

Swimmer takes aim at Lake Ontario

By Peter Downs

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Long-distance swimmer Christine Arsenault plans to make all her days of bone-numbing cold pay off some time in the next two weeks.

The St. Catharines woman can already see herself climbing to shore on the other side of Lake Ontario at the Toronto park bearing the name of Marilyn Bell, who became the first person to swim across the lake in 1954 at age 16.

Arsenault, 35, has been dreaming of pulling off the remarkable athletic feat since she was almost the same age.

And after nearly two years of training, she's ready to slip into the water in Niagara-on-the-Lake and attempt the 52-kilometre crossing — possibly as early as Aug. 8, depending on the weather.

"It's been a long time coming," said the single mother of two daughters and a day-care operator. "It's been on my agenda for 20 years."

But getting in shape for the marathon swim — which will raise funds for swim programs at Welland's International Flat Water Centre — has been a marathon challenge in itself.

Arsenault can still feel the water's biting cold from lengthy training swims at the beginning of June without the benefit of a wetsuit when the water temperature hovered just below 9°C.

"It was awful. It's a seriously weird form of self torture," she said.

"It was not fun at all. I can't say that I enjoyed it. But I will enjoy the success that comes with having done it."

But dealing with the cold is a minor issue compared with some of the other obstacles that came Arsenault's way.

After riding her bike 7,600 kilometres across the country in 1998, Arsenault set her sights on a cross-lake swim.

The former competitive swimmer began training, but learned just three weeks after getting started that she was pregnant with her first daughter, 11-year-old Trinity.

A second daughter, Michaela, 9, followed shortly after and Arsenault was too busy wading through the waters of parenthood to think seriously about her dream of conquering the lake.

But about two years ago she joined the Master's swim program at Brock University and the lake swim resurfaced as a goal.

A crash on her bike last summer shattered her collarbone and put her training on hold for months as she went through rehabilitation.

"It's been a full year of rehabbing and testing to ensure my shoulder is going to be strong enough to make it," she said.

Now healthy and healed, Arsenault has been preparing to tackle the lake by swimming five to eight kilometres a day in the pool at Brock, followed by longer swims on the weekend. She has also logged several lengthy sessions in the canal and the lake, covering up to 25 kilometres at a time.

"I'm feeling good. I'm ready."

Arsenault is gearing up to set off from Niagara-on-the-Lake — Queen's Royal Park at the foot of King St. — on Aug. 8, provided there are no major storms or high winds in the forecast. She's also lined up crews to accompany her on two back-up dates — Aug. 11 and 17 — if necessary.

She expects the swim to take between 19 and 22 hours.

"It's got to be as close to flat as possible, but if there's anything I'm learning about lake Ontario it's that conditions on that lake change very quickly," she said.

"I'm not too afraid of when the chop and the wave will come because I know it will pass."

In addition to realizing a personal goal, Arsenault is also hoping her swim will help break down some of the barriers to competitive swimming for needy kids.

She's raising donations for a new fund created in partnership with the Welland Flat Water Centre and the Niagara Community Foundation.

"We're going to develop an open-water swim program and we're going to open the doors up to kids who normally wouldn't get an opportunity to participate in competitive sport," Arsenault said. "I know as a single mom how expensive access to good quality programming really is."

When she hits the water, Arsenault will have her two daughters at her side in one of the crew boats and her boyfriend, Mike Schulz, who is acting as her coach.



Christine Arsenault, shown in the water in Niagara-on-the-Lake, is hoping to swim across Lake Ontario to raise money for the Welland Flat Water Centre. PHOTO: BOB TYMCZYSZYN QMI Agency