

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

BY SARAH ZOBEL

PHOTOS COURTESY  
BURLINGTON YMCA

# The Lake Swim

A FUND-RAISING EVENT FOR THE LOCAL YMCA

Swimmers and their support kayakers  
await the start of the race.



**SPENDING A SATURDAY IN AUGUST SWIMMING 10,000 LAPS IN THE WATERS OF LAKE CHAMPLAIN**—who other than the mythical Champ would do that? Quite a few people, it turns out—all participants in the Greater Burlington YMCA’s annual Lake Swim.

The noncompetitive eight-mile swim covers almost half the distance of an English Channel crossing, but without the cold temperatures and strong currents. It draws both local swimmers and visitors from around the United States and Canada. For safety, every participant is accompanied by at least one support person in a boat, usually a kayak. ▶



Above: A last-minute check of safety equipment before heading out onto the water is important. Below and right: Swimmers and kayakers eagerly await the horn to signal the start of the race.



### A Personal Challenge

Two-time Lake Swimmer Ilana Weinstein, 30, describes it as a “mental marathon.” Weinstein, of Montreal, explains, “For the most part, you’re alone with your thoughts and it’s quite the emotional roller coaster. There are moments of feeling as strong as you ever have, and moments of feeling so discouraged as the waves are tossing you around like you’re in a washing machine, despite your best efforts.” But rather than give up, Weinstein learned how to make the miles pass: “When I was feeling discouraged, I sang songs to myself in bubbles and repeated my personal mantras to help me focus and feel strong.”



Above: Friends and family wait for the swimmers to return. Inset: The race's youngest participant.

Adds Weinstein's swimming partner Mitch Katz-Zeitlin, 44, also of Montreal, "It's like the perfect movie—you laugh, you cry."

The Lake Swim was originally a straight-line crossing. Participants would be boated to Willsboro, New York, and then swim more or less directly across the broad lake to Oakledge Park in Burlington. But the combination of distance and the uncertainty associated with wide-open water scared away all but the most avid swimmers, explains Jaimie Held, the Y's director of aquatics. It was also challenging for bystanders who wanted to cheer on the swimmers. So three years ago she changed the route,

moving both the start and the finish line to the Y's Camp Abnaki in North Hero. Held also decided to offer alternatives to the eight-mile distance. In 2009, she added a four-mile swim and four- and eight-mile relays. Those were successful, so this summer, the Lake Swim's 15th anniversary, swimmers can choose among one-, two-, four-, and eight-mile lengths, and relays at all distances. Held says she's hoping area swim teams will find the different options appealing and decide to join in.

"It's an endurance event," says Paige McCormick, 25, explaining that she can't do yoga, so she swims as a form of meditation in motion. "But everyone is very encouraging and just happy to be swimming with others who also love to swim because it's fun. We aren't doing



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this to beat a time clock or each other—we just love to swim.” McCormick, of Burlington, teaches swimming at the Y, but before last year’s event she had never swum more than a mile in open water, so she planned in advance to stop after four miles. She hopes to swim all eight this summer.

In the water next to McCormick last August was another Y swim teacher, Laura Gould, of South Burlington. Gould, 24, also works at Vermont Children’s Hospital and had competed in the 10-mile Kingdom Swim in Lake Memphremagog just a month earlier. She committed to the Lake Swim almost spontaneously, registering only the Thursday before.

Ilana Weinstein notes some of the benefits of swimming in open water, including being able to breathe relatively easily since there’s no chlorine to inhale. Like other participants, she finds swimming in the lake meditative and observes that it “can’t be compared to swimming eight miles’ worth of laps in a pool, which makes me feel like a hamster on a wheel.” The cold water also motivates Weinstein to swim faster than she would in a pool.

### Fund-raising Fun

More than an endurance challenge, however, the event serves as the main fund-raiser for the Y’s aquatics programs, which include swim teams, lessons, and adaptive activities. The Y’s policy is that no one will ever be turned away from their aquatics programs because of inability to pay, says Held. The proceeds from the Lake Swim—the programs’ only fund-raiser—have allowed that policy to continue. Lake Swim participants must contribute a minimum of \$300 to participate, but they can choose whether they want to solicit donations from others or pay the fee themselves. Prizes are given in special catego-

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Sweet victory! Two swimmers are elated after completing the 8-mile swim.

ries, including to the person who raises the most money and the person who travels the farthest to participate.

Through teaching at the Y, Laura Gould sees firsthand the impact of this fund-raiser on area families. "Swimming is not only a sport for all ages," Gould says. "It's a lifesaving skill, and everyone should have the right to learn."

During the Lake Swim, safety is paramount. A roaming boat charts the course; the Coast Guard, Grand Isle rescue and fire departments, and a New York rescue crew stay out on the water until the last swimmer finishes. In addition to keeping an eye on participants, the Coast Guard begins the Lake Swim and makes the decision to cancel if the waves are too high or the wind is too strong. Just those kinds of conditions in 2010 meant a last-minute revision to the course; rather than the planned out and back, swimmers essentially did mile-long laps around the bay between North Hero and Grand Isle that's known as The Gut.

This year's Lake Swim will take place Saturday, August 13, at 8am. Held says she is always in need of volunteers—whether to assist on shore or, most importantly, serve as support to swimmers by paddling alongside them. Support kayakers keep swimmers on course, feed and water them, and call for help as needed. (Katz-Zeitlin tipped his hat to his own support team members, claiming that after six hours riding in kayaks in substantial waves, they were sorer the next day than he was.) Held is also seeking corporate and in-kind donations. If you're interested in helping out or would like more information about the Lake Swim, contact Jaimie Held at [jheld@gbymca.org](mailto:jheld@gbymca.org) or (802) 862-9622.

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