

THE Great Lakes

SHARK

Fearless swimmer
Great Lakes.

JIM DREYER braves all five
BY KIM SCHNEIDER



If you've never heard of Jim Dreyer before meeting him on this summer day — on a hidden cove south of Saugatuck, Michigan — you might think he's a tourist out for a casual vacation float. His mischievous, dimpled grin is hidden under a floppy fishing hat; his sandaled feet propped atop the inflatable yellow kayak like someone ready to do nothing but lounge in the sun.

But appearances won't fool you for long. An orange head pops up between waves alongside Dreyer's vessel, then another — this one in a bright green swim cap — as his hands gesture wildly while offering the swimmers tips on things like shoulder rotation and bilateral breathing (competitive swimmer jargon). You won't see him on shore until the last of this group of nine swimmers has completed their 5-mile training swims, for this is one safety and mission-oriented swimmer, motivator and coach.

MAIN PHOTO BY TOM DOTY; KAYAK PHOTO BY KIM SCHNEIDER

THE SHARK

Many know Jim “The Shark” Dreyer best for his highly publicized swimming feats. He has freestyled his way across the lengths of all five Great Lakes. More recently, he’s gained fame as a “human tugboat” for the way he hauled a ton of bricks across Lake St. Clair, to bring hope (and housing funds) to Detroit, and a 27-ton car ferry 800 yards on the History Channel’s “Stan Lee’s Superhumans” — well, because he could (in spite of what experts predicted).

Dreyer plans to continue some sort of annual “superhuman” feat; in mid-August this year, he swam a to-be-raffed Lincoln MKC to Mackinac Island. He enjoyed the irony of taking a car to an island that long ago banned them, but kept the island’s culture in mind by stacking it floorboard to roof with boxes of Murdick’s fudge.

MIGHTY MAC

But Dreyer’s main focus is on a major Labor Day swim across the Straits of Mackinac, called the Mighty Mac Swim; it lets open water swimmers tackle a feat on many personal bucket lists and it can be a significant fundraiser for charity. And Dreyer is off to a good start. This year’s 84 swimmers are on track to raise \$300,000 for Habitat for Humanity, a cause dear to Dreyer.

“I perform for charity, and there’s strength in numbers,” he said. “84 swimmers are always going to be able to raise more than I can raise myself.”

The Straits of Mackinac is a narrow, 5-mile slip of

water that separates Michigan’s Lower Peninsula from its Upper. It’s long sacred to the Ojibwe, who, 500 years ago, were drawn by a vision to these waters they consider home to the Great Spirit Gitche Manitou. The Straits is hydrologically part of both Lake Michigan and Huron, and is located 200 feet below one of the world’s largest and most beautiful suspension bridges. It’s always beautiful and sometimes even appears to look flat calm, Dreyer says, but is always tricky to navigate.

“The current can be the worst you’ve ever experienced,” he said. “The waves and current are often independent of each other; what occurred 100 miles away in Lake Michigan or Huron two days ago affect what’s happening at any given moment.”

That challenge — plus, the allure of waters most vacationers have seen from the iconic bridge above — had swimmers begging him to rekindle a swim tradition started in 2007,



In 2007, Dreyer led 50 swimmers across the Straits of Mackinac to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge.



(Top left) Dreyer reaches the shore after swimming 22 miles across Lake St. Clair.

(Middle) The trophy from Dreyer's Solo Superior challenge in 2005.

(Top right) Dreyer gives a motivational speech to the swimmers involved in the Mighty Mac Swim.



when he led 50 swimmers across the Straits to mark the 50th anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge. Among those who qualified for this year's swim are a woman who once swam the English channel, a triathlete coincidentally born the year the Mackinac Bridge opened, and even a few swimmers recovering from traumatic injuries. But no story is more unlikely than that of Dreyer's, who didn't learn to swim until he was in his 30s because of a childhood fear of drowning. Yet, within just two years, he set a record with a 65-mile swim the length of Lake Michigan.

UNLIKELY COURSE

Every time he puts his face in the water — be it for a training swim or major feat — he says he still flashes back to the Easter Sunday when he was 3 years old. He had dropped his fishing pole off the end of a dock, fell in, and couldn't right himself because his puffy winter coat kept him at the top. Drowning, from then on, was his biggest fear, making his current career focus as unlikely as it could be.

"My mom used to tell stories of how she would wash my hair when I was a kid and I would freak out if she'd pour water on my head," he said. "Today, every time I start to swim, the first few strokes I flash to that memory; for a split second I feel panic, but it goes away immediately. It's that confidence to the core thing — how you've conditioned yourself to control fear. It's funny how it's engraved in there but you can learn to control it and not let it control you."

HOW DID YOU DO IT?

Questions flow, as Dreyer joins the Straits swim camp crew for an after-swim fuel-up at a nearby Chinese restaurant. Between trips to the buffet line and comparisons of fortune cookies (Dreyer's an eerily accurate "Excitement and intrigue follow



you closely wherever you go"), swimmers and team members pepper the engaging leader with questions. Among the group is Katrina "Kat Woman" Murphy — a personal friend of Jim and the event's swimmer liaison. They met when Katrina asked him for help with training, and she most remembers his advice that she should swim for a cause bigger than herself.

Tim, the event's paramedic, and an expert in wilderness medicine, asks Dreyer if he has a mantra he repeats when things get especially challenging.

"I do," Dreyer tells him. "Philippians 4:13: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

He's had to say that more than a few times, Dreyer says with his trademark grin.

"How about hallucinations? Do you get them?" one swimmer asks, and then is treated to a story about the way trees along the shoreline often gain faces — sometimes arms — that reach out to grab Dreyer when he's swimming. Then there was the time when Hurricane Isabel hit as he was swimming the Great Lakes and he had to fight the resulting storm effects until he eventually collapsed on shore. He thought he saw America's favorite purple dinosaur walking towards him; he later learned Barney was actually a team member in a rain jacket.

TRAITS OF THE GREAT LAKES

Arguably, no human knows the Great Lakes as intimately as Dreyer, at least from the vantage point of their surface. The friendliest lake is Erie, he says, because it's the most shallow and the warmest. While he can fight waves, hypothermia is hard to conquer when blood stops circulating to your extremities, he says, and you can no longer move your legs. Lake Superior wins for nastiest, he says, for a disposition that can turn on you at a moment's



(Top left & top right) Dreyer pulling a barge on Stan Lee's "Superhumans" show.

notice, and Lake Michigan takes the beauty contest. Though he experienced a traumatic crash landing at Point Betsie near Frankfort during his Lake Michigan swim, he says he remembers clearly saying to himself: "If I am going to die in this event, this is the most beautiful place on earth to die."

For the strength of the mission, though, his solo swim across Lake Superior is the one he says most stands out. To raise awareness for a planned memorial honoring shipwreck victims of the Great Lakes, he carried with him messages from family members of those who'd drowned. When he dropped those messages at the U.S.-Canadian border, he included a poem he'd written, one describing the affinity he often felt with them. He wrote, "I've felt the same fear that took you into eternity... Seen both the beauty and beast of these inland seas."

CONFIDENT TO THE CORE

There is something about facing such fears, taking calculated risks — that you're well trained for but still push yourself to physical and emotional limits — that is indescribably liberating, Dreyer says; and it's a lesson he shares in his popular motivational speeches.

"We're all scared of different things in life, but that confidence spills over. If you can face your biggest fear and win, any other hurdle seems that much smaller," he says. "I always tell people to develop confidence to the core. You don't just wake up one morning like that. Over time, every time you mark something off the bucket list, you're become more and more confident to the core."

Dreyer also encourages people to leave a legacy with their lives. His includes the more than \$1 million he estimates that he's earned through his feats and matched donations, he says. But when he covers that topic in speeches, the slide he includes shows a picture of the leader of the Bay Mills tribe presenting him with a blanket for warmth and friendship after his successful swim across Lake Superior

— a lake particularly holy to a tribe that adopted him, in a sense, after the swim.

"Here's a bond different from any bond ever made before," he notes. "That's a legacy; proof you've made a mark. They also gave me an Ojibwe name, Kiiwinaadizi Nini. It means 'Crazy Man.'" He pauses, laughs, then continues, "I've never been more proud of anything in my life." ★

MIGHTY MAC SWIM

The Mighty Mac Swim will take place on September 7 at 7 a.m., the same time people are crossing the Mackinac Bridge for the annual Labor Day bridge walk.

Spectators can view the swimmers while walking the Mackinac Bridge (there will be 40,000 to 65,000 of them). Dreyer encourages people to come to Colonial Fort Michilimackinac and greet the swimmers when they arrive after swimming the Straits.

"For the spectator, it's not something you see every day," Dreyer says, "and for the swimmer, arriving to a sizeable cheering crowd is most gratifying."

Swimmers will be broken into 12 teams of seven, and will be monitored by volunteers in boats for safety. There are small breaks about every 30 minutes, so swimmers will have a chance to grab refreshments. Participants are encouraged to wear wet suits to combat the conditions, expected to reach a water temperature of around 50 degrees.

In 2007, Dreyer worked for the state of Michigan to organize the swim. Prior to that swim, there had been no more than 20 documented crossings of the Straits by a swimmer. This year, Dreyer is coordinating the event with the help of private sponsors and volunteers, including Walstrom Marine, Murdick's Fudge and the S.S. *Badger*. The money raised will help support Habitat for Humanity's Neighborhood Revitalization Tour. You can donate money to a swimmer by visiting the Mighty Mac Swim website (MIGHTYMACSWIM.COM).

