

# SCUBA Sirens Roaring into Rottnest

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Maureen Cox, Sandy Webb, Carol Travaglione and Zita Dobson

**Not many people can claim they've swum WA's gruelling Multiplex Living Rottnest Channel Swim, but when you're sixty years old, who would even want to? The Roaring Forties of course. These four women, who were the oldest female team to swim from Cottesloe to Rottnest in 2001, are back again in 2005.**

**M**aureen Cox (59), Sandy Webb (64), Carol Travaglione (56) and Zita Dobson (60)—who are the Roaring Forties Laubman & Pank Team—have been training for several months now to once again tackle the swim. With a collective age of 240 years, they again will be amongst the oldest teams swimming to the island on February 19. The team is so named because the forties was the decade each woman was born.

"I'm 59 now," says Maureen, the team's driving force, "so this is my sixtieth year. What else would I do in my sixtieth year? Swim to Rott. If you can't be the youngest or the absolute best at something then grow up and be the oldest."

The event boasts a slew of superlatives. At 19.2 km, it is the largest open-water swim in the world. It attracts over 2,000 swimmers and more than 10 000 spectators and visitors to Rottnest Island. Last year, Rottnest's local pub, the Quokka Arms, increased its capacity to cater for 3,800 revellers.

Because of the nature of swimming in open water, most teams actually swim about 22 km. Each member of the Roaring Forties will swim for ten minutes then rest for thirty, culminating in a distance of about 5.5 km each. Even if weather conditions are good, the swim is not leisurely with possible large swells and strong currents. In 2003, swim conditions were so bad that only one third of the solo swimmers and under half of all swimmers finished.

In addition, jelly fish pose another problem. Sandy still bears the mark of stings across her throat when doing the 4.5 km swim from Barrack Street to Matilda Bay. "The last kilometre was like being in a roomful of stingers," she explains. "They went deep as well. Individually, they don't sting that much, but by the time you had to get across a whole acre of them, it was awful, especially when it's at the end and you're really tired."

Remarkably, the women started swimming in the late nineties because of their local SCUBA diving club, the Underwater Explorers Club. During the winter, when the dive boat didn't go out, they began meeting at Fremantle Pool on Wednesday nights. "At that stage I couldn't swim 50 metres," says Maureen. "I couldn't make it to the end of the pool. Three years later we swam to Rottnest."

"It was more socializing in the shallow

the water. The Australia Day swim at Scarborough Beach taught her a particularly potent lesson in respecting the sea. "I did the two kilometre swim and I was just coming around the final buoy with the people who were winning the five kilometre section. I got a bit distracted by two young men who came around at the same time. My competitive spirit kicked in and I tried to catch them."

"I forgot to look around at the waves—the surf was really big that day—and I got totally slammed into the ground. I lost my goggles and bathers and cap—they all got sucked off—which was very mean of the water, I think. They were such big dumping waves, but I was coming in like a hero and winning the five kilometre race. Luckily, I managed to get my bathers back on."

But the women claim they're not in it for the competitive glory. "I do it because I can," says Sandy. "I was a very watery child, playing underwater and on reefs, but I wasn't athletic and I was a hopeless swimmer. Still am. I

would never have thought I could do anything like endurance swimming until I got started because of fear of being unfit."

Indeed, Sandy's training regime for the three weeks leading up to the swim resembles a complicated flight plan. Her schedule, developed by a young colleague at work who is a triathlete, is designed to mimic the day.

"It's like I'm doing some Ironman thing," Sandy jokes. "I get up at 5am and swim for two hours five days a week. He's designed it so I do four to five hundred-metre sets then take a break which is what we'll do on the day. You need to know what it feels like. All up it comes to five kilometres. He says, 'You've got to get five kilometres into your arms.' Well I've got five kilometres into my arms and they're really tired."

"Seriously, I'll still be slow but I'll have amazing stamina, I hope."

With such a positive outlook and enthusiasm, the team has attracted a bevy of sponsors, including Skids Swimwear,

Aviva Optical who made their prescription goggles and fuel money from BHP. Their corporate sponsor, Laubman and Pank, not only helped out the team by picking up their entry fee, but continue to boost morale by showing up at events with a bunch of supporters and a big banner.

"Many local customers comment that what the girls are doing is fantastic," says Yvonne Parnell, Laubman and Pank's WA Retail Operations Manager. "I saw them at the Australia Day swim; it was only two kilometers, but they came out with stinger bites all over them and it had been really tough seas. I just thought they are so fabulous and their efforts are so amazing."

The 2005 swim promises to be a challenge for the women: this time they hope not to repeat their performance, but to better it.

"We took eight hours and 28 minutes in 2001," explains Maureen, "and if we can—like the true Olympians we're not—shave five one-hundredths of a second off that time, we'll be

pretty happy."

The women have a strategy to better their time. "Carmine has a theory that we really shouldn't stop and chat in the water when we tag," laughs Sandy. "I think this time we're going to try and not talk so much."

"All we really need is nice water and good conditions and we'll be fine," says Maureen. "Eoin Cameron from 720 ABC Perth radio wants us to cut ten minutes off our time."

"Even if we don't it's still the best day out. The support, the crowds, the atmosphere, it's a fantastic day. The team spirit is incredible. You really want to help these other three people on their journey to Rottnest."

"I'm really grateful to everyone and our company for getting right behind us and saying, 'You girls are worthwhile and we'll do whatever we can for you.'"

"I could've walked on water last time and come right back," says Sandy about finishing the 2001 swim. "So I hope the miracle happens again. But it's true that in 2001 I was the one

who did all the training and everyone else was much more casual and they still swam better than me. But I felt fantastic so who cares."

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Recently celebrating its fiftieth year, the Underwater Explorers Club of Western Australia is the state's oldest SCUBA diving club. It has been a pioneer in local shipwreck exploration as well as instrumental in many environmental clean-up projects. Today, the club boasts over 150 members, many of whom actively work in the aquatic and marine industries. Club members dive locally in Perth most weekends from the club's boat, Underwater Explorer, which is based in East Fremantle.  
<http://www.underwaterexplorersclub.net>

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