

Swimming: World's best marathon swimmer is a hero in Slovenia

By Brendan Gallagher

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Marathon swimmers are a mad but happy band who share, with sumo wrestlers and world championship darts contenders, the luxury of competing internationally while carrying massive beer guts. But at least the swimmers have an excuse. During one of his epic swims Martin Strel, from Slovenia, will lose at least 40lb, so it stands to reason he should start 40lb overweight, if he is to have any chance of finishing.

The result is a glorious off-season of gluttony and self-indulgence - luckily it coincided with our arrival - when he is permitted to eat and drink anything. The objective, 24/7, is to pile on the pounds. In Strel's case gallons of Pivo, the local beer, Cvicek red wine and Sadjevec, fiery pear brandy, are used to wash down three daily helpings of Slovenian cuisine. Strel majors on zlikrofo - ravioli filled with potato, bacon and onion - and various liver-based dishes. It's a tough job but somebody's got to do it.

The entire Slovenian population - two million people who live in one of God's own countries - are clearly well acquainted with the dietary requirements of their national hero. When he nipped into the picture-postcard church of Santa Maria on Bled island to show us the beautiful fresco and ring the famous "wish bell" we emerged to find the local restaurant owner had sent over complimentary brandy and ice cream, just to keep him going between meals you understand. In this religious country Martin is the de facto patron saint of expanding waistlines.

And talking of food, he looks and acts uncannily like chef Antony Worrall Thompson. Didn't the latter admit this week to having swum the Channel in his youth?

Universally known as Martin - just as Gareth, JPR and Gerald need no introduction in Wales - he is mobbed by autograph hunters, aged nine to 90, from dawn to dusk. The local basketball and ice hockey stars are B-list celebrities compared with the world's greatest long-distance swimmer. His stock will rise even higher on Tuesday week if, as expected, he wins the Laureus World Alternative Sportsman of the Year award in Monaco. The likes of Tiger Woods, Michael Schumacher and Paula Radcliffe will contest the other major awards so Martin is in elite company.

Despite the pressing need to eat for Slovenia, he likes to keep on the move. Since becoming a professional marathon swimmer in 1978 Martin can count the number of days he has not swum - rivers, lakes, reservoirs and pools - on the fingers of one hand. At this time of year he is simply ticking over, contenting himself with a gentle 3km swim in

beautiful Lake Bled in the heart of Slovenia's stunning Julian Alps. Predictably, his short dip ended outside a friend's lakeside restaurant where another groaning table awaited.

He never stops laughing and is fully aware of his incongruous appearance at present, but don't be fooled. In the crazy world of extreme sports and ultra marathon endurance performers this is the daddy of them all. His 'Everest' came last year when he swam the 2,360-mile Mississippi, the world's fourth longest river, in 68 days, breaking every long-distance swimming record. An average day would consist of 14 hours and 35 miles of swimming, with a half-hour break for lunch. Rather puts our lung-bursting 10-length front crawl at the local heated pool into perspective.

Previously Martin had held the world record by swimming his favourite river, the Danube, which clocks in at 1,866 miles. He knocked that off in 58 days in 2000 and returned the following year for possibly his piece de resistance. This time he broke the world record for an 'uninterrupted' swim by covering 313.2 miles in one marathon session of 84 hours and 10 minutes. He is also the only man to have swum from Africa to Europe, covering the 49 miles from Tunisia to Italy in 29hr 36min 57sec. His next major project, supported by the Chinese government, is to swim the mighty 3,800-mile Yangtze, or at least those parts they are not damming up.

You only need to dip your toe in a mountain stream or lake to appreciate why Martin needs to carry extra weight. He is like a camel trekking through the desert, feeding off his fat. In the initial stages of a swim marathon the spare tyre also provides insulation against the cold - the water temperature can be as low as 9 DEGREES. He always travels with two different sized wetsuits: Martin the fat and Martin the slim. One for the early weeks of a swim, one for the final stages.

To watch him swim is an education. Barely 5ft 10in, he has the long, smooth, reaching stroke of somebody much taller. The leading arm seems to stay out front forever, waiting and searching for the perfect moment to pull back. His forearms and wrists are those of a blacksmith. He hardly kicks, his legs are simply stabilisers, all the power comes from his arms and shoulders.

And it seems completely effortless. How does he do that? He doesn't really know - no secret tips, I'm afraid - but as with many sports, God-given timing is probably the key.

As if to emphasise the point the only other people on Lake Bled this week were Slovenia's Olympic rowing champions, Iztok Cop and Luka Spik, who skimmed past at high speed. They hailed Martin, firstly in reverential tones, and then made some crack. Something about working up an appetite. Laughter all round.

Boredom could be a problem, but not with Martin. "Of course it would drive you crazy thinking of nothing but swimming and making your next stroke for 14 hours a day, so the trick is to totally relax and switch off. You recall your past life, relive old stories and incidents, dream of your beautiful wife, think about the future, plan your meal for that night.

"On a good day it's the ultimate form of meditation, the hours and kilometres go very quickly. You become very happy. I can sleep when I'm swimming, or at least go into a sleep-like state. As long as my support boat keeps me in the right direction and looks out for trouble, it's OK.

"On a bad day you're fighting currents and big waves, sometimes three metres high. You are dodging boats - one night I collided with a barge on the Danube - and then sometimes you're hungry and tired. Other times you're swimming through polluted waters, dodging electrical storms, fighting off aggressive swans and desperately trying not to think what else might be swimming alongside or under you. Water snakes are the things I hate most.

"In the big rivers, whirlpools can be very dangerous. You have to rely on your back-up team to spot them from their kayaks and steer you away. You finish with your face very sunburnt and blistered, your head aches from being slapped by big waves. I don't like my wife Nusa to be with me at the end of big swims, I look very bad, it's very distressing."

When it comes to motivation, people in extreme sport usually have a common thread - the irresistible need to get as close as possible to nature's elements for as long as possible. To visit places, physically and geographically, where mankind hasn't been before. Martin might not be able to walk on water, but you get the feeling he could happily live in it.

Swimming is his life. It has even given him a wife. He was swimming down a river one July when he spotted Nusa reading a book on the bank. He pulled over for lunch, got chatting and calculated that by 7pm he would be finishing 20 miles downstream at the Mirna Lake Bridge. Was it a date? Remarkably it was, Nusa appeared at the appointed time, Martin stepped out of the water and they have been together since.

He's not lonely or a social misfit. Far from it. He's the life and soul, a raging extrovert who nonetheless craves solitude. When he's not swimming you'll find him walking or cycling in the hills and mountains.

So he's off to Monaco next week and a chance to mix with the glitterati of mainstream world sport. He will religiously put in a three-hour swim every dawn around the harbour and is eagerly anticipating the awards night. A gong would be nice, but whatever the outcome there will be a six-course gala dinner to devour. Just deserts you might say.

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