



**Come on in, the
water's freezing.
That's fine by
Lewis Pugh.**

Swimming
with the

Ice Man

BY TODD PITOCK

On July 15, 2007, Lewis Gordon Pugh, the world's premier cold-water endurance swimmer, journeyed by icebreaker to the Geographic North Pole, climbed into an inflatable dinghy, walked out onto the ice where a wide crack had opened up an Arctic pool, and dived in.

The water temperature was -1.8 degrees Celsius, and Pugh was wearing only swimming trunks, a cap and goggles.

His goggles fogged and froze. The water was full of sounds, a violent creaking of shifting ice. He felt as if his entire body was on fire.

Extreme swimmer
Lewis Pugh:
For him, the colder
the better.

PHOTOS BY TODD PITOCK

At the age of 17, Lewis Pugh made his first serious cold-water endurance swim, seven kilometres in cold, turbulent waters from Robben Island, then the South African Alcatraz, to Cape Town. Born in Britain, Pugh grew up in South Africa, where his father, a surgeon rear-admiral in the Royal Navy, moved the family when Lewis was 10.

“I always wanted to be the first to do something,” he said. “So when I started into cold water swimming, it was still new and no one had done these things.”

In 2006 Pugh set the world record for the longest swim in zero-degree water, with a distance of 1,225 metres in the Nigardsbreen, a Norwegian lake.

Extreme swimmers are a small community. The sport is more about achieving a feat than winning a competition. The spoils of lasting fame go to its pioneers. The first person to swim the English Channel was Captain Matthew Webb in 1875. In 2007, Martin Strel, from Slovenia, swam the entire 5,268 kilometres of the Amazon. Lynne Cox, an American, was the first person to swim two kilometres in Antarctica and the Bering Strait separating America and Russia.

“Between Lynne, Martin and myself, we’ve hit all of the world’s major landmarks,” says Pugh. “There’s really nothing left.”

Nothing, that is, except the Geographic North Pole. Pugh and Cox had swum at zero degrees C in Antarctica, which is like a car wreck from the inside-out. No one had ever swum below that temperature, and no one knew what would happen.

The first time I met Pugh was in June 2007 in Jostedal, western Norway, where I had gone to watch him prepare for his North Pole expedition.

We drove to the Nigardsbreen, a jade-colored lake in front of a glacier wedged between mountains.

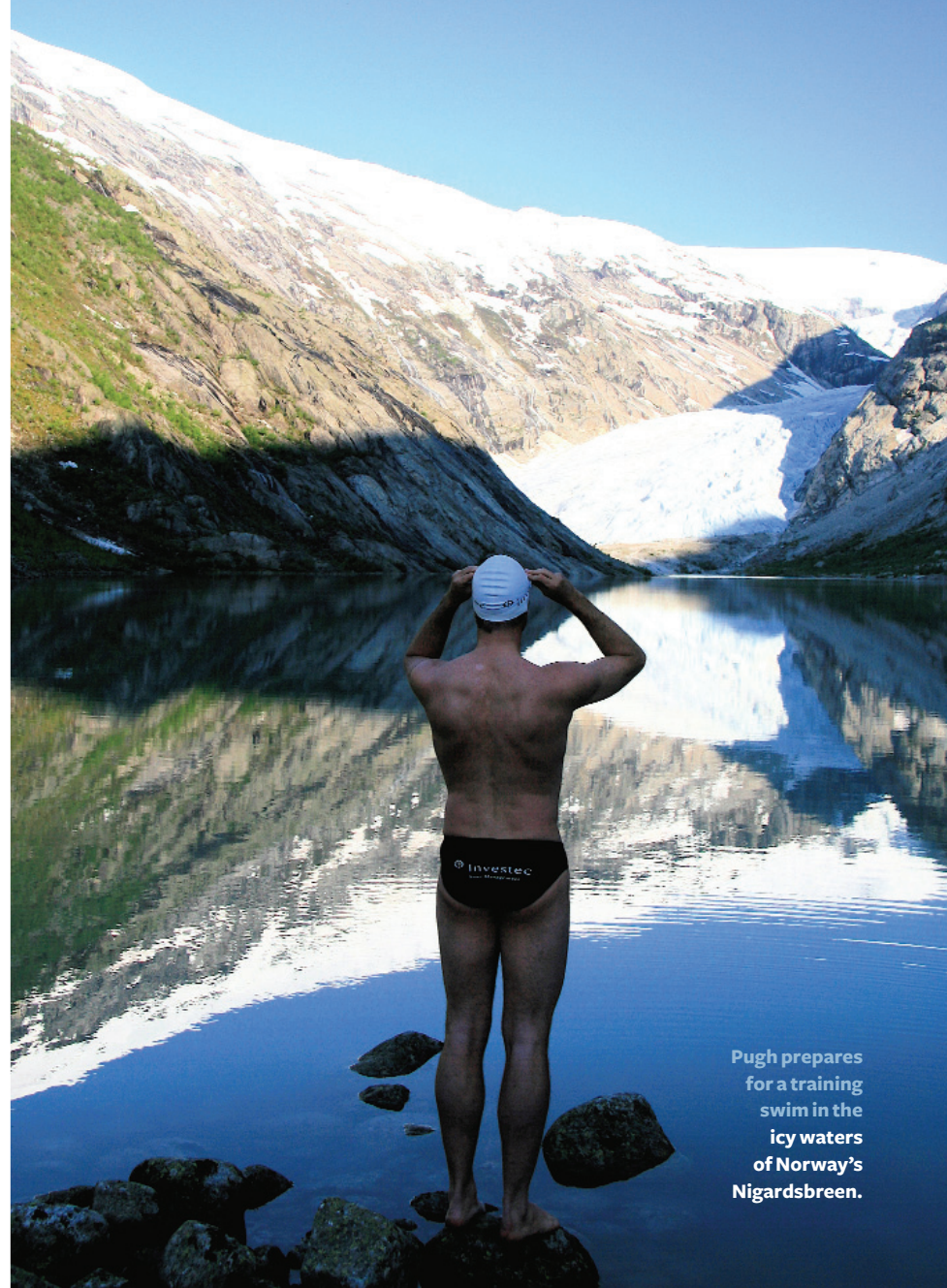
This was where he had made his record-breaking long-distance zero-degree swim the previous year.

At the water’s edge, he stripped down to the trunks-goggles-cap uniform. That’s all you can wear for a swim to count, according to Channel Swimming Association regulations, and Pugh, a 37-year-old maritime lawyer, has conformed to those rules on swims in the Antarctic, around the frosty perimeter of South Africa’s Cape Peninsula, and Norway’s 200-kilometre Sognefjord.

Ice chips glinted on the surface of the Nigardsbreen. Pugh, whose nickname is Ice Bear, estimated it was two degrees C. “You should get in,” he said. “It’s not as if you’ll get an opportunity like this again.”

Nor would I want one. Nevertheless,

“Once he’s in the water, he can suppress the urge to get out...”



Pugh prepares for a training swim in the icy waters of Norway’s Nigardsbreen.

I removed my shoes and walked in to my knees. It did not take long to establish that it was as unpleasant as it looked and I started back to the beach.

“Not yet,” Pugh said. “You have to stay in a minute to get any effect.”

“Okay,” I said. “One, two...” The water felt textured, like cut glass, and wet frost gripped my feet and legs like Velcro. A chill percolated into my throat, and I could feel a shiver starting to twitch in my jaw. When I moved, it stung like nettles, and when I got out, I had no feeling in my middle toes.

Pugh looked pleased, as if he'd found a playmate. No one had ever gone in with him before. “All you felt was the cold on your skin and muscles. It didn't have time to get into the bones. That's when the real pain starts. Now go in completely.”

“I don't have a bathing suit.”

“No one's around.”

Perhaps common sense would have been a sufficient argument.

I stripped down and got in. This time Pugh went in, too, to make sure I got out—and that, I realized once I entered, wouldn't have been a given if I had had to swim any appreciable distance. Almost instantly my breath got quick and shallow, putting me into a state called massive involuntary hyperventilation. The water felt like weights on my arms and shoulders.

“You're all right,” Pugh said. “Okay, relax. Just relax. Breathe slowly. Slowly.”

Most people who fall into icy waters do not die from the cold. Not directly, anyway. Instead, the shock

causes them to lose control of their breathing and when water makes contact with their mouths, they inhale a lungful and drown. The rare individual who manages to tread water will feel his temperature decline, eventually losing the capacity to speak and control of his limbs as blood rushes around his torso to save the core. At some point, sooner than later, hypothermia will lead to unconsciousness and he will drown.

My own total-body experience was less than 20 seconds. When Pugh set the world record for the longest zero-degree distance swim, he swam for 23 minutes 50 seconds.

Two hours after wading into the water, I was still flexing my feet to get the feeling back in the middle toes as we ordered lunch.

“Cheeseburger and fries,” Pugh said.

“Burger,” I said. “Hold the fries.”

Pugh looked over as if I'd said something possibly effeminate. “Give me his,” he said. “There are no thin animals in cold water,” he added.

At 1.86 metres, he was carrying about 90 kilos and working on bulking up to 105 kilos for the North Pole.

Body fat helps, but it's not what he relies on. Instead, Pugh is the only person ever documented who can regulate his own core temperature.

He stands at the water's edge listening to music—Beethoven, Eminem, P. Diddy, the soundtrack to the film “Gladiator”—and goes through mental exercises. He thinks about the objective and feels aggression welling up

in him. By the time he plunges headlong into the water, his temperature has risen from 37 degrees to a feverish 38.4.

He is a subject of fascination to scientists, navies and search-and-rescue teams thirsty for data about the capabilities of the body and mind. The only other research anyone knows of was by the notorious Nazi Josef Mengele, whose methodology, which involved torture, was dubious, and whose results are ethically verboten. Doing new research is all but out of the question. Even if you found volunteers, no ethics board would permit experiments.

“You just don't get a chance to study physiological responses to zero-degree water,” said Jonathan Dugas, a Chicago-based scientist who, with Tim Noakes, studied Pugh at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa. “We found that his body temperature was elevated to 38.4 degrees C prior to a cold-water swim. This is crucial as it allows him to stay in the water longer.”

That the body adapts to cold is known: Alcatraz inmates were permitted only warm showers so that any escapers would feel the full impact of San Francisco Bay's 10-degree C water. For Pugh, the process of adapting is speeded up. To train for the Antarctic, scientists put him in a specially designed swimming pool, starting him at 8 degrees for 22 minutes, then lowered

the temperature in each successive session.

“It's not that he has superior physiology,” Dugas said. “His real attribute is psychological. Just getting past the inhibition of going into the water in the first place is unusual. Then, once he's in the water, he can suppress the urge to get out, despite his body telling him he's really cold. That he can then

swim normal freestyle is remarkable. In zero degrees he swims like it's a lap pool despite terrible pain. He has described it as an ice cream headache all over your body.”

Most people can muster courage or find motivation for short periods in extreme circumstances. Pugh, however, is able to maintain and return to the mental state at will.

“You don't only visualize,” he told me. “You have to put yourself in the scene and feel it, smell the air, taste it. Then you go for it.”

Sometimes tiny crystals of ice in the water are so sharp that they cut into the skin, and Pugh has emerged from the water spotted with blood. After one swim, it took him two weeks to recover full use of his hands.

Andy Cullens, a New Zealand native who runs Ice Troll, a kayak and glacier guiding company in Jostedal, watched out for Pugh from a kayak during the record-breaking long-distance swim in the Nigardsbreen in 2006.

...despite his body telling him he's really cold

“The record was 1,200 metres,” Cul-lens recalled. “For the first 1,000 metres, he looked all right. Just before he reached 1,200 he got really disoriented. Until that point, he’d look at me on every stroke, but in that last stretch his eyes became more and more vacant. Really spooky. But by then he’d done it.”

Not everyone enjoyed watching. “It started out like a big party,” recalled Olav Grov, a Jostedal local. “But then toward the end his face got an expression. He wasn’t with us. He was at, you know, the border” [between life and death]. Peder Kjærvik, a friend of Pugh’s, added: “When he went in the shower, I wasn’t sure we’d see him again.”

But Pugh has another attribute, his ability to recover. Forty minutes later, he was giving interviews to the press.

The North Pole swim in July 2007 was Pugh’s biggest challenge yet—the most northern point of the world at the lowest point of the thermometer that any person has ever swum. He was accompanied by Tim Noakes; his mind coach, David Becker; a photographer and a cameraman; Jørgen Amundsen, a descendant of explorer Roald Amundsen; and three polar bear guards. As an environmentalist, Pugh had given strict instructions: under no circumstances were the guards to harm a polar bear.

His course was a 250-metre-long field of open water at -1.8 degrees C. He would swim laps until he reached the one kilometre mark. Amundsen would track alongside him on skis.

Pugh reached one kilometre in 18 minutes 50 seconds, becoming the first person to complete a long-distance swim at the Geographic North Pole and breaking the zero-degree record set by Lynne Cox.

“Compared with this, the Antarctic was like a pool at a holiday camp,” he told me afterwards. “It’s a surreal environment out on the ice—eerie.

“It was the most frightening thing I could imagine. You can’t see a thing. It’s like diving into a dark black nothingness. You get that sense of absolutely nothing underneath you.

“Knowing I was pushing the boundaries and we didn’t know precisely how my body would react was terrifying.”

At the end of each lap, the pain-and-fear cocktail was so intense he considered quitting. He was elated that he hadn’t.

His feat lifted his profile and jump-started his environmental campaign to “shock the world” out of its complacency about global warming. Five years ago, after all, it would not have been possible to swim at the North Pole.

“The paradox,” he said, “was that in order to show everyone that global warming is taking place at an unprecedented speed, I had to freeze.”