



Endurance Swimming and Overcoming Obstacles

You can go farther than you think.

By Tim Walther

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Reflections

It was a hot July day in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The dry mountain heat surrounded me as I perched on a wooden rail in Grand Teton National Park. Gazing out across Jenny Lake, I could see the white-capped mountain peaks of the Tetons with the remaining snow dripping down from their summits into the shimmering water.

Memories of a multitude of Teton adventures flashed through my mind. The landscape conjured up magical memories of rock climbing, trail running, paddle boarding and all the sights, sounds and feelings of being in the mountains. It felt good to remember those moments, and I remained lost in my daydream until the pain in my knee snapped me out of it.

Caressing my swollen right kneecap, I shook my head in frustration. One little tweak while running through the streets of St. Petersburg, Russia in the middle of World Cup frenzy a few weeks ago, and, BOOM, another setback. I had enough experience with injuries to know that this wasn't going to be a week-long recovery. Dang! Right in the middle of the brief window of prime-time summer in Jackson Hole.

My brain searched through scenarios to calculate how long it would take to get my knee back. I definitely knew what I couldn't do – no big mountain routes, no long endurance runs and no “normal” Teton adventures. I shook my head in disgust. I didn't like this negative thought pattern and made the conscious decision to shift. Taking a deep breath, I said to myself, “Reset. Reframe. Ask a better question.”

“What COULD I do?” I asked the little voice in my head. I sat in silence for some time repeating this question. Soon enough, my mind shifted to the realm of possibilities and answers began to bubble up.

I could probably stand on a paddle board. I could definitely swim.

Swimming inside during the summer didn't seem fun, though, so I focused on stand-up paddle boarding. Paddle boarding across the lakes seemed possible, but how could I make it interesting? What if I could paddle board all the lakes in Grand Teton National Park? The travel in between would present some obstacles, but the challenge seemed worthy.

Over the next few days I shared my idea with some friends and received a lukewarm response. The general consensus was that bushwhacking through Grand Teton National Park with paddle boards didn't exactly sound like fun.

What if I could eliminate carrying the paddle boards through the woods? Better yet, what if I could just eliminate the paddle boards all together? Would it be possible to just swim across all the lakes? Considering the fact that the longest swim I had done to date was about a mile and a half, the initial idea of *that* seemed pretty outrageous.

I looked at my GTNP map and pieced together all the mileage across the seven prominent lakes at the base of the Teton range—Jackson, Leigh, String, Jenny, Bradley, Taggart and Phelps. It looked like it would be about twenty miles of water. Twenty miles? Is that even reasonable? It would certainly be challenging—which is precisely what made it interesting.

The Challenge

My mind began to consider the adventure.. Just how hard would swimming twenty miles be? How cold was the water? What about the wind and waves? Swimming Jackson Lake was the most daunting part. If I could swim the thirteen miles across Jackson, I should have no problem getting across the others. I would certainly need some support along the way. I shifted into preparation mode and created a quick action plan.

I would need:

- A clear route, including how to get in between the lakes
- A target date for the adventure
- A support boater for safety, at least getting across Jackson Lake
- The right gear, including a new wetsuit
- To train for endurance and how to swim long distance (minor detail)

I created a detailed map, piecing together the known and unknown parts of the route. It was important to clarify which direction to take across the lakes and how to navigate what seemed to be a bushwack between Jackson and Leigh Lake.



Schedule It and It Becomes Real

My launch date would be August 24th, the last full moon of summer. I would begin the swim in the dark, just like when I swam across Jenny Lake during my first multi-sport Teton adventure, "The Picnic." This was one of several romantic, yet very disillusioned and inaccurate evaluations of the objective.

What's In a Name?

I decided to call it the Lake to Lake Link. Giving my objective a name also gave me a new identity. Instead of just swimming across mountain lakes, I became someone training to complete a new adventure. I said things like, "I'm becoming aquaman so I can swim a marathon." Half joking. Half real. All fun. The psychology of aligning with identity added a very important element to the positive excitement of it all.

Support

The biggest danger I perceived was drowning somewhere in the middle of Jackson Lake. I wanted to alleviate that primary fear by finding a skilled canoe person who

would be willing, and able, to follow me across Jackson Lake. I knew just the right person—Erik Kampe.

Erik is a longtime friend, business partner, and endurance expert. He grew up canoeing in the backwoods of Canada and later in the boundary waters of Minnesota. He is a survival expert, backcountry canoe specialist, and one of the smartest people I know. I hung up the phone after he told me he was in, pumped my fist in the air and shouted, “Yes!” The power of someone saying yes to an idea is so invigorating.

After plenty of banter, it was time to test my capacity to swim and prepare my body and mind for the best attempt, with action.

Gear

I created a primary gear list:

- Wetsuit
- Booties
- Gloves
- Hood / Swim Caps
- Goggles – 2 pair
- Safety buoy with swim lanyard
- GPS Tracking device
- Trail running shoes

The next thing I did was order a new wetsuit! When it arrived, I squirmed and squeezed to fit into it. The neck was so tight I could barely breathe. I looked in the mirror at my stomach bulging out and had to look away in disgust. Talk about taking the wind out of my sails. I was too fat to fit into my new wetsuit! Good one. My immediate reaction was to return it and get a bigger size. My second thought was that I needed to lose weight, quickly.

And so began my “fat boy” transformation.

Training

I wrote out my plan for what I would eat and how I would train. I made “power smoothies” each morning, cut out alcohol, and started working out three hours a day. I began daily road biking to minimize impact on my recovering knee.

My first swimming objective was Leigh Lake. Neesha, my girlfriend, and I paddle boarded down String Lake and across most of Leigh, stopping almost at the end at Mystic Island. From there, I squeezed into my old wetsuit and swam back about a mile and a half. I felt strong and confident. However, my hands were like soft, wrinkly prunes when I finished. We both wondered what swimming twenty times that distance would do to my hands.

A few days later I went out to Slide Lake. It was colder than Leigh, but manageable. I still felt smooth during the hour and a half swim, but felt nauseous afterward. On top of that, my arm rotation and water pulling seemed to reactivate an old shoulder injury.

My two go-to guys for healing, Kevin Meehan and Brian Prax, helped me out. Meehan gave me some immediate relief with his magical acupuncture and massage. Prax diagnosed me with a “subacromial impingement” which is medical speak for my shoulder really, really hurting. He consoled me by telling me that my shoulder would not likely get any worse, it would just get more and more painful as the swimming progressed. Sweet! Deep down inside I wondered at what point this would become too much to continue.

I wasn't sure whether to let my shoulder rest or continue with my next training swim. In the end, I decided to test out some alternative stroking methods. I researched a different approach to swimming called Total Immersion Swimming. The idea was to reduce drag by streamlining my body positioning and rotate myself with sideways kicking. That way I could use the natural momentum of my arms and body as the primary way to propel myself through the water.

I went for a swim to practice the technique and circumnavigated most of Phelps Lake in about two hours. Afterward, my shoulder felt okay.

Time was ticking. I had about ten days and two big swims left to prepare my body and mind. I spent a lot of time researching supplements, cold water exposure, psychology and advanced swimming techniques.

The first of my last two objectives was designed to test my endurance by linking up two lakes, Leigh and Jenny. This time I was solo. I left town about noon, stashed my road bike at Jenny Lake, and made my way to the north side of Leigh Lake. I suited up and just before getting in the water, I bent over. As I did, I heard a small ripping sound. The

seam in my suit had popped, making a small hole in the ass of the suit. Good one! I took it in stride and started swimming even though cold water seeped into the back side.

I made my way past Mystic Island and crossed the bay that afternoon just as the wind picked up. The big waves were challenging. It was a wild sensation to have water crashing over my head, creating just enough of a pocket on the opposite side to catch a breath of air. The fear of choking on a wave is real, and so I focused on remaining calm and consistent with my head positioning. I swam the two-mile crossing in an hour and a half and hiked the four miles back along String Lake and over to Jenny. The wind had picked up significantly, and I realized that this would be another great opportunity to train in adverse conditions. Dropping into the water, it became apparent that the crashing waves were even bigger than the Leigh Bay crossing. I swam along the shore through the chaos of crashing waves for two hours, grabbed my bike and got back to my truck with daylight to spare.

My final swim on Jackson Lake happened when there was less than a week to go. Erik rolled into town, and we met up to discuss the plan and logistics. We rented a seventeen-foot kevlar canoe from Rendezvous River Sports to test it out on my final training day. My plan was to swim five miles down the shore of Jackson Lake from Lizard Creek to Leeks Marina. It would be my longest swim yet.

We figured it was best to swim on Jackson Lake at the time that we envisioned starting. The strategy was to start at night under the full moon and log some mileage to avoid the strain of waves and current created by afternoon high winds.

We started at midnight from town and arrived at Lizard Creek in the dark. The air temperature was a cold 38 degrees, and the lake was shrouded with fog. There was a light wind. We looked out at the lake, contemplating being in the middle of it in the dark with big waves, adverse conditions and nearly freezing temperatures. It all seemed like a really bad idea. Erik went to his car, and I crawled into the back of my pick up truck to wait for the sun and warmer temperatures.

In the morning it was beautiful and sunny, and we got underway at about 9:30 a.m. for the six and a half mile swim to Leeks Marina. It took about five hours, and I was able to get into the flow for long periods of time and stay mostly relaxed. The only bummer was that my hoody fell out of the canoe at the end of the trip. Luckily, I had ordered a few swimming accessories, including a new open water swim cap.

I felt tired and nauseous, but overall pretty good, considering the distance and amount of time in the water. However, having to double the distance in a day felt really daunting, and waiting until daylight to start meant swimming during afternoon winds on Jackson Lake. All of the variables created more uncertainty. I knew it was going to require digging deep to get across Jackson Lake in one day, never mind all of the other lakes.

Was I Ready...Enough?

The few days leading up to go time, I rested and prepped the logistics. I had one last visit to Meehan for acupuncture on my shoulder. "Good Luck!" Kevin shouted with encouragement as I left the appointment. I nodded and suddenly remembered a quote by Seneca. "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity." But was I prepared *enough*? This was the overarching question that loomed in the recesses of my mind.

Food Prep

I took all my snacks out of wrappers and packed my food into small, easily accessible bags for quick access. I had hot drinks in three thermoses, a gallon of non-caffeinated power drink, a gallon of caffeinated power water, another gallon of regular water and various small water bottles. I made my power smoothie filled with my standard concoction of greens and other all-natural energy boosters.

Go Time

The final night before launching was filled with nervous energy that emerged through a lot of pacing and double checking my supplies. Sitting at dinner, I visualized swimming across Jackson Lake for hours on end. I was already there as I stared off into some distant place, squinting my eyes as if to see it more clearly. I was preparing to go into battle.

I laid down around 10 PM and jumped up when the alarm buzzed at 2:30 AM. Hopping into my trusty 1992 Toyota pickup truck, I headed for Jenny Lake to pick up Erik and then on to Lizard Creek. As we pulled up to the parking lot, there was an eerie mist shrouding the lake making for quite the mysterious scene. We loaded the canoe, and I put on my wetsuit and new orange swim cap. Taking long, deep breaths, I waited for the sun to come up enough for the lake to come into full view. Erik filmed a brief opening video that showed my pre-launch jitters.

My excitement of the journey insulated the actual cold of the morning. As I stepped into the lake and felt the coolness of the water, I began what would become a series of pre-swim rituals. I took several deep, long power breaths and splashed water on my face. These actions both facilitated easier breathing at the start of the swim and lowered my heart rate. I took the plunge and began stroking away from the shore. My sights were set for the opposite side of the lake about a mile and a half away.

At the outset, I just focused on being relaxed, smooth and efficient. My breathing pattern alternated sides on sets of three. Stroke, stroke, breathe. Repeat. Each stroke was a new opportunity to move through the water efficiently and gracefully.

As the sun rose, I had a sudden affirmation of what I was doing. Each breath gave me a snapshot of the fiery red sun, a counterpart to the dark abyss below me. My spirit was filled with joy. I was in it, and the sun was greeting me with a big thank you smile for embarking on the journey. This was a moment I will never forget, and to me, one of those moments that makes life worth living.

It was about one hour into the swim when the first obstacle arrived.

Muscle Cramps

I was in the middle of the first crossing, about a mile from each shore of Jackson Lake, when a major cramp seized the calf on my left leg. It took me by surprise because I had not had any cramps on any of my training swims. I did my best to stay calm, but it was so bad I had to stop swimming. I called Erik over, grabbed onto the canoe and nearly dumped the whole thing over. Erik gave me some warm tea and alkalizing supplements to reduce cramping. I started swimming again without kicking my left leg. I slowed my pace and mentally visualized the cramps disappearing. Miraculously, over several minutes, my body responded, the cramps disappeared and I was able to begin kicking again.

Neck Rash

The swimming continued, and we made it to the western shore of Jackson Lake. Mentally it felt good to get onto dry land and feel the ground for a few minutes. My body was chilled. The strategy was to get off the top of the wetsuit and warm up by putting on my cotton fleece and drinking hot fluids. As I pulled off my swim cap, I felt a burning sensation across the whole back of my neck. Erik checked it out and said, "Wow, Tim. This isn't good, brother."

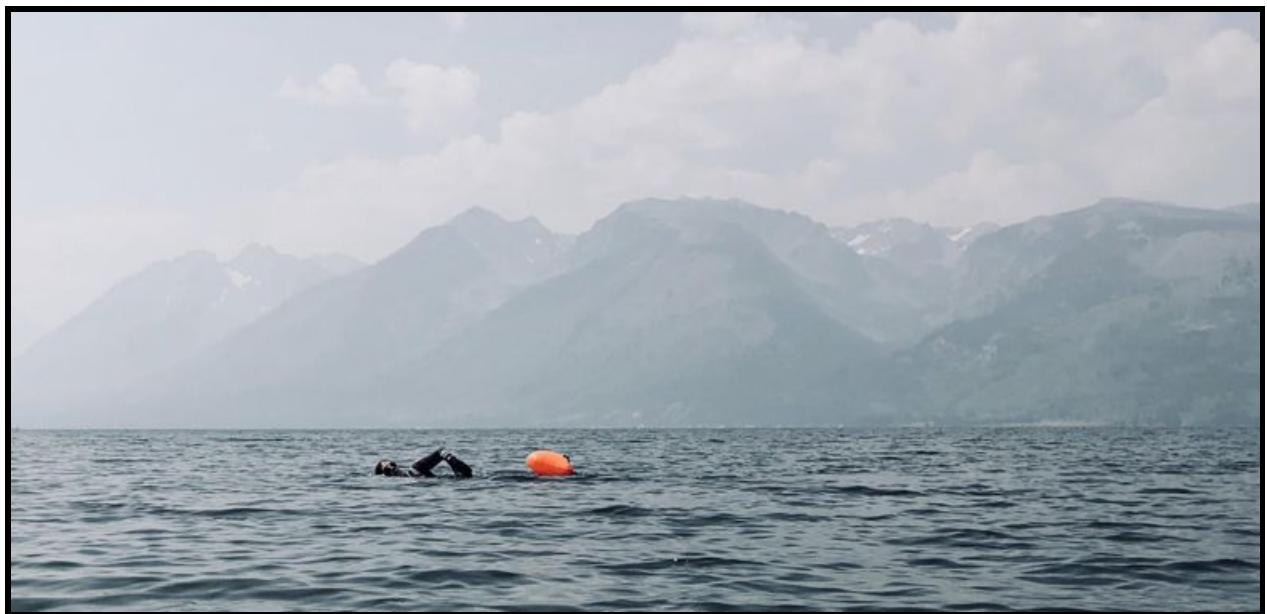
This was the first time wearing this specialized swim cap. I figured it would be great because it was specifically designed for open water swimming and to help with extended cold exposure. But instead, it gave me a massive, bloody neck rash. Luckily, Erik had a buff, which I put on under my regular swim cap and covered my burned neck. I would continue with this set up for the remainder of the trip. As I got back into the water, my neck continued to burn.

Ripped Wetsuit

As if the swim cap issue wasn't enough, just before we headed off shore I looked down and noticed that the patch covering the hole in my wetsuit had come off. I now had a hole in my rear end about three inches wide, and as I began to swim, I felt a flow of cold water pouring directly onto my lower body.

The Swimming

It's hard to describe what it feels like to be swimming for hours on end. There are so many parts of a stroke to direct attention toward, and the repetition brings out subtleties. A minute can seem like an eternity, especially if you are battling waves, wind, and cold. My strategy was to get into my flow space with my swimming technique and optimize my strokes. Whether I was in or out of flow seemed to begin largely with how I controlled my mind.



Walther swimming on Jackson Lake - PC: Erik Kampe

Rhythms and Mantras

Establishing various rhythms and using mantras helped me to focus my mind and reduce the monotony. I sang songs in my head to the pattern of stroking. Sometimes I counted strokes for sets of 100. At one point I remember doing sets of 1,000 before breaking stride. My mantras were positive thoughts I would repeat to stay calm and embrace the experience. "Stay in the flow, here we go...let gratitude flow to me and through me."

My overarching psychology as I continued on through difficult situations was a phrase I heard from a cold exposure and breath hold master, Wim Hoff, "The only limitation is in the mind." I repeated this phrase to myself so much that it became an echo in my head.

Sighting

I was able to keep swimming forward without thinking so much about direction because Erik was perfectly positioned next to me. This allowed me to not have to look up or think about where I was going. This detail of the support positioning cannot be overstated. I felt the most efficient and safe when I was looking slightly back over my shoulder at the canoe. Sometimes I would close my eyes or not be close enough to Erik and would start swimming off into some random direction. I usually veered off to the right because my left arm was fixed in a bent position from a past elbow injury, and I was overcompensating for my right shoulder.

A main focal point of my strategy was to just keep going—swimming as consistently as possible to the seven way-point markers, without worrying about the big picture or focusing on the map. I was reminded of a quote from my long term endurance training mentor, Stu Middlemen, as he shared insights on his world record thousand-mile run. "I never ran a thousand miles, I ran one mile, a thousand times." Break down the magnanimous journey into small parts, knocking them off one piece at a time.

Along the way, my meditations continued to get deeper and deeper, and my body continued to get colder and colder.

Core Body Temperature

I had no idea how cold I would get or how long it might take to get to a temperature that was "too cold." I wore gloves, booties and a cap along with my three-millimeter

race designed wetsuit. As the day progressed there were long periods of clouds and wind, requiring swimming against waves and currents. This was way different than my last Jackson Lake training swim. Erik pointed out that the water temperature along the western shore was colder because it was where the snow melt comes in directly from the mountains to feed the lakes. This temperature shift was another thing that I had not anticipated.

The irony is that I often could not tell how cold I was getting until I stopped to warm up. When I stopped, I immediately began shivering. The consistency of becoming mildly hypothermic began to create an odd sensation of survival throughout my body. By the time we reached the final crossing at Bear Paw Bay, I had been going for twelve hours and was delirious.

Bear Paw Bivy

We had made it to the final crossing and the setting sun left a red hue over the darkening water. My crew was only three miles away. My dream had been a sunset crossing in perfect glass conditions and meeting everyone at the camp with a big bonfire. The reality was completely different. The wind was whipping and the waves rolling across Bear Paw Bay were significant. As the sun disappeared, I stood shivering and staring out at the big waves. The end of the lake seemed so close, and yet so far. Still, I felt like I could make it.

Erik, in his calm and calculated manner, made it perfectly clear that we weren't going anywhere, though. "There's no way for me to keep you safe in conditions like this, Tim. It's time to settle in and warm up."

Partially in shock, I was filled with a moment of irrational determinism, yet also relieved that I had someone to make a wise decision. Erik moved fast to get me out of my wetsuit and into dry clothes and a sleeping bag. As I got into my bag, my body proceeded to shiver uncontrollably. My feet were like blocks of ice and remained numb and cold for several hours, even after putting one hot water bottle between my thighs and another between my feet. Erik made the most amazing hot soup I have ever had, and I felt so thankful that he was there with me.

As I lay under the shining bright stars, feeling the weight of the cold and exhaustion, I was unsure if I would be able to warm up enough to continue at all. We managed radio contact with Marshall, and he agreed the bivy was a good idea. He congratulated us for making it this far. The words felt comforting and helped me to realize that I had already

gone farther than ever before. My mind continued to spin, "What if I couldn't warm up? What if I couldn't swim any more? Would I be okay with not continuing on?" I became aware again of the stories in my mind, and chose to let that decision rest until tomorrow.

I awoke to the sun glistening behind the mountains and icy frost covering my bivy sack. I breathed deeply through the cold air, thinking warm thoughts as Erik got up and fired up the stove for hot food and drink. The lake was calm for now. I didn't know how long that would last, but I knew I needed more time to warm up.

Erick put my wetsuit into a bucket of hot water, making it reasonable to put it on again. I began a longer series of deep breathing techniques as I prepared for re-entry. About 9 AM I started swimming and was able to get over the looming hesitation as I started out with strong confident strokes. After about two minutes I took my first pause and looked over to Erik, laughing out loud and shouting, "It's reasonable. I think I'm going to live!"

Soon enough we emerged onto the Bear Paw Bay Beach. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of accomplishment. The biggest bite of this adventure was over...at least I thought it was.

The portage from Jackson Lake to Leigh Lake follows an old unmaintained trail, passing the midpoint base camp where the crew had hoped to meet us the night before. Passing by it was a reminder that the best plans, more often than not, have deviations from what is expected.

When we arrived at the camp, we ate a few bites of fish, drank some hot coffee, and I had a brief shoulder massage from D. We were back on track as we walked the remaining half mile to Leigh Lake. It was approaching 1:00 PM right when the afternoon wind started to pick up.

The swim was going to be challenging, but the fact that I had been here before gave me a feeling of familiarity that was comforting. In addition, Marshall was in his kayak which meant a two person support crew for the windy crossing. When we launched off on the swim to Mystic Island, the water felt significantly warmer, which was hugely uplifting to my spirit. I felt confident. However, for the first time, my right shoulder began to burn with pain. I immediately began to compensate with bigger body rotations making the flip of my right arm into the water easier.

We made it to the island and, sure enough, the wind across the bay was significant. I knew that this was going to be a forty-five-minute battle requiring left-sided breathing to not choke on the waves. My goal was to get across the open water to the protected, calmer waters behind the island as efficiently as possible. I streamlined my strokes and breathed through small pockets of air as waves crashed over my head. As I made it across the calmer water and slowed my stroking rhythm, my right shoulder began to feel like someone was holding a hot flaming torch to it. Marshall gave me some water, arnica tablets, and ibuprofen to help.

I focused even more on not using my right arm and slowly made my way to the staircase exit. I could see a crowd of people there and as I emerged from the water, a flood of happiness overcame me. Neesha was there, and I felt a sense of relief when I saw her. I gave her a big hug, and it felt like an official crossing over the midpoint of the adventure.

Erik and Marshall had already portaged the canoe and gear to String Lake making for a relatively brief transition. String Lake was quite shallow for the majority of the way, making the swim an odd combination of walking, shallow swimming and using the lake bottom to propel myself forward. The swimming turned into more of a game, choosing some rocks to propel off, walking some sections, skimming on top of others. Instead of the monotonous swimming with no bottom or end in sight, it was like being on a ride at Disneyland.

A short way in, the crew decided to head straight to the take out to deal with gear and shuttles. I was having fun and enjoying the company, and when they left me, albeit for logical reason, sadness overcame me. For the first time of the swim, I was on my own. Even though there was zero threat of danger, I remember the distinct feeling of longing to have people with me to share in the experience. Maybe my ego craved people being around to reflect the pride I was feeling. I was also bummed because this was the end of my support partnership with Erik. Maybe I just wanted to celebrate because it felt like a lot of the hardest parts were over. I didn't realize that the challenges were going to continue, just in different ways.

I exited String Lake through a crowd of tourists gaping at my "navy seal" get up. The word had spread through the crowd about what I was doing. As I made my way to the truck to refuel and transition to Jenny Lake, I felt strong and relaxed. In the back of my mind I knew that I needed to keep things flowing to make it across Jenny Lake by dark.

As I stood there for a moment, a gentleman walked over to me with a curious look on his face. "Your friends told me what you are doing," he said, "and I just have to ask you something. Why? I mean, *why* are you doing this? I *really* want to know."

I smiled. "The short answer? I'm an adventure athlete and this is what I do." My response felt oddly automatic, yet it was something that had never come out of my mouth before.

Marshall stepped in and added, "This is a Grand Dynamics thing. Our company is all about creating experiences and challenging people to be their best. And he is showing people how to do it."

I listened and followed up. "For me, it's really about seeing how far I can go and pushing the limits of what's possible for myself. And in the process, I hope people might see some new level of possibility in themselves."

We finished up and I launched off down the trail toward Jenny Lake. About a quarter mile in I realized that I had left the GPS spot tracking device back at the parking lot and turned back to retrieve it, annoyed at the extra time. I knew I needed to stay focused in order to have enough daylight to make the swim across Jenny.

I made my way to the north end of Jenny Lake. It was windy, and the lake was filled with white caps. My mind considered the most direct line. I figured it would all be hard, so I might as well head straight toward the eastern shore line. That way, if I needed to rest I would have the shore for a quick break.

It was about 6 PM when I began the swim. My body felt heavier than it ever had on any of the other swims. Fatigue was clearly taking its toll. On top of the heavy feeling, my shoulder was pinching and sending shock waves as I pulled with my right arm. I focused in on my strokes and again attempted to minimize the use of my right side, making my alignment difficult and creating a zig-zagging movement.

It took about five very long minutes to make it toward the eastern shore as I swam diagonally into the wind. I could only breathe on my left side as the waves were too big to breathe to the right. I was beginning to feel completely out of sorts.

Marshall waved at me with his paddles. "Dude, it's raging along the shore. There's no way I can spot you over there and the waves are huge. We've got to turn around and get to the western side!"

My brain went into a minor meltdown as I processed what that meant—swimming back into the waves and all the way to the other side of the lake, then swimming twice as far down the length of it once we got there. It would take an extra hour at least and visions of swimming in the dark flashed into my head. It was cold, cloudy, windy, and for the first time, I felt completely exhausted. A sinking feeling of dread came over me as my strokes slowed to a crawl. I was approaching my limit.

“Fuck! OK. Give me a pull, back to where I started.” I grabbed onto the back of the kayak and kicked my feet. Marshall was struggling as we went into the wind, and my weight was too much. I dove down under the waves and swam breaststroke underwater for several sequences. Eventually we made it back to where I had entered the lake a half hour before to start the swim all over. My body felt an odd mixture of hot and cold while I swam. My shoulder was on fire.

Marshall and I debated the best line across the lake. He wanted to keep us on the western shore as long as possible, avoiding the chaos in the middle of the lake. I wanted to get to the shore using the most direct line possible. We landed somewhere in between. As we crossed over the wind line in the middle of the lake, sure enough, the waves began to pick up and soon I was swimming amidst chaos.

The Edge

Part of the allure of the adventure experience is finding the edge of our capacity. The edge lies just beyond our perception of what’s possible, a fraction further than failure and requires everything we have to make it. It’s the furthest intersection of our ability and the level of challenge, and that place where we drop into flow. Sometimes that moment arises during the most difficult part of a challenge—the hardest move on a climb, the steepest section of a ski descent or a swim through the roughest water. Other times the challenge is just difficult because of our physical state of being. Fatigue can make almost any challenge difficult. In either situation, that moment challenges us to go deeper than ever before. And often what it takes to continue on is to go deep within ourselves and summon every bit of what we’ve got. I found my edge that day on Jenny Lake.

The air temperatures continued to drop as the sun disappeared. I felt the water flowing into my suit and onto my skin. Time took an odd transformation as each stroke seemed to slow. Each breath revealed breaking waves and whitecaps stretching toward the shore. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I began to fear the worst. What if my

body just shut down entirely? What if I slipped into hypothermia in the middle of the lake? What if I suddenly passed out from exhaustion? Would Marshall be able to rescue me if any of these scenarios played out? My mental battle was interrupted by Marshall's yell through the wind, "You got this, Tim-o!" Our eyes locked as we both recognized the direness of the situation. Minutes seemed like an eternity as we slowly and painfully made our way across the lake. Somewhere in the middle of it, I swallowed my first major gulp of water. I immediately went into a coughing fit and began slapping down at the water erratically to keep my head above water. Fortunately, I somehow managed to keep it together and slowly move back into my strokes.

An hour later and an eternity in my mind, I stepped foot onto the shore of Jenny Lake. I stumbled as I took my first steps. Squinting into the darkness, I could barely make out the blurry silhouette of an unrecognizable person. Stepping closer, I realized it was my old friend, David Gonzales. He asked me how I was doing, and the only reply I could muster was, "Wow, that was a battle." Deliriously, I began to walk down the path to meet my crew, unsure of what would come next.

As I emerged from the darkness of the woods, there was an odd tension in the air. It felt like one of those moments when you know people are talking about you and might not be saying the most positive things. Side conversations were going on as Erik, Neesha, Marshall and David evaluated my circumstances.

Erik was oddly quiet yet seemed to be letting the situation unfold. David was surveying the scene and getting caught up on what had happened over the past two days.

"Haven't you done enough, already? Come get a good night's sleep in a nice bed," Neesha implored. My mind immediately went into reaction mode of someone telling me it was time to quit as if I didn't have the strength to go on. In that moment it may well have been true, but I certainly wouldn't believe it.

The mutterings continued about not being able to support me any further. I was a day behind schedule and everyone had other plans. The game was over, and they were ready to go home.

I don't need them, anyway, my inner voice screamed as my brain scoured the possibilities. Maybe I should just wander off into the dark and then lay down somewhere to rest closer to the next lake, I thought. This option, of course, was going to require me to carry a backpack filled with a bunch of gear. It all seemed to make sense, except that it didn't really make sense at all.

It was getting late and everyone else was leaving. I was faced with what I would need to do to finish the route on my own. Marshall came over and looked directly into my eyes. "Yeah his face is puffy," he said to the others, "but he'll make it. I would tell you if I didn't think he could."

Finally, David said something that cut through all the mental chatter going on in my head and in the parking lot. "Why don't you bivy here and get an early start in the morning? I'd be willing to come back and go with you."

"Bivy here? Like in my truck?"

What seemed so obvious was something that I had not even thought about. My entire body immediately began to relax at the idea that I could take a break without deviating from the route and continue with my mission in the morning. David, the random card I had not expected, was coming through, and I would have someone to share the last day of the adventure with. Erik took the cue and started to prepare some much needed hot food, although I was feeling too nauseous to eat.

I was able to force a few bites, but the need to lay down became overwhelming. I spread my sleeping bag and crawled into my cocoon. Neesha came in for a few minutes and wished me a good night's sleep and then I was there, alone in the back of my old Toyota. The wind whipped outside rocking me back and forth like a baby. Laying still, my body slowly began to stiffen and I tuned into my heart rate. My heart was pounding fast in what must have been an effort to recover and send vital nourishment to the rest of my body. Even so, I was able to drift off to sleep.

I awoke in the middle of the night desperately needing to go to the bathroom but not wanting to move. After some internal debate, I flopped over the tailgate of the truck and stumbled toward a tree to relieve myself. The storm kicked up leaves as the wind swirled around me.

I woke again to the low light of the day and the sound of the rain pattering on the roof. I looked at my watch, wondering if David would be on time. Even though my shoulder was in excruciating pain and my body was stiff, I was thankful for the rest.

An hour later David's van came rumbling down the dirt road, and the thought of morning coffee motivated me to get up. He slid his van door open and greeted me with coffee and an expressionless look as a gust of wind whipped rain across us.

“The storm is coming in strong with forty mile per hour winds today. You’re not gonna keep going are you?”

I chuckled to myself, surprised by David’s comments. The thought of not continuing on seemed so bizarre. Of course, there was a storm and forty mile per hour winds for the final day. I had the awareness to realize that he didn’t have the same motivation or commitment to do what I had planned for the day. I also had the awareness I was going to figure out how to finish this thing one way or another.

“Well, what else am I going to do? Go home and watch a movie?” We both laughed.

“You have a good point there,” David replied.

I considered the weather and my gear, and my immediate thought was that I would just wear my full wetsuit for the hike. That way the rain and wind wouldn’t matter. We sat there sipping coffee, talking about the various options, and slowly the caffeine began to revive me. I wasn’t in any rush to head out in the middle of the storm.

About an hour later, the rain stopped, and we stepped out of the van. I began to sort through my gear for the final push. Neesha and her friend came by on their way for a hike in the park. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Other than being exhausted and that I’d like to rip my right arm off, things are great!” I was feeling punchy but starting to loosen up a little bit as I walked around.

As the weather continued shifting, the plan started to take shape. David said he was going to drive to the Bradley-Taggart trailhead, hike into Bradley where we would continue together to Taggart, then peel off and hike into Phelps to join me for the final swim. That all seemed reasonable. I knew the trails, but also knew this would still be a big day.

I left the lot and moved off into the woods toward the Lupine Meadows trailhead, beginning my journey to the next lake. Motivation was high as I jogged slowly down familiar terrain. The wind swirled around me, spinning dust into the shining sun. I split at the trail junction and oddly enough, in all my years of travel in GTNP, I had never been on this portion of Valley Trail. It was exciting, and it was downhill.

I meandered down the trail soaking in the new terrain. As I came around a corner I had a delightful surprise. A black bear was foraging about thirty feet off the trail, happily peeling berries off some bushes. I paused for a few photos and continued on.

When I got to Bradley Lake, the waves were minor as it seemed to be sheltered from the high winds. I figured it would only take about 15 minutes to cross and likely be the easiest of all the lakes. Making my way to the shore, I wondered if David was going to meet me.

I suited up and waded in to test how my body would react to the temperature and splashed water on my face. The lake was shockingly cold, and I needed some extra body heat before taking the plunge. I got back out and began my breathing techniques to warm my core before reentry. Wading in again, I splashed water on my face and took the plunge. Within a few seconds, I felt the chilling sensation of water filling my wetsuit, and this time the temperature was the coldest I had felt the entire trip. I began to turn over strokes quickly and moved through the stiffness in my shoulder. A minute into the swim I began to process the realization that the water temperature was significantly colder than all the other lakes.

My fingers began to tingle, breathing became more difficult and my brain began to question whether I could make it across without going into shock and rapid hypothermia. I responded by increasing the fullness and intensity of my breathing as I turned over my strokes as fast as I could. I paused for a brief moment to look up at the North Face of the Grand shining brightly. I refocused and cranked across the lake toward the take out, not stopping as I continued breathing to keep my core warm. Soon enough I was at the shore exit and celebrated making it across, christening the new name for Bradley Lake, the "Icebox."

The walk to Taggart Lake was only about a mile and as I began, David appeared. He had been to Bradley Lake and turned around thinking he had missed me. We high fived and continued on. Two lakes remained. I figured that Taggart would be much warmer, but the wind was still a question mark.

It was nice to have David there, and we paused on the shoreline to shoot some video as I geared up once more for the swim. Pulling the swim cap over my head, it suddenly snapped and broke, making both of us laugh. Luckily I had a backup cap in my gear stash.

I breathed up again and began lake number six. It was about 2:00. The swim went smoothly until the final entry across the last bay. The wind was strong, and I felt like I was in one of those endless pools, swimming hard and going nowhere. I pushed through it until I reached calmer water. Only one lake and about an hour and a half of swimming remained. I felt good knowing that I would be sharing that experience with David. What I didn't think so much about was the trail.

David and I had a brief moment of celebration before parting ways. "What time do you imagine you'll be at Phelps?" he asked.

"Oh about two and a half hours, I guess." Checking my food pouch, David saw that I had one carrot and a Gu packet left for the 10 mile hike and mile and a half swim. That's the poorest food stash I think I've ever seen," he said, and we laughed.

The Taggart Trail to White Plains involved circuitous, downhill hiking. There is a turnoff toward Death Canyon a couple of miles in which would take me toward Phelps Lake. I had been on the Death Canyon Trail countless times, but had never been on the Taggart to White Plains section. I figured the turnoff would be quite obvious. Then again, I was somewhat delirious.

I was excited to get to the final leg, yet cautious that I still needed to have enough energy to complete the swim leg safely. As I traveled through the new terrain, the wind picked up significantly. Trees were blowing sideways in the forty mile per hour gusts, and I had to lean in to keep myself from being blown over. The downhill was fairly steep, and I broke into a light scamper, passing a couple people along the way.

Cruising along, I wasn't thinking much about where the turn off might be as I expected it to be obvious. The steep downhill began to mellow out, and I kept walking to conserve my energy. And then an odd thing happened—the terrain began to look really familiar. Was I hallucinating? A parking lot and signpost appeared up ahead, and I walked toward it as a deep sense of confusion began to overwhelm me.

What the...? I was at the Taggart-Bradley parking lot. I looked at the sign in disbelief. Sure enough, the cut off to White Plains Trail was 1.6 miles back up the steep trail I had just come down. I looked around the parking lot as if David or someone else might randomly be there. Nope. I turned on my phone. Only 3% battery remained, so I quickly turned it back off.

The realization that I missed the trail became clear to me as I started walking back into the woods. Embarrassment, frustration, and confusion all set in. I muttered to myself, "Well, shit. Okay. I have 1.6 miles to go back up to get to the cutoff, so I had better not miss it again."

The section was steep, and I was filled with remorse. Checking my watch, I calculated that I still had ten miles to go, putting my total for this leg at thirteen miles. I crept along looking for the trail, beginning to wonder if I had missed it again. Finally, there it was—the small sign at the turn off. I must have run by it in my excitement. I giggled a semi-nervous laugh as I decided to let it go and just add it to the list of obstacles I had overcome over the past three days. Embarrassing as it was, it would be yet another lesson I could take away.

The Valley Trail to White Plains was mostly flat, and the wind wasn't as strong. There had been recent grizzly sightings near Death Canyon on a road parallel to this trail. A grizzly bear was certainly an obstacle I did not want to encounter. I talked to myself and held off any urge to run. I wanted to conserve energy and avoid surprising a grizzly.

I pulled out my last bit of food, the carrot stick. It was like a security blanket, and I didn't want to eat it all because it felt like my friend on the trail. Sometimes I used it as a microphone.

Somewhere in the middle of the route I began to hallucinate and hear things that I was sure were real. I began to sing the theme song to the Twilight Zone to complement my state of being.

Making it onto the Death Canyon trail brought the energy of familiarity and soon enough I made it to the overview of my final objective, Phelps Lake. I could see that there would be some issues with the wind. Mentally, I plotted the route to swim, tracking along the western shoreline to avoid the windy middle or eastern sections. I didn't want to screw up this final swim.

I headed down the switchbacks to the final trail junction and stood there wondering which way to go next. I started one way and walked for about five minutes, then turned around, passing the junction heading the other way, then turned around again. This went on a few times as I wandered around in a delirious state. Eventually, I heard a yell off in the distance. It must be David, but I couldn't figure out how to get to him. Between us the ground looked like a swamp. I squinted my eyes, looking through the

dim light, attempting to figure out the right way to go. Eventually, I hesitantly walked into the swamp forest and, to my surprise, my feet didn't sink into the ground. I pushed through the trees and finally, there it was... the lake... and David waiting for me on the shore.

David seemed calm considering that he must have been waiting for a couple of hours because of my delay. I told him I missed the trail and tried to laugh it off, but my laughter wasn't convincing.

I estimated that I had about an hour and a half of swimming left. It was cloudy, but the western shore looked relatively calm. Then again, I couldn't tell how the wind might change during the swim.

Being at the last lake felt like I was going into overtime in a championship soccer match. I was cold and tired, but it was my destiny to finish. I sat there staring across the smooth water with memories of the past three days flashing through my mind.

The final preparation required putting my wetsuit on again and packing my dry bag full. I would be swimming with two bags floating behind me. David was ready and gave the final call, "I need to swim soon. I'm getting pretty cold."

"Yeah. Me, too. Let's do it."

We were at the western shoreline and the water was calm. I did a breathing sequence for a minute and was ready. We waded in and started swimming. I wanted to get my body heat back up quickly, so I started with a fast turnover sequence, thrashing like I was in a race to the finish. I paused after about thirty strokes to hear David yelling. "TIM! Slow down... Or maybe I'll meet you there."

"Sorry, I'm just getting warmed up. Let's swim together."

David had a fast breaststroke style that was quite impressive. Oddly enough, I had barely used the breaststroke during any of my swimming, and I couldn't keep up with him using this style. I switched back to my total immersion freestyle. The bootie on my foot was loose and flopping around causing even more drag, but I didn't have the energy to fix it. I was too tired to stop and thought that if I stopped my body might start cramping.

It felt comforting to have David swimming along beside me. For the first time of the trip, I wasn't swimming alone. The grind of the swimming felt deep and required more concentration. The dry bag configuration I was toeing was cumbersome. My whole body ached, and slowly my fingers became numb as my body chilled once again. I repeated the mantra that had pulled me through hours of endless swimming, "The only limitation is in the mind."

As we got out toward the middle, the wind picked up significantly and suddenly we were swimming in waves and whitecaps. Yet, for the first time, the wind was at my back. It felt like surfing as the waves rolled over me, and even though it was mildly chaotic, I smiled as it seemed like some sort of a finishing gift for all my effort.

The light was waning, and we finished the final bay crossing at the south side of Phelps Lake just as it disappeared. As we flowed up to the shallow rocks that approached the shore, I felt overwhelmed with a deep sense of inner satisfaction. It was a feeling of fulfillment for completing something monumental.

The cold wind whipped off the shore as we transitioned our gear, giving me just one more final obstacle. My shivering intensified and I ran in place, having an odd feeling that I might pass out if I didn't start moving. Soon David was ready, and we started down the trail into the darkening woods. Within minutes my body warmed up, and I finally felt like I was going to make it. As we reached the first junction, it began to feel more like an unbelievably exhausting victory lap, with only 1.4 miles to go.

We continued the walk together, and the lightness of my accomplishment gave me the feeling of floating on air. Each grounded step was like someone clapping for me for overcoming everything I had experienced on this three-day intense journey. As I walked alongside of David, I had the odd thought that me being right here was all his fault. When he invited me to join him for "The Picnic" four years ago, something within me was ignited. That spark gave me a new way of looking at how to travel the wilderness. It unleashed new ways for me to push my limits, and a new way to see what was possible for myself.

Before long, we entered the parking lot, and through the darkness I could see someone waiting for us. It was D, smiling.

Wow! It was over. I had completed the Lake to Lake Link!

It seemed surreal, and I took a long moment to breathe it in. The people who had been with me on my Lake to Lake journey flashed through my mind, including Erik, Marshall, Douglas, Neesha, Teryn, Sierra, D, Curtis and everyone who got behind my idea. I was full of gratitude and an immense sense of accomplishment. I was also ready for a beer and a hug of congratulations from Neesha.

As we got in the car and headed toward home, I thought about how good it would be to sleep in my own bed that night, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I began to dream about my next grand adventure.

The End

View the Lake to Lake Link Video
[Lake to Lake Link - Grand Teton National Park \(You Tube\)](#)

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