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## Historic swim across Newfound Lake for Henniker woman



Cheryl Coletti-Lawson swims in Newfound Lake on July 1 with Andrea Hrynychuk kayaking next to her. Coletti-Lawson became the first person to record a double crossing of Newfound, a 12.28-mile swim that took her just under nine hours. Courtesy



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Published: 7/19/2020 7:20:11 PM

She joined her high school swim team for a boy, but quit because she found the sport boring. She put her wetsuit on backwards during her first open-water swim. She's usually the last one out of the pool after her morning workout at the Concord YMCA.

None of that has stopped Cheryl Coletti-Lawson from falling in love with open water swimming, and none of it mattered on July 1 when she completed the first-ever documented double-crossing of Newfound Lake, a 12.28-mile swim that took just under nine hours.

“I wouldn’t say, ‘If I can do this anyone can,’ what I would say is I hope my swims can inspire people to follow their dreams,” Coletti-Lawson said. “If you set a goal and make a plan you can achieve whatever you put your mind to.”

After quitting the swim team at Salem High in Massachusetts (she didn’t get the boy, either), Coletti-Lawson didn’t swim competitively again until 2017. That’s when she tried a sprint triathlon for the Nashua YMCA that included a 300-yard open-water swim.

“I was scared to death,” said Coletti-Lawson, who lives in Henniker and will turn 54 on Wednesday. “When I was about to start the event a friend of mine noticed that my wetsuit was on backwards. Such a novice.”

She enjoyed that swim, but didn’t feel the same about the bike and run portion of the triathlon. So, she tried a relay triathlon in Canada where she did the swimming and her teammates took care of the biking and running.

“I remember standing on the shore with 2,500 people and I thought to myself, ‘What am I doing? This is crazy.’ I thought I was going to get kicked in the head and pushed around, and that’s exactly what happened,” Coletti-Lawson said. “I did it, I finished it, but I thought, ‘This is nuts, no thank you.’”

Like she did with the running and biking, Coletti-Lawson stripped away the crowd from her swimming experience, and that did the trick. Solo open-water swimming allows her to challenge her will and endurance without a kicking crowd around her or a dreaded long-distance run looming on the shore. She can swim at her own pace, enjoy the scenery and find some inner peace.

“When I’m in the water I meditate, I think about my stroke, I think how grateful I am at this point in my life to be able to do what I do,” Coletti-Lawson said. “I once told somebody, ‘I go to the ocean to lose my mind and find my soul.’”

Her open swimming skill and potential got a boost after she started working with swim coach Bob Fernald about three years ago. He helps Coletti-Lawson with her technique, strategy and finding the best open swims for her. He’s also completed the triple crown of open water swimming - crossing the English Channel (21 miles) and the Catalina Channel in California (20.1 miles) and circling Manhattan Island (28.5 miles) - a trifecta that Coletti-Lawson said is on her bucket list.

She completed her first marathon swim, which is 6.2 miles (10 kilometers) or longer, at the Barbados Open Water Festival in November 2018. She’s also done 10K swims in Lake Memphremagog in Vermont and in Harrington Sound in Bermuda. Her longest swim prior to the double crossing of Newfound Lake came

in August of 2019 when she crossed Lake Tahoe from Homewood, Calif., to Glenbrook, Nev., which was exactly 12 miles.

Coletti-Lawson has an even longer swim than the 12.28 miles she covered on Newfound Lake planned for August, although she won't say what it is so she doesn't put any extra pressure on herself. The prospect of that swim pushed her to find a warm-up event this month, which is what led her to double cross Newfound.

"It's a local lake. We didn't need to get permission from any type of open water organization ... and the distance was perfect," Coletti-Lawson said.

The date she picked to do it, July 1, turned out to be perfect, as well. Swim With A Mission, a charity that benefits U.S. military veterans, normally holds an event at Newfound Lake with open water swimming and paddling, as well as a demonstration by Navy SEALs. Coronavirus canceled that event, so Swim With A Mission decided to have a virtual month of fundraising in July, and the organization used Coletti-Lawson's Newfound Lake swim as a way to kick off the virtual fundraising.

Poor weather nearly forced Coletti-Lawson to postpone the swim until July 2, but the skies cleared enough for her to begin as scheduled at 5:30 a.m. on July 1. Her husband, Scott Lawson, and Fernald were there for support. Andrea Hrynychuk kayaked next to her the entire way, throwing out drinks and food as needed. Her friend JR Linden jumped in the lake as a support swimmer for about an hour.

"Open water marathon swimming is a solo sport, but it can't be done without an amazing crew," Coletti-Lawson said. "My job is simply to swim. My crew's job is to keep me safe, feed me and make sure I swim the shortest distance between two points."

The weather did take a turn for the worse near the end of her swim as lightning and thunder began following her across the lake. Coletti-Lawson was too submerged in inner peace and exhaustion to notice, and that was probably a good thing.

"If I knew the thunder and lightning were behind me," she said, "I would have freaked out."

Instead, she calmly finished the double crossing, which was verified by Guy Davis from the Marathon Swim Federation. She didn't have enough energy to celebrate that night ("I was sound asleep by 8:45," she laughed), but she celebrated the next day with, what else, a swim in the ocean.

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