



By RON HAWORTH

Across the channel

The English Channel has been swum over 100 times, the Molokai Channel only once. Keo Nakama, in September of 1961, walked ashore 15 hours and 31 minutes after wading into the water off Molokai.

Dr. Harry Huffaker, a dentist who thinks nothing of putting in an eight-hour swim day, hopes soon to add his name to that of Nakama's. All he asks is a moderate sea, light Kona winds and a channel relatively free of hungry sharks.

Huffaker, 27, has been swimming since he was nine. Before moving to Hawaii he body-surfed extensively along the Southern California coast, and since living here, has taken up board-surfing.

Huffaker has swum over 130 hours in the past 60 days, which averages 30 miles a week at the unheard of speed of two miles per hour.

But Huffaker was not always a slow man in the water. He started his competitive swimming career as a sprinter and was named to the All-American Collegiate team three successive years while at Michigan State.

Huffaker's thoughts first turned to distance swimming one afternoon when he was crossing the English Channel by ferry. Why not swim it, he asked himself? So with no more ado, and upon arriving back in the States, he went into training, swimming every lake he could find in Wisconsin.

A potential ally

One by one they fell: Higgins Lake (eight miles), Mullet Lake (10 miles), Bart Lake (10 miles), and finally the much respected Straights of Mackinac — an icy bad dream. Then he logged 900 miles in a pool.

Huffaker has since made two unsuccessful attempts to swim from France to England. On both occasions he blacked out from the cold a short distance from the finish.

The 57-degree water temperature beat him the second time when he was but two miles from the beach. Two such defeats might have thwarted a lesser man's determination. But Huffaker sees the Molokai Channel as a potential ally.

"There are many things in my favor. Most important is the water temperature. Some people can withstand hours of cold because their body temperature drops slower; I'm not one of them."

"Another factor in my favor is that I live here. I can wait for that perfect day."

"When a channel hopeful goes to France," he explained, "he has a limited time at his disposal, and often he is forced into attempting the swim under adverse conditions."

Huffaker went on to explain that both channels are entirely different and must be approached with different strategy.

"The Cap Griz Nez-to-Dover swim is a tidal battle, it must be timed down to the hour so as to get maximum benefit from the seven miles an hour tidal change. Molokai, on the other hand, is a current swim."

But even so, he looks to be in the water 14 to 18 hours, and if all goes well, will step, or stagger, ashore at Makapuu or Sandy Beach.

On alert

What does a channel swimmer think about for 18 hours?

"Anything but swimming," he says.

The Outrigger Canoe Club is sponsoring Huffaker's Molokai attempt. Dick McClellan heads up an entourage which would have made Marco Polo look like a piker.

The ship Scuba Queen is on a ready alert. She can put to sea inside of two hours once the weatherman gives the okay.

On board when she sails will be a diver in full dress. His job (a ticklish one at best) will be to leap into the water if sharks are sighted, and then to ward them off with a spear gun. Rifles also will be within reach.

Huffaker is willing to wait out September if necessary. But he would like to make the swim before the proposed inter-island ferry gets going. His reason is whimsical. He remembers well what happened the day he arrived in Dover and asked of a stranger on the street whom he should see to swim the channel.

"Oh, you don't have to swim the bloody channel, old boy," came the reply. "There's a ferry—it even carries motors."