

Images: Simon Porter, Julia Horton

IN FROM THE COLD



Swimmer Cathy Hartle battles with the chop on Loch Lomond

Beginner ice-swimmer Julia Horton jumped in at the deep end at the Great Britain Ice Swimming Championships in Loch Lomond

Choking and spluttering I struggle forward, inhaling water instead of air as waves smack endlessly into my face.

My goggles mist up but I can still see the vague shape of another swimmer in front of me as we make for a large orange marker float which is bouncing about crazily in the choppy waters of Loch Lomond.

On the far shore the majestic snow-capped mountains will soon be gilded by the warm glow of a magical winter sunset.

But right now I am immersed in this dark surging mass, focusing on survival as my thoughts turn from curiosity to rising panic. There is also the unmistakable fear that perhaps this was not one of my better ideas.

I am taking part in Scotland's first international ice swimming championships, where wetsuits are banned and the water temperature must be 5 degrees Celsius or below.

Elite ice swimmers from around

the world are here competing in gruelling 1km heats including South African Ram Barkai, who founded the International Ice Swimming Association in 2009.

His goal is to get the discipline officially recognised in time to be included in the Beijing Olympics in 2022, and it is increasingly popular across the globe, particularly in the UK, where more hardy swimmers are also completing the ultimate ice mile challenge.

But while interest is growing the risks of hypothermia are very real for anyone not used to swimming in such chilly conditions. Health and safety are paramount.

I'm a fairly strong swimmer in a pool but my only serious open water venture before now was in the Caribbean so I am (thankfully) not allowed to attempt the longest distances, for which entrants need ice swimming experience, doctor's approval and heart checks.

Instead I am braving the 100m

"The swim is not over until you have fully recovered, as organisers stress, but happily I don't need medical assistance."

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breaststroke in the swimming gala, which right now feels more like a marathon to me.

Although it is 4.2 degrees I manage to mutter instead of screaming as I wade in with my stoically silent fellow swimmers.

But as the klaxon sounds and we set off into the biting wind blowing in off the distant peaks all I can hear is myself gasping and coughing with each unwanted lungful of loch.

A swimmer behind me shouts valiantly "We can do it!" and as I round the marker – the halfway point – a rescue diver bobbing calmly in a drysuit like a human buoy asks cheerily if I'm ok before observing drily, "You're all nutters".

I try to grin numbly in agreement but I'm suddenly not sure whether my arms are even moving any more.

The organisers moved the course into shallower water as a precaution against the chop and I can see the rescue boat out of the corner of my eye nearby. Then I'm jolted to a stop

when my knee unexpectedly bumps the bottom and, slightly disorientated, I stand up briefly, spluttering again. I'm dimly aware of voices yelling encouragement as I swim on, tuning in to one man who looms into view on the jetty shouting "Keep going!" It's amazing how that helps and somehow I reach the finish and turn to cheer on the woman coming in next.

Trying to get onto dry land I feel incredibly dizzy and a volunteer leads me to a warm tent. Suzie Cooper, a kind fellow swimmer who is up from Newcastle, lends me her fur-lined swimming cape, which almost everyone here bar me has wisely invested in.

Clutching a hot blackcurrant drink I shiver in the warmth before stumbling gratefully into a mobile steam room. I thaw quietly as my senses, including humour and vague elation, return.

The swim is not over until you have fully recovered, as organisers stress,

but happily I don't need medical assistance.

Reflecting on conversations earlier in the day with some of the 80 or so other swimmers I remember asking South African accountant Gordon Shutte – who came ninth in the 1km with a time of around 24 minutes – why he took part.

He replies: "It's colder here but the beauty is exquisite. I love the way ice swimming takes you to places you wouldn't see otherwise and I love the camaraderie."

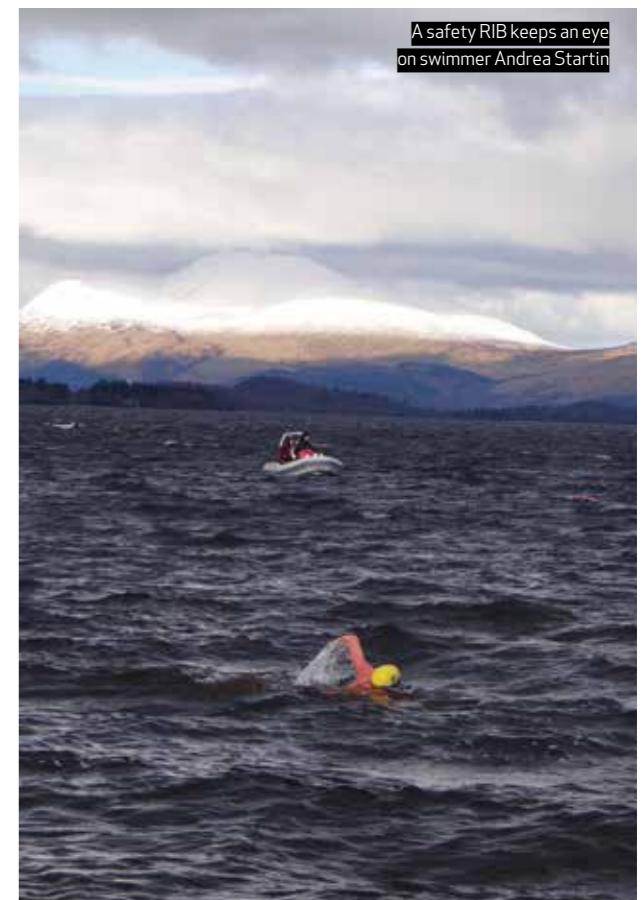
For James Leitch, a commercial diver from Paisley who came first in the 1km at just over 15 minutes, it is about competition and fitness. Gratifyingly though he readily admits to being "useless" at wading in, which still takes him "ages", he says.

Driving home I'm sure I'll swim outdoors again, but I definitely won't be appearing at the Olympics any time soon.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE INTERNATIONAL ICE SWIMMING ASSOCIATION GREAT BRITAIN SEE
ICESWIMMINGGB.CO.UK



Julia Horton warms up with a hot Ribena



A safety Rib keeps an eye on swimmer Andrea Startin