

# NO BONES ABOUT IT

THIS SOUTH AFRICAN LONG-DISTANCE SWIMMER IS FIGHTING AGAINST THE TIDE. BY JASON BAILEY

**I**magine swimming for hours and hours on end, only to hit a treacherous ocean shelf, the force of its current literally pushing you back.

Your hourly progression amounts to a few hundred metres, sharks are nearby and bouts of seasickness are a recurring problem. While the sheer thought of all this could well be too much for most, this and more could sum up one brave South African's successful attempt at one of open water swimming's toughest monuments.

'I don't actually remember too much of the swim,' says Durban's Sarah Ferguson of her crossing of Hawaii's notorious Ka'iwi Channel, or 'Channel of the Bones'. 'I had intended to dedicate each half hour of swimming to various people in my life, but would get distracted. Much of the swim is a blur, really, almost like having been in a dream.'

Yes, Ferguson realised a dream. Swimming the equivalent distance of a standard marathon is not exactly on the athletic bucket list of many. But then Ferguson is not your average athlete - or person - for that matter.

Originally hailing from Cape Town, Ferguson was a highly competitive pool swimmer in her school days. A rapid progression to international level ensued, culminating in national representation. But combining the rigours of elite-level swimming with her physiotherapy studies had always been a challenge, and Ferguson found herself at a crossroads.

'International pool swimming is incredibly demanding,' she explains. 'After 15 years of training and racing,



I made a difficult decision to retire. I say difficult because I'm naturally competitive and like to get the best out of myself. But I had other priorities, like establishing myself in the field of physiotherapy. I just felt I needed a complete change. I was looking around for something different when an opportunity to work in India came up.'

Working on the subcontinent proved exactly the break Ferguson needed. The stark difference in culture and custom suited her adventurous nature, as did the challenge of teaching local physiotherapists and swimmers.

A stint working with the Indian national swimming team at the 2010 Commonwealth Games added to her



growing arsenal of experience, all the while furthering her studies in various complementary fields. But she remained active throughout.

'I've always had a love of the water,' she says. 'I swam intermittently, juggling work and studying with trying to stay active. India came around at the right time; I had lost the enjoyment of competitive swimming, so focusing on something completely different refreshed my mind and body.'

It was during her travels to Hawaii in 2011 that Ferguson accidentally stumbled on a new passion. Taking part in her first open water swimming race on the Big Island of Hawaii, she was inspired by the freedom and space the ocean gave her. Falling in love with this discipline of the sport, she wondered whether swimming to one of the neighbouring islands was possible.

'I knew there and then that ocean swimming was my new passion,' says Ferguson. 'That race on the Big Island was the start of a new journey. That fleeting thought and then hearing about the Ka'iwi Channel Swim became a long-term goal.'

You don't just swim the Ka'iwi Channel. It's a treacherous crossing, for starters. Starting on the island of Molokai, heavy surf and unpredictable currents predominate. There is also the issue of marine life - sharks and jellyfish, to be exact. Heat is another factor, with

*You don't just swim the Ka'iwi Channel. It's a treacherous crossing, for starters*

many a swimmer suffering the effects of dehydration en route. Then there are the tides, where timing is everything for the sake of safety.

But that was OK with Ferguson; this was exactly the sort of swim she was looking for; one that was unique, if a little crazy all the same. Only 55 people had ever completed this swim and she was hell-bent on being the 56th. Not that it was all plain sailing. 'It wasn't easy putting it all together,' she admits. 'The swim was supposed to happen last year, but I was diagnosed with bilharzia. So the Ka'iwi swim was put on hold while I regained my health. Then I had a problem with an irregular heartbeat. Juggling work and training also wasn't easy. I'm not sure I would have got through it all without the support of family and friends.'

And so Ferguson finally found herself on the island of Oahu in

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
The Ka'iwi Channel is host to official races for outrigger canoe, surf skis and the Molokai-2-Oahu Paddleboard World Championship. Each human-powered race across the Channel of Bones is regarded worldwide as the crowning achievement of the sport.

SUPPLIED

## SARAH FERGUSON

late-July 2017. In the company of two fellow South Africans, the trio travelled for almost two full days to reach their final destination. Travelling halfway around the world has its drawbacks, jetlag being one. But there wasn't much time for acclimatisation.

'So much depends on the conditions, so there is a very short time frame,' explains Ferguson. 'We arrived in Hawaii on the Friday afternoon and got the go-ahead early on Sunday morning.' It was a little after 10pm when Ferguson dived into the Pacific Ocean. Stoking away from sparsely populated Molokai, She settled into a steady rhythm. Less than an hour in and she already had to readjust: normally used to a bilateral breathing sequence, the swell forced her to breathe solely to her right.

'Navigation is paramount in open water swimming and I needed to be on the left of my support kayak,' she explains. 'Dehydration and seasickness followed, as did a visit by a shark. And then there was "The Shelf".'

Seven miles off Oahu, an underwater shelf causes vicious rip currents. Hitting this area during a tidal change, Ferguson was swimming on the spot.

## SWIMMING AGAINST PLASTICS



While many athletic endeavours involve a narrow sporting focus, the same does not apply to Ferguson. With conservation close to her heart from childhood, long-distance ocean swimming drew her attention to the detrimental effects of plastic in the sea. And that's when the Ka'iwi Swim became a project with purpose. She now swims for her own charity, Breathe. 'There'll be more plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050,' says Ferguson. 'That's scary. Many people think that plastic pollution is too big a problem for them, but it's not. If we all become a little more plastic conscious, we can reverse this problem. I truly believe it is a realistic goal.'



'I think it took me a little over three and a half hours to swim a mile. Funny thing was that I had no idea this was happening. My support crew [left] didn't want to distract my focus and I actually felt pretty good throughout.'

Making it through the 'Endless Pool' proved pivotal and Ferguson found renewed energy after this ordeal. After 59.8km of swimming, she savoured those last few strokes on to Oahu's Makapu Beach, safely home and mission accomplished.

Now back in Durban and with 'Project Ka'iwi' a thing of the past, how is Ferguson adapting to normal life?

'Recovery has been tough,' she admits. 'Taking your body to the extreme has a massive toll physically, mentally and emotionally. But I'm taking it all in my stride and being kind to myself. While I've got nothing planned at the moment, that will no doubt change in a few months. The ocean is a beautiful thing. And once I'm in the water, it's difficult to get me out.' ■

Bailey is a Cape Town-based freelance writer and sports massage therapist.

SUPPLIED