LOOKING BACK

1927 LAKE GEORGE SWIMMING MARATHON

by Ginger Henry Kuenzel

Just a few weeks ago, Hague was abuzz with the Open Water Swim. Here we look back at a Hague swim from the more distant past. The year was 1927. Prohibition was in full swing. Calvin Coolidge was president. Hague Central School had just held its first graduation. And the Lake George Swimming Marathon was making headlines. Most people are not aware of this historic event — which is amazing when one considers that it drew 146 competitors from six countries and nearly every U.S. state, that several of the swimmers were world record holders, and that heavy-weight boxing champion Jack Dempsey traveled to Hague to fire the starting pistol.

The marathon drew approximately 100,000 spectators, according to newspaper reports of the day. Charles Gelman of the now-defunct Merkel and Gelman Stores of Glens Falls and Lake George noted, "It turned national attention on Lake George."



Photo from the collection of the Hague Historical Society

July 12, the day of the marathon, dawned as a scorcher. An estimated 5,000 spectators in Hague alone lined the beaches for the start. Among the spectators was Clifton West, former Hague historian, who was 18 and had just graduated from the new Hague Central School. "There were people everywhere," he recalled. "But I think they were more interested in seeing Jack Dempsey than they were in the swimmers."

The dock at the Trout House was a bustle of activity as boats arrived and departed, dropping off contestants and officials. With each approaching boat, a cry went up from the crowd as they waited in anxious anticipation for Jack Dempsey to disembark. When his boat finally arrived, state troopers had to clear the multitudes from the dock to make way for the sports hero. West remembered that so many people had crowded onto the platform leading out to the pier that it gave way when Dempsey stepped onto it, sending him and about a dozen of his fans into the ankle-deep water. Dempsey was unscathed, though his fashionable shoes were soaked through. He reportedly grinned and carried on with his business — getting the race started.

Champion swimmer Lotte Schoemmel had traveled by train all the way from California. When her train finally arrived at the Lake George station, the boat that was to carry her to Hague had departed. No matter. The determined Schoemmel hitched a ride on an aquatic plane, touching down in Hague with just minutes to spare before the start of the event.

Fortunately, Schoemmel didn't require much time to suit up for the race. In fact, she required NO time. Schoemmel, it seems, was the originator of the "grease bathing suit" which had caused quite a stir and more than just a few raised eyebrows at previous events around the globe. According to the official program for the Lake George Swimming Marathon, it had been decided in advance that the grease bathing suit would be considered "suit"-able for this race. Rule #12 stated: "Any class of bathing suit, except that which might cause the swimmer to remain afloat, can be used. Suits can be abolished entirely if swimmer chooses to use a covering only of grease."

The use of the grease was put in question shortly before the event, when Warren County Sanitary Inspector Harry Smith announced that the grease could jeopardize the quality of Lake George's water— which was, after all, used for drinking water. The swimmers, however, were able to convince him that the grease was a natural substance and would not harm the lake.

Of those registered for the race, two were local talents. One was Sam Schwartz of Glens Falls. The other was one of the few remaining members of the tribe of Six Nations, the Native Americans who inhabited the area long before the first white man ever laid eyes on Lake George. Her name (could this be pure coincidence?) was Anniwake Swimmer.

The 24-mile course for the marathon ran from the Trout House in Hague to the pergola of the Fort William Henry Hotel. Dempsey fired the starting pistol shortly before 9 am, and the swimmers were on their way. Ernest Vierkoetter, the German baker who held the record for swimming the English Channel, took an early lead. He was the first to pass the checkpoint at Sabbath Day Point, a feat which would earn him the Bruce Carney trophy. (Carney was the proprietor of the Sabbath Day Point House).

As the race progressed, more and more swimmers were forced to drop out from cramps or exhaustion. George Knapp of Shelving Rock had donated the use of his yacht, Sayonara, as the hospital ship for the race. Dr. Edward C. Gow of Glens Falls was on board as the doctor in charge. Gow and his staff treated 41 contestants on the ship. Fortunately, all of the swimmers swiftly recovered from their maladies, though a newspaper report of the day noted that the greased-up swimmers did impart some slight damage to the fine furnishings and upholstery of Mr. Knapp's fine luxury yacht.

Not all of the problems encountered by the swimmers were of a medical nature. One swimmer, delivered to the hospital ship with cramps, recovered and was transferred to another boat to be taken ashore. However, his clothes and possessions were in the rowboat that had been accompanying him. The rowboat was nowhere in sight. The swimmer, believing that the

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oarsman had rowed back to Hague, directed the patrol boat to bring him there. After the boat dropped him on the beach and returned to the race, the unlucky swimmer learned that the rowboat had continued on to Lake George, leaving him high and dry in Hague.

Another account tells of an official who found two oarsmen rowing down the lake without their swimmer. When asked where the swimmer was, the oarsmen said they had lost him. After three-quarters of an hour of searching, the officials finally found the missing swimmer, about two miles behind the rowboat!

The water was cold, the waves were high and the course was long. Apparently the swimmers had not anticipated the difficulty of the marathon. In the end, only one contestant crossed the finish line. His name was Edward Keating, a 24-year-old swimming instructor from New York City, who completed the race just after 4:30 am on the morning of July 13th, after being in the water for almost 19 hours.

At an awards ceremony the next day, Keating received $5,000 in prize money, as well as a silver cup and a lot in a Lake George development tract. He vowed to use part of the prize money to give his mother a vacation on Lake George. Although at the time of the prize ceremony he had not yet decided which hotel he would select, he did say that he had a special fondness in his heart for Hague. Keating had trained there for a week before the race and had established many new friendships there.

Ernest Vierkoetter, the German baker who had held a strong lead throughout the first part of the marathon, dropped out in Bolton Landing because of indigestion. It seems that his stomach was having difficulty adjusting to that good ole American cuisine after his hearty German diet!

Although the marathon was a great success in garnering publicity for the region that summer, it turned out to be a one-time event, never to be staged again.

Perhaps it was the frustration on the part of the many competitors who were unable to complete the course or perhaps the American Legion could not rally enough support for a second running of the marathon.

The reasons are not clear. But for a few short weeks, in the summer of 1927, the Lake George Swimming Marathon was the talk of the town and the region.

NEWS FROM THE LAKE GEORGE LAND CONSERVANCY (LGLC), CONT'D

Learn about Fall Bird Migration

Join a naturalist at Peggy's Point Preserve in Hague at **9 am on September 5th** to observe and record songbirds, waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors. This two-acre park provides an ample environment for observing species to later upload to eBird. Prior birding experience is not necessary and binoculars will be available for use. For more information and to register, click HERE.

NORTHERN LAKE GEORGE FOUNDATION

The Northern Lake George Foundation (NLGF) supports education, workforce development, local businesses, and community programs. Its mission is to foster economic growth, youth development, and community well-being.

The NLGF Board of Directors has appointed Mike Corbo as Executive Director, effective September 1st. He succeeds Board Chair Kathleen Coffman, who served as volunteer Executive Director.



Corbo served nearly a decade on the Board of Directors of the United Way of the Greater Capital Region while working as a vice president with Enterprise Rent-A-Car and operating an auto appraisal company. After returning to Ticonderoga four years ago, he became a substitute teacher in the Ticonderoga Central School District.

"I am extremely excited and incredibly honored to join NLGF to work on increasing our impact on the community," Corbo said.

NLGF recently awarded more than $27,000 in scholarships to seven Ticonderoga High School graduates: Isabelle Burroughs, Shaelene Dedrick, Madelyn Drinkwine, Eli Dromgool, Brady Leerkes, Derrick Osier, and Gracie Wells. The students are pursuing programs ranging from line worker training and nursing to four-year degrees. Meg Singer and Mike Huffman launched the 2026 Scholarship Campaign with a $10,000 contribution toward its $50,000 goal.

The Foundation also donated $5,000 to the Ticonderoga Backpack Program, which provides nutritious food to 290 eligible children from seven area school districts.

Another NLGF initiative, UpLift, provides local students, particularly those with financial need, with access to Garrison Gym, mentorship, community support, and opportunities to develop healthy habits. A $35 monthly contribution sponsors one student.

To donate, volunteer, or join the mailing list, visit www.nlgfoundation.org or email info@nlgfoundation.org.