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Old Man River

At age 47, and with Huck Finn in his heart, Slovenian Martin Strel became the first man to swim -- yes, swim -- the Mississippi

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By Lars Anderson

"What he had planned in his head from the start, if we got Jim out all safe, was for us to run him down the river on the raft, and have adventures plumb to the mouth of the river."

-- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Martin Strel first read *Huckleberry Finn* when he was a 12-year-old living just outside the village of Mokronog, Slovenia. On his family's farm in the foothills of the Julian Alps, young Strel would close his eyes and imagine what the great Mississippi looked like, picturing its curves and its colors. Even then, Strel had a thing for water. He learned to swim at age six in the Mirna River, a small waterway near the farm. Using chicken intestines and rabbit skin as bait, Strel would jump in the river and catch carp. By age 10 he was such a prodigious swimmer that he challenged two soldiers to a two-mile race. Strel won and was awarded a case of beer, which he gave to his father. "I am a fish. Always have been," says Strel, a man of few words.



After taking the plunge at the river's source in Minnesota on July 4, Strel stroked 2,350 miles in 68 days. Joe Rossi/AP

But it wasn't until 1997 that Strel got serious about ultramarathon swimming. That year, at age 42, he quit his job as a music teacher and swam across the Mediterranean from Europe to Africa, covering 48 miles in 29:45. Three years later he set a Guinness record for longest swim when he completed the length of the Danube -- 1,862 miles -- in 58 days. During all this time, simmering in the back of his mind, was his childhood dream to swim the mighty Mississippi.

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"No one has done it," says Strel. "That is why I try."

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And so he did.

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DAY 1 At high noon on July 4, amid the towering pines in the woods of Minnesota, 225 miles northwest of Minneapolis, Strel plunges into the clear blue waters of Lake Itasca, the headwaters of the Mississippi. Slathered in lanolin, wearing goggles and a wet suit and swimming freestyle, Strel at first goes so fast that the three kayakers who are accompanying him strain to match his speed. His stroke is textbook; he'll average about 20,000 of them a day.

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As will be the case for most of the trip, Strel says very little. The only sounds are his arms piercing the water, his legs kicking, his gasping for air. The kayakers have whistles to warn him of objects in his path, but nonetheless he frequently scrapes his hands and head. After covering 16 miles, he says his only word of the day: "Drink." He then takes a break and has a drink.

Strel has crafted an ambitious schedule: Swimming 11 hours a day, he plans to take 66 days to cover the 2,360 miles of the world's fourth-longest river, ending in the Gulf of Mexico. To prepare his body, Strel spent the previous six months swimming, hiking and cross-country skiing for five to six hours a day. Not that Strel looks the part of ultramarathon swimmer. He has, to put it gently, a big belly. At six feet and 250 pounds, he more closely resembles an aging middle linebacker than the typical long-limbed swimmer. "My father is like a bear before hibernation," says Strel's 20-year-old son, Borut. "He must store food for his long journey. A little fat is good."

Even so, on the eve of his swim the kayakers -- all of them American volunteers -- were flabbergasted to see Strel stuffing his face with sausages and swilling beers.

DAY 6 Swimming in Minnesota's Lake Winnibigoshish, Strel is draped in weeds that weigh as much as 10 pounds and trail behind him for 20 feet like a long green cape, but he keeps his head down and swims on. By day's end he has covered a total of 150 miles -- only 2,210 to go.

DAY 11 Near Brainerd, Minn., the river is swollen by rain and rife with whirlpools. Strel nearly gets pulled under by one in the afternoon, which further erodes his flagging spirit. He has blisters, bug bites and cuts all over his body. He has already lost 20 pounds and is having trouble sleeping at night. "Too much to think about," he says.

Along with his team of kayakers, there are four other people helping Strel: two drivers who move his gear from one hotel to the next; one cook; and one person who continually updates his website. With the help of the Slovenian government, Strel secured corporate sponsors to cover expenses for the team and to pay him a nominal sum. Says Guy Haglund, one of the drivers and project coordinators, "Nobody is getting rich doing this. This is all about the thrill of the adventure."

DAY 34 Strel stops in Hannibal, Mo., the birthplace of Samuel

Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, and is given the key to the city. "I am Huckleberry Finn," Strel announces. He is in good spirits partly because, for the the past two weeks, numerous Slovenians have stood on the banks and cheered; some have even jumped in and swum a little ways with him. Like Forrest Gump as he ran across the country, Strel attracts people who simply want to join him.

DAY 37 Just outside Alton, Ill., Strel yells, "Hot." A factory on the bank of the river is releasing near-boiling water into the Mississippi, forcing Strel to abandon the strong current in which he's been swimming. Strel also encounters detritus such as diapers, tires, bottles, cans and all manner of plastics in the Big Muddy.

DAY 38 Strel is beaming. He reaches St. Louis in the late afternoon. Here he traverses the 29th and final lock on the Mississippi. He is happy to have the locks behind him because they slow the current and force him to go ashore to walk around them. Now that it is open river from here to the Gulf, the current becomes noticeably faster, increasing from an average speed of about one mile per hour to 2.5.

DAY 41 The day starts out like every other: Strel wakes up at 6 a.m. at yet another cheap hotel, this one in Grand Tower, Ill. He eats a breakfast of eggs, ham, cheese and fruit and is in the river by seven. Just before noon a violent storm rolls in as Strel nears Cape Girardeau, Mo. His kayakers encourage him to stop, but Strel wants to continue until their scheduled lunch break at 12:30. At precisely 12:25, lightning strikes an iron buoy that's only 10 feet behind Strel. The concussion of the blast lifts him half out of the water. He is dazed but unharmed. As he retreats to a nearby sandbar, he is visibly shaking. "Close call," he says.

DAY 44 At twilight Strel decides to go a few more miles downriver -- one of the few times he and his kayakers stay out past nightfall. In pitch-black conditions a barge shines its spotlights on the group, blinding them. In the confusion another barge nearly plows over Strel and the kayakers. They make landfall at 9:30 p.m. near Tiptonville, Tenn., after covering 50 miles, the longest single-day swim of the journey.

DAY 56 This is the worst day yet for Strel. He has swallowed so much polluted river water that he has constant pain in his stomach. He floats on his back and simply kicks with his legs for much of the morning. He's so tired, he falls asleep in the water on several occasions. Nonetheless, aided by a strong current, he covers 38 miles.

DAY 57 Strel wakes up in the morning, and the burning in his belly has magically disappeared. He surprises his kayakers by covering 21 miles before lunch. When he breaks for his noon meal, he eats a soup laden with pasta and vegetables and drinks two glasses of a Slovenian wine -- just as he has during every lunch break on his journey. "My secret weapon," he jokes of the wine. "Then again, I must be drunk to swim the Mississippi." He swims another 19 miles after lunch.

DAY 64 Just north of New Orleans the Coast Guard warns the team to

stay away from the right bank. An alligator has eaten a few small dogs, and its whereabouts are unknown. The gator never makes an appearance. Late in the day the kayakers hear Strel say under his breath as he swims, "The mighty Mississippi. Hah! Soon we shall see who is mighty."

DAY 68 It took two days longer than he had hoped, but at 11:32 a.m. Strel finishes his epic swim when he touches the large white sign in the middle of the river that reads 0, marking the point where the Mississippi disperses into the Gulf of Mexico. His son strips off his clothes and, in only his briefs, jumps into the water to give his dad a hug. "Tired," Strel says. "Very tired."

Two days later Strel is still tired. He has just returned to his midtown New York City hotel room after enjoying dinner with the president of Slovenia, and he's now telling the whole sprawling story of his swim. He has lost 40 pounds since he first entered the water, every muscle in his body aches, and his face is cut, swollen and sunburned -- just what you'd expect from someone who has spent the past two months in the Mississippi.

"I think this was a good thing," he says, as he lies down on his bed. "Sixty-eight days is long time to swim. I am just so happy. So very happy. It was longest swim in history. Now I rest for six months."

He then smiles wonderfully and rolls over. Soon he will be asleep. Soon the bear will be in hibernation.

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