advertising entrepreneur by day, whose motivational talks raise funds to develop underprivileged swimmers.

Only a handful of extreme ice swimmers rival Pugh's exploits —



and most of them are Capetonians whose culture of aquatic derring-do was bred in the cold, wild Benguela current that swooshes around the southwestern tip of Africa.

Stramrood credits these men as his swimming partners — an aquatic boys' club of daredevils who have equalled and exceeded his achievements. Ram Barkai, Stramrood's

"mentor", holds the 2008 Guinness World Record for the southernmost swim in Antarctica — 1km at 1°C.

Last year Stramrood and partners completed the first official ice mile in the Arctic Circle; and he says his March swim was the world's first official mile within the Antarctic Circle.

But Pugh, whom Stramrood credits as an early mentor, swam a mile in 2°C water well within the Antarctic Circle in 2005.

Stramrood, however, says his and his partners' ice miles are the first to be recognised by the International Ice Swimming Association, founded in 2009 by Barkai himself. Stramrood is a founding member.

"Before the association, there was no body regulating or recognising ice-swim claims or standardising the challenge," he explains. The rules dictate that an ice mile must be outdoors in 5°C waters or less — proven by thermometer readings and an affidavit — and include "lots" of other safety requirements.

Stramrood says he and his team were also the first to swim around the southernmost tip of South America and, in 2012, they braved a 1km swim in 0°C Siberian waters. The air temperature was -33°C.

At the end of July, Stramrood will join the Madswimmers charity group for a 4km swim between the Diomed Islands in the Bering Strait. The Madswimmers will be wetsuited, but our subzero hero will sport nothing but speedo, cap and goggles.

"I'm expecting the water to be anywhere between 4°C and 7°C. To place it in perspective, the water between Cape Town and Robben Island at this time of year may be between 13°C and 16°C — and that is very cold by swimming standards."

Stramrood, from Constantia, took up the sport at the relatively advanced age of 26, in an effort "to get off the couch". He did his first

**'There's nothing nice about swimming in ultra-cold water'**

crossing from Cape Town to Robben Island two years later. He has since completed 46 crossings.

This will be his first solo attempt at the Bering Strait route. "I've had a fetish for the Diomed Islands for a long time." He will freestyle his way from Big Diomed, ruled by

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CONTINENTAL DRIFT: A summer satellite image of the Diomed Islands in the Bering Strait, between Alaska and Russia. Stramrood will swim westward from Russia's Big Diomed to the US's Little Diomed. The islands are about 4km apart, with an ice bridge connecting them in winter

Vladimir Putin, to Little Diomed, half the battle. That's when your core temperature drops and you go down into a horrible, dangerous

whatever ... I get a little high from it, I suppose."

**'I make myself angry, because anger generates heat. It's a bit embarrassing if you can't find a private place to do it'**

But you also get something called 'turning the corner' — that noticeable moment when you feel yourself recovering. It's a euphoric feeling. It's an amazing feeling. Amazing. It's endorphins, it's ...

For an alpha-male endurance automaton like Stramrood, giving up — even in the most excruciating circumstances — seems like a form of death, so much so that he will trigger himself into a rage before a big swim.

"It's so easy to panic, so I visualise that I am going to panic and I talk myself through how to calm myself down ... And I make myself angry, because anger generates heat. It's a bit embarrassing if you can't find a private place to do it, but I'll swear and flippin' punch a few things. You know, it's 'testosterony'. F\*\*k this water. I'm going to nail it," he says, and jiggles his sculptured battle-axes as though

challenging Neptune himself to a duel.

It's hard to imagine him in his couch-potato days.

At times, Stramrood has sensed that he would rather die than surrender to his human limitations.

"During my 13-hour, English Channel crossing in 2008, I aimed for an insular swim — I didn't want to know how much time had passed. I'd swim until I ran out of water. At one point I thought: 'I think I have about three hours before I die ... I'm just going to swim. I love my family, but I'm headstrong. I've never failed in a swim, so I push to the limit. Next moment someone said, 'Ryan! You can stand.'"

It was 41km later. He put his feet down and he was standing "waist deep, in France".

He adds: "When that millionth wave hit me in the face, I'd say to myself, laugh ... laugh! Ha! This is what you signed up for, buddy! You have to be in the right mental place or die. And when you realise what you can overcome when you get to that place, you start applying that to your job and family. In business, I'm now pitching for an account I would never have bothered to pitch for before."

During his Bering Strait swim he anticipates jet lag — it takes about 40 hours to get there — "very strong and icy winds" and, possibly, 6m swells.

"But if the Diomedes are absolutely flat and easy, I will be disappointed."

If Stramrood manages to finish his solo Straits dash, he will be the first man to do so, but not the first human being. He was beaten to that challenge by a woman — US swimming legend Lynne Cox — in 1987.

"I would quite like to claim that. Records can be broken but no one can take a first away from you."

Stramrood will leave for Alaska on his son's third birthday. The cold is calling. **LS**

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## FREEZE STYLE

The Ocean's Seven is the aquatic answer to the Seven Summits mountain challenge. It's a hit list of long-distance swimming feats: the Catalina, English, Molokai, North and Tsugaru channels, plus the Cook and Gibraltar Straits. Four swimmers, including two women, have done them all. One of the world's greatest ocean crossings is in SA — the 35km False Bay slog, first completed by Belgian Anemie Landmeters in 1989. Only four others have done



it since. By contrast, 1950 swimmers had crossed the English Channel by the end of 2013. In 1926, US swimming ace Gertrude Ederle, then 20, became the first woman to swim the channel. Her time — 14 hours and 39 minutes — set the record for both sexes. In 1972, 15-year-old US swimmer Lynne Cox (pictured) broke the record.

In September, another US woman, 64-year-old Diana Nyad, claimed she was the first person to swim 174km across the Florida Strait without a shark cage.

So why are women so good at endurance swimming? One factor may be their more equal distribution of subcutaneous fat — which means better insulation and buoyancy.

But they are certainly not invincible. Last year Briton Susan Taylor died while trying to swim the English Channel for charity.