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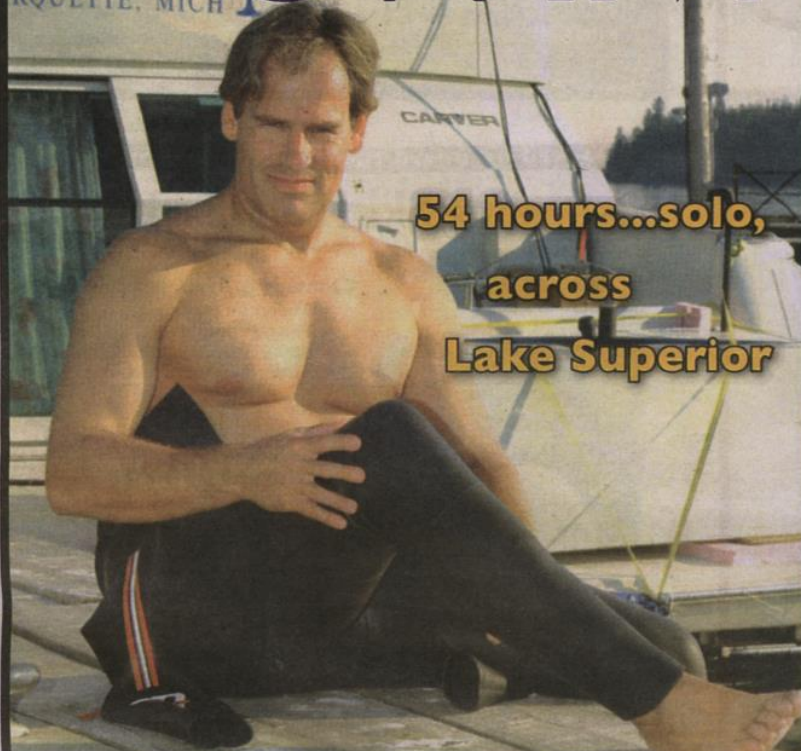
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## JIM DREYER'S Death-Defying SWIM



54 hours...solo,  
across  
Lake Superior

"Not to be melodramatic," Jim Dreyer says of losing his support dinghy during a swim across Lake Superior, "but the whole time I was chasing the Zodiac, all I could think of was, 'you catch it, or you die.' I mean -- all the supplies were there, the lights, and the radio if I needed to call for help -- and I was

still over 25 miles from shore at that point."

Dreyer had also lost the use of his GPS direction-finder, facing the possibility that he wouldn't see land for several days in what some say is the most dangerous lake in the world...

Story by Kristi Kates on page 8



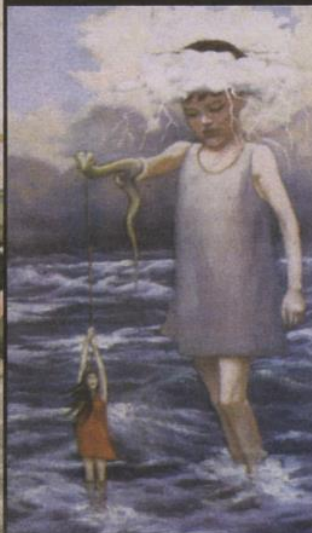
## Maximum Miriam

Northern Michigan has plenty of female singer-songwriters, but few can measure up to Miriam Pico whose exquisite voice is rocketing her to the top with local audiences. By any measure, Miriam is a rising star...

★ Story by Rick Coates on page 23

## Wolf Man - Part II

Story by Anne Stanton on page 16



## Melonie Steffes' Personal Mythology

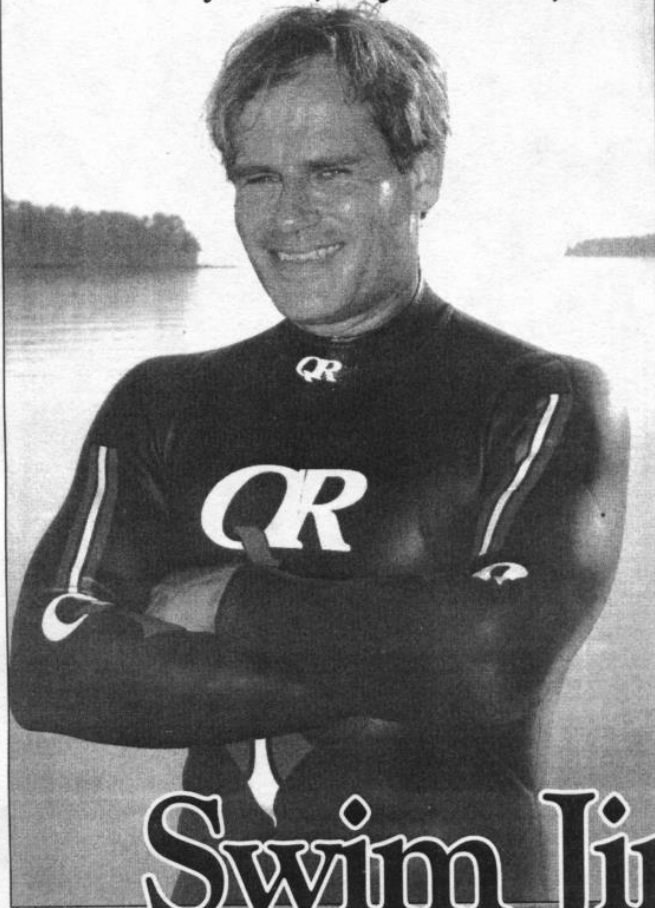
"People ask me what the symbols in my paintings mean, like what the cord is or the snake, and I just don't know," says painter Melonie Steffes. "People come up with their own ideas and I think that's great..."

-- Story by Robert Downes on page 18

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM DREYER  
ART BY MELONIE STEFFES  
STYLING BY JIM DREYER  
HAIR BY JIM DREYER



## The long, wet, death-defying journey of Jim Dreyer



He's swum across five Great Lakes and has set 13 world records. Pretty good for someone who nearly drowned when he was three years old, and, as a result, developed a lifelong fear of swimming. But if you knew the man, it's nothing more than what you'd come to expect from Michigan's own Jim Dreyer.

Most people who live in the Great Lakes state know just how challenging those lakes can be. Beautiful, yes - but they're also rife with riptides and currents, temperature changes, and of course, their vastness. The largest freshwater system in the world, the Great Lakes are sometimes referred to as "inland seas," and, in part due to their size, can experience many of the same dangers as the ocean, including sudden and severe storms. Jim Dreyer grew up around these lakes, and has grown to appreciate them as much as he respects them - although his introduction to them wasn't the best.

"I did nearly drown when I was three," Dreyer reflects. "My sister pulled me from the water at our family cottage. So I grew up with a fear of water. That's why what I've done seems so unlikely, even to me."

At the age of 32, Dreyer decided it was finally time to teach himself to swim at the local pool near his hometown of Holland, Michigan, but found it a hard process for someone hesitant to put his face in the water. A helpful lifeguard noted Dreyer's efforts, and helped enroll him in swimming lessons.

It was a humbling experience for a man who was already an accomplished runner, biker, cross-country skier, martial arts aficionado, and semi-pro baseball player.

"I mean, this is what they teach little kids," Dreyer chuckles, "so my swimming career had real modest beginnings, for sure."

### 65 MILE SWIM

And it was a long, carefully thought-out path from those lessons to the world records that Dreyer's set, even though it only took him two years between starting those lessons to setting his first world record, 65

miles swum straight across Lake Michigan from Two Rivers, Wisconsin to Ludington, Michigan.

"I've always admired triathletes," explains Dreyer. "I was an athlete myself, and I knew that there were certain things I could do. But swimming would force me to face my life's biggest fear, and I figured that if I could do that, then any other hurdle in life would seem smaller by comparison."

Once Dreyer tackled that fear and began swimming in earnest, friends and colleagues noticed that he could "swim and swim and swim" once he got going. Dreyer didn't notice this as anything out of the ordinary, since he didn't start swimming until his early 30s. But entering something called the Lake Michigan Swim Challenge made him realize how skilled he'd become.

"A company called Johnson Control was promoting a program called the Lake Michigan Swim Challenge," Dreyer expounds, "you'd spend six to eight weeks swimming at the local pool, and you'd write your progress down as you went. They tallied the miles as if you were swimming Lake Michigan, for fun, to see how far each person could go. Well, most people would do maybe 20 miles or so... but I'd managed to "swim to" the Mackinac Bridge, and I was already working my way back down the "coast" before the Challenge was over."

And once the seed of swimming Lake Michigan was sown, Dreyer plunged into expanding on that very idea.

"I thought, what if I was swimming all these miles at once; could I actually do it? Then I found out that no one had ever swam between Michigan and Wisconsin. So there was the challenge."

### FOUR TO GO

He worked with the Great Lakes Environmental Research lab in Ann Arbor to help him understand currents and weather conditions, and started training in 1997. In 1998, it was a done deal, a goal reached - something Dreyer thought was a "once in a lifetime achievement." He didn't realize

# Swim Jim, Swim

By Kristi Kates



Jim Dreyer set a world record for swimming 65 miles across Lake Michigan only two years after learning how to swim. This summer, he completed the crossing of his fifth Great Lake and biggest challenge: Lake Superior.

Dreyer swam 54 miles solo across Lake Superior this summer, pulling a Zodiac dinghy with all his supplies.

what kind of reaction his accomplishment would draw.

"I landed on the beach, and there were media everywhere," Dreyer says, "I started doing speaking engagements and some endorsements. Then it occurred to me that, well, there are four other Great Lakes, and this would be a great way to raise attention to needy causes and maybe raise some funds as well. The whole thing really changed my life."

Changed his life, indeed - and also kept him busy swimming the rest of the Great Lakes and facing multiple challenges to raise money for his two pet causes, Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum.

In 1999, Dreyer swam across Lake Huron, succeeding on his third attempt, a new world record of 52.3 miles in 39 hours and 38 minutes of continuous swimming. The Lake Huron swim was plagued by dangerous shoals that prevented Dreyer's support boat from following him during the critical final miles of the swim, so he finished the swim without nutrition and with legs so cramped and paralyzed that he could only swim with his arms.

In 2000, he conquered both Lake Erie (30 miles across) and Lake Ontario (56 miles). But Lake Superior would prove to be his biggest challenge yet.

#### SOLO SUPERIOR

This past August, Dreyer embarked on an event he dubbed Solo Superior, in which he'd not only swim across the most treacherous of the Great Lakes, but he'd do it without a support boat, pulling his own supplies, nutrition, lights, and navigational equipment in a dinghy for over 54 miles. If you thought just attempting to swim all five Great Lakes was dramatic - well, that's nothing compared to what Dreyer would go through in his quest to cross the Lake they call Gitchee Gumee ("big water" in the Ojibwa language).

Partway across the lake, Dreyer's GPS (Global Positioning Satellite navigation tool) stopped working, leaving him to rely on a fortuitously purchased \$6.99 compass that he impulse-bought at a gas station on the way to his swim.

Of course, the GPS had given up in the middle of the night, forcing Dreyer to navigate by the constellations, rigging a flashlight onto the front of the dinghy he was towing so that he could use the inexpensive compass when cloud cover got in the way.

"That was pretty scary," Dreyer recalls, "I knew that I had to fend off panic. I knew that I wouldn't see land for several days. I think that was one of many things that made the Lake Superior swim the most emotionally overwhelming, difficult event I'd ever done."

As a result of moving straps around to rig the impromptu flashlight, Dreyer also lost his dinghy a mere two hours after he lost his GPS.

"Suddenly the Zodiac that I was pulling felt a lot lighter," he explains, "I turned around in the water, and the Zodiac was gone. My first thought was that I was going to die swimming in circles in Lake Superior. I could see a pinpoint of light in the distance - the generator was still working on the Zodiac, so the lights were still on - but it was several hundred yards away. It took me a half a mile to catch it because the current had it."

#### 'CATCH IT OR DIE'

A scary situation for anyone - but especially for someone who was swimming completely on his own and had no way to contact anyone at this point.

"Not to be melodramatic," Dreyer continues, "but the whole time I was chasing the Zodiac, all I could think of was, 'you catch it, or you die.' I mean - all the supplies were there, the lights, and the radio if I

needed to call for help - and I was still over 25 miles from shore at that point."

Once Dreyer got within four miles of shore he began relaxing a little bit, thinking about the end of his swim, and the celebration that would follow. But he's learned to never say it's over until it's over. The notorious Lake Superior weather suddenly transformed from sunny skies to a monster storm, with 60 mile per hour winds, 15 foot waves, and frequent lightning. It was only Dreyer's determination and experience that would see him through.

"The dinghy started getting heavier as it filled up with water," Dreyer explains, "and as I got closer to the shore, the rip currents that were being stirred up by the storm kept pulling me back out. I had to keep making new runs at the shore, and I was running on empty. I couldn't stop to eat, because I would've lost the battle. But I hadn't slept in 60 hours. That last four miles took almost five hours to achieve, and the currents had pushed me north past the point I was supposed to land at, where my crew and

"That was pretty scary," Dreyer says, recalling the failure of his GPS direction-finder during his solo swim across Lake Superior. "I knew that I had to fend off panic. I knew that I wouldn't see land for several days."

the media were waiting."

#### STUCK ON SHORE

Cape Gargantua, Ontario - where Dreyer was supposed to land - is beautiful, but remote. There's only one access road, the one that Dreyer's support crew was waiting at. But Dreyer had been pushed by the storm over two miles further north, where he found himself faced with nothing but a sheer rock cliff.

"I finally made it to shore," he says, "but I couldn't go anywhere. I just climbed onto a boulder and touched the side of the cliff to prove to that I'd made it."

The untold story here is that of Dreyer's friend Tom Farnquist, the executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, who had taken his boat across the lake to watch Dreyer finish. Farnquist was anchored when the storm hit, and quickly went out looking for Dreyer, finding him up by that sheer rock wall. Farnquist tried to get Dreyer in the boat, but Dreyer - determined as always - refused to get in the boat until he'd touched the cliff and officially finished the swim.

But Dreyer only had about three seconds to celebrate before the current pulled him and his dinghy back out to sea. Now that he'd "made it," Dreyer allowed Farnquist to throw a life preserver out for him to grab onto.

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"I was getting so delirious, I guess I yelled 'what IS that?' when the boat bumped me," Dreyer remembers, "and Tom said, 'It's a boat! You need to get on it!' Tom probably saved my life - I had nowhere to get out of the water, and no one could really get to me to rescue me. Tom is a scuba diver, and he had oxygen on his boat as a result, which was important, because at this point, I began to lose consciousness."

**'IS HE DEAD?'**  
Dreyer woke up in a strange vegetative state. "I could hear everyone, but I couldn't communicate," he explains.

His most surreal moment may have been hearing the boat captain asking the woman running the oxygen tank if he was dead yet. "I could hear him talking, saying 'Is he dead? He looks dead!' and all I could think was, please don't bury me at sea, I'm still alive!"

The next day, after sleep and food, Dreyer - remarkably - didn't even have a sore muscle, most likely a result of his diligent training and nutrition. He'd pulled 250 pounds of supplies for 60 miles, and had completed his five-lake mission, although he'd come close to death several times in the process.

It was all worth it for Dreyer, both to achieve his last Great Lakes goal and to participate in a special ceremony that involved honoring all of the mariners who have lost their lives in the Great Lakes, especially those that were on the Edmund Fitzgerald, the famed shipwreck that happened 30 years ago this year.

During his Lake Superior swim, Dreyer dropped a memorial urn containing a poem

that he wrote plus messages written by survivors of the deceased mariners into 300 feet of water in the middle of Lake Superior, at the border between the U.S. and Canada. "I feel a definite affinity with the mariners," Dreyer explains, "I've faced similar perils myself, and came close to my demise many times. Over 30,000 mariners have died in over 6,000 shipwrecks over the last 400 years on the Great Lakes. This was just a small thing that I could do to commemorate their efforts."

So now that he's swum all five Great Lakes, what's next for this extraordinary Michigan athlete?

"Well, coming out of all this, I'm definitely in the best shape of my life," Dreyer chuckles, "I see all of these good things happening around me, so I'm sure this winter I'm going to be working on something. The difficulty now will be in raising the bar so that the people and the media will want to follow along - that's what helps me draw attention to the causes I feel strongly about, especially the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization and the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum." Dreyer takes a long and well-deserved deep breath. "After achieving this last goal, finding something to top it will be a steep order," he concludes, "but believe me, I'm already thinking about it."

Read more about Jim Dreyer and his achievements at his official website, [www.swimjimswim.com](http://www.swimjimswim.com), and keep an eye out for Dreyer in Northern Michigan - he's set to make several appearances at various events around the Traverse City region, and is also being considered as Grand Marshal for this year's Petoskey Holiday parade.\*

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