



Sarah Ferguson gets in a spot of local training for her big ocean swimming challenge.

PICTURE: S'BONELO NGCOBO

Durban woman to tackle hazardous 42km Hawaiian island channel swim

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DURBAN North swimmer Sarah Ferguson has always loved a challenge – and now she is planning to conquer one of the most dangerous and arduous ocean channels in the world.

“It will be my biggest challenge to date,” said Ferguson, 34, who will become the first woman from South Africa – and Africa – to have swum the 42km Kaiwi Channel, between the Oahu and Mokokai islands of Hawaii, if she succeeds.

The determined Ferguson cannot wait to battle the unpredictable currents, tides and swells, where dangerous wildlife lurk in the volatile waters. There are various species of sharks, jellyfish and the terrifying and highly venomous Portuguese Man-of-War; a giant species of bluebottle which has tendrils of between 10 and 50 metres in length.

“I will be more concerned about the Portuguese Man-of-War than the sharks,” said Ferguson, a physiotherapist and Pilates instructor.

But she is taking no chances and is planning to swim with sharks in the Aliwal Shoal soon as part of her intensive preparations.

A one-time competitive pool swimmer who represented South Africa internationally,



SARAH FERGUSON

she had been keen to do something different with her talent, and has been ocean swimming for five years.

Her love for ocean swimming started on a trip to Hawaii when her dream to swim the Kaiwi Channel took shape. The crossing is the longest of the Oceans Seven, the ocean version of the Seven Summits.

Only 44 people have done the crossing, including two men from South Africa.

Ferguson is planning to do the swim between July 22 and August 6, and it should take her between 12 and 24 hours.

While Kaiwi will be her first channel crossing, she has con-

quered some challenging open-water swims in South Africa, and was the first woman to swim the 16km from uMhlanga to Durban.

She has done two Robben Island-to-Cape Town crossings and has conquered the infamous Cape Point, a swim of 7.5km around the southern tip of Africa, in some of the most unfriendly and unpredictable water in the region.

“The Kaiwi swells are bigger than the Durban swells, of course. It will not be peak season, but the swells will still be big and volatile,” she said.

With just weeks to go before she sets out on her most chal-

lenging swim, she has a full training schedule of both pool and ocean sessions, Pilates and gym workouts.

She does 20-40km of swimming in the pool and sea when she can. And twice a week, she does strength training in the gym with a biokineticist, and she also makes sure she gets the right nutrition and enough rest.

Ferguson has also been on a night swim training camp in Cape Town in cold water.

Two swim coaches, a sports psychologist, a dietician and various oceans experts are also helping her prepare.

She has carefully selected her team – some from South Africa and others from Hawaii – for the crossing, and is confident they will ensure her safety.

Her support team will be in a kayak and a stand-up paddle board while she is swimming, and there will be other team members in a motorised boat 40m away.

She is also doing the swim to create awareness for ocean conservation, and to develop her non-profit organisation, Breathe Conservation, to highlight the state of the world’s oceans.

“Besides this being a personal challenge, I am swimming for a cause bigger than myself in the hope that I can somehow make a sustainable difference in the world,” she said.