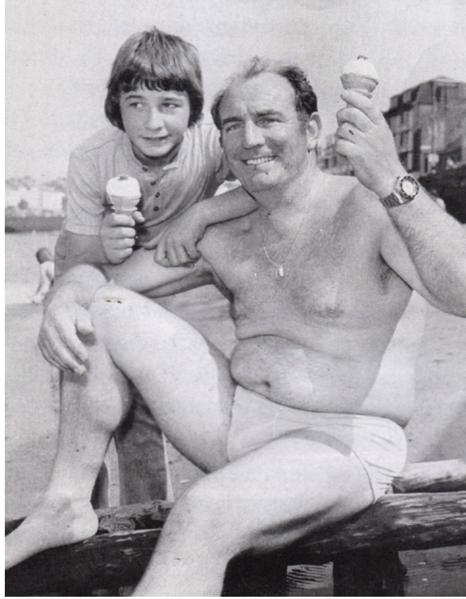


The Legend Ted Keenan – Triple Channel Swimmer (1934 - 2013)

“I used to think he belonged to the sea and the sea belonged to him”

By Brian Keenan (son)



Ted 'licks all the odds' with his son Brian after the North Channel swim.
© Stanley Matchett, Daily Mirror.

Ted Keenan was my Dad. He was also one of my best friends. He was the bravest person I've ever had the privilege of knowing. He was a fearless giant, and as stubborn as a mule. In contrast, he was loaded full of devilment and adventure and he possessed a great, unique sense of humour. His heroes were the actor John Wayne, five time Olympic Gold Medallist and actor Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan) and the great country singer Johnny Cash. Three men who were without doubt truly men, and a trio of stars who inspired my father through their consistent strength and iconic significance.

Dad learned to swim at a young age at the Mill Lough and the Old Weir's Bridge. For a dare he once dropped off the edge of the bridge and into the water. I remember him telling me that when his mother found out what he had done she nearly died of a heart attack. He always found that he got bored of swimming before he ever got tired. His first long distance swim was in 1967, across Lough Erne at its widest point; after a friend waged a bet with him that it couldn't be done. I was only eight years of age at that time but I remember after he completed the swim, which took 5 hours and 20 minutes, it seemed as he had only popped in for a quick "dip". It was effortless.

From a very early stage it was clear the sea was where he loved swimming. I used to think he belonged to the sea and the sea belonged to him. In 1968 he swam from Mullaghmore to Bundoran, by which time he had caught the bug for Long Distance Swimming. His dream was to swim the English Channel, as it was regarded as the Blue Ribbon of long distance swimming. Two years of hard training then followed. We used to swim a mile in Portora Pool each morning before work or school, and then in the evenings attend circuit training in the Police Depot. The latter was done under the supervision of Sergeant Jock Cooper and Sergeant Jack McFarland, and Dad and I circuit trained 3 or 4 times per week.

Dad's first attempt at the Channel in August 1970 ended in failure. After swimming for almost 19 hours Dad was ordered from the water or risk the lives of all, including mummy, who was also aboard the pilot boat. Due to severe weather conditions and navigational problems they were blown off course and in the area known as The Goodwin Sands, which was notorious for sunken wrecks from the Second World War. The pilot boat was in danger of sinking. Mummy, who couldn't swim, never got in a boat again. Having trained relentlessly for the previous couple of years, Dad cried with disappointment, however he was still strong and determined to finish.

He continued to train hard and vowed to return. I remember mummy, who had wonderful patience, having the Saturday or Sunday dinner prepared for 11.30 to suit the tidal times in Bundoran. This was done purely to meet Dad's training schedule.

On the 13 August 1972 he triumphantly completed the English Channel in 18 hours 11 minutes. There were tears again, tears of joy this time, filling his goggles as he began to see the sand beneath him when he approached the final 150 yards.



Mr. Ted Keenan with his son Brian on the boat to Bangor from Portpatrick (Scotland) after completing 'The North Channel' 1973.

On the 11 August the following year, the North Channel was conquered in 18 hours 27 minutes. Dad was only the third person to complete this feat – a remarkable achievement. The North Channel is regarded as the toughest swim in the world due to the extreme cold and the "Man O' War" jellyfish. The unique treble was completed when he swam the Bristol Channel on the 17 July 1975 in 14 hours 26 minutes. The first eight hours of the swim left him physically sick as a result of swallowing raw sewage and fuel from an oil slick he had swam through during the first hour. Dad's general mantra was all too believable when he stated, "It was tough but I'm tougher".

He continued to swim and train in Bundoran. Paul McGuinness, a lifeguard in Bundoran at the time used to accompany Dad and I on many a training swim. Dad's favourite swim was to leave Bundoran beach and head out around the point of Rougey and into the little beach at Rougey before returning. This would normally take about an hour. One Saturday after doing the swim Dad asked Paul and I to accompany him to the Long Lounge Bar in Bundoran. Always the country and western enthusiast, Dad had wanted to see a local band, whilst we both reluctantly agreed.

We met up later that evening but Paul and I got bored as the band were truly awful, and there was a very "old" crowd in attendance so Paul and I decided to leave Dad and head into town for a much "better" night. Before leaving we agreed with Dad to meet the next morning at 9 o'clock to do the Rougey swim again. Paul and I didn't get to bed until about five the next morning meaning we were suffering from severe hangovers when we met Dad just a few hours later at 9am. We proceeded to swim around Rougey but instead of returning to Bundoran as normal, Dad decided to swim straight out further from the shore. After about two hours, with Paul and I shivering from the cold as our hangovers were truly "kicking in", I turned to Dad and asked through cracked lips and slurred, difficult speech, "When are we turning to go back?"

Dad simply burst into fits of laughter, responding that it would be the last time us pair of young boys would leave him in the pub alone! So after swimming for about two and a half hours, we eventually got back to Bundoran. I was shivering so much I could barely walk up the beach while Dad was still laughing at taking the mickey out of us. He always had a fantastic knack for balancing his self-determination and headstrong mulishness with a childlike, mischievous wit. He was some boy! He was some man for one man!