

# The Mighty Mac Swim

## Historical Perspective



### Labor Day, 2007 - How it All Started

It was Labor Day of 2006 that **Jim Dreyer**, world record Great Lakes swimmer and Governor's appointee to the *Mentor Michigan Leadership Council*, was asked to join **Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm** and her family to lead the annual run across the Mackinac Bridge. Following a spit-balling conversation during the 5-mile run about how the 2007 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge might be celebrated, Governor Granholm announced to the media in Mackinaw City that Jim Dreyer was going to lead 50 swimmers across the Straits of Mackinac next Labor Day to commemorate the special event. When the cameras and microphones were turned to Dreyer, he said, "Uh... I guess I am." That is how it all started. Really.

"It was just a thought off the top of my head in an exchange of ideas with the Governor which became an on-the-spot commitment in front of the media," Dreyer said. "I'm not complaining, though. Opportunity was knocking."



Jim Dreyer (left) and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm (right) address swimmers at the starting line.

Skip ahead to the next Labor Day – it's the first *Mighty Mac Swim*. Governor Granholm shakes the hands of 50 swimmers getting out of the water after successfully crossing the Straits of Mackinac! Two swimmers did not complete the swim, but a 3-person relay team



Finish line greetings from the Governor!

each decided to swim solo ... so the final count was exactly 50. Prior to this swim, there were only 20 documented swims across the Straits ... EVER. We more than doubled that amount in a single swim. These original “Finheads,” as we lovingly call our swimmers, were true pioneers!

These 50 Finheads also raised over \$57,000 for *Mentor Michigan*, led by our top fundraiser, **Jef Mallett** of Detroit, Michigan, the famed cartoonist and creator of *Frazz*.

## Labor Day, 2015 – We Were Back ... and We Made Some Noise!

The first *Mighty Mac Swim* in 2007 was organized by Jim Dreyer under the State of Michigan. For 8 years, people were begging for the swim to return. Finally, Dreyer took ownership of the event himself and agreed to organize it through his event management company, *Event Marketing Enterprises*.

Like 2007, The 2015 *Mighty Mac Swim* was not yet a race. It was about challenging the currents and experiencing the thrill of swimming between Michigan’s peninsulas. Groups of swimmers were matched with dedicated support boats. Fifty swimmers were bumped up to 84 swimmers.

Like 2007, the event was a fundraiser, and this is where history was truly made that year. The 2015 *Mighty Mac Swim* raised over \$427,000 for *Habitat for Humanity*. There were \$322,000 in cash donations and \$105,000 in the contribution of goods and services (including a confidential \$55,000 gift from a tech giant to refurbish the *Habitat for Humanity* corporate office). The *World Open Water Swimming Association* ranked the 2015 *Mighty Mac Swim* as the 12th highest grossing swim fundraiser in world history!

The Finhead fundraising efforts were helped by awarding a 2-year lease of a Lincoln MKC in a raffle, thanks to **Dan Pfeiffer** of *Pfeiffer Lincoln*. It was actually a Finhead, **Steven Heaney** of Cleveland, Ohio, who won the car. As a footnote, Event Director Jim “The Shark” Dreyer put the vehicle on a barge to pull the 19 tons in a swim to Mackinac Island and fill the car with fudge as a fundraiser and promotion for sponsors.



Steven Heaney drives off with his prize!

## Labor Day, 2016 – Now a Race ... and Drawing the World’s Best

In 2016 the *Mighty Mac Swim* still raised nearly \$200,000 for *Habitat for Humanity*, while the focus was shifted to making the swim a marquee competition and drawing some of the world’s best. That it did!

This was 2000 Olympic bronze medalist and Ann Arbor, Michigan, native **Chris Thompson's** first Mighty Mac gold. **Amanda Stevens** of Phoenix, Arizona, one of the world's top triathletes, also took home the gold, finishing ahead of Mighty Mac bronze medalist and 2000 USA Olympian, **Amanda Schneider (Adkins)** of Columbus, Ohio, in a highly competitive women's division. More than trophies and medals were awarded, however. Both gold medalists earned \$20,000 in prize money!



(Left to right) Silver Medalists Alec Mull & Ashley Sigman, Gold Medalists Amanda Stevens & Chris Thompson, Bronze Medalist Jon Vos, missing (from the podium, not from the water ... we promise) is Bronze Medalist Amanda Schneider.

An interesting footnote is that Dutchman **Ferry Weertmen**, the reigning Olympic gold medalist in the 10K marathon swim, was at the airport in Amsterdam ready to board a plane to compete in the *Mighty Mac Swim*. Jim Dreyer had to tell him the swim was sold out. It could have been interesting in the men's division, but we have confidence in USA's Mr. Thompson!

A trip to Costa Rica was awarded to our top fundraiser (and bronze medalist), **Jon Vos** of Holland, Michigan, once again thanks to our friend Dan Pfeiffer.



Gold medalists Amanda Stevens & Chris Thompson might find depositing these checks in the ATM more difficult than the swim.

## August 11, 2019 - 400 swimmers!!!



The 2019 Mighty Mac Swim started with a sunrise cruise, followed by a jump from deck and swim ashore to cross the starting line and begin following the Mackinac Bridge across the Straits.

Following cancellation of the 2017 event due to escalating Homeland Security concerns, the *Mighty Mac Swim* had to regroup and move the swim away from the Labor Day holiday when the Governor's *Bridge Walk* was taking place. We were back in 2019, marking the second Sunday in August as "our own!"

Jim Dreyer was tasked with forming a law enforcement coalition made up of 13 government entities, and after much collaboration, the U.S. Coast Guard issued a permit for 400 participants in the swim ... a once unthinkable number. International commerce via freighter traffic was halted in the Straits of Mackinac for the first time in history. All for us. Remarkable!

The *Mighty Mac Swim* was no longer a fundraiser, but a race with a flat entry fee to get in. However, the race included a team of disabled U.S. Combat Veterans and served as a fundraising platform for Veterans causes.

The race for 400 sold out and 312 swimmers made it across the Straits! Over 100 staff, volunteers, and contractors played integral roles in putting on the show. The Straits of Mackinac had now truly grown into an international open water swimming destination!

Chris Thompson repeated as the gold medalist in the men's division. **Kaelan Oldani**, like Thompson from Ann Arbor, Michigan, was crowned the women's champion.



(Left to right) Silver Medalist Katie Stefl, Gold Medalist Kaelan Oldani, Bronze Medalist Jessica Kieras



(Left to right) Silver Medalist Aaron Helander, two-time consecutive Gold Medalist Chris Thompson, Bronze Medalist Matthias Bares.

## 2020 & 2021 - Pandemic

Well, we all know what happened. The 400 entries for 2020 sold out in just 11 hours, but ...

Let's just say the *Mighty Mac Swim* staff never wants to hear the term "new normal" again.

After a 2-year hiatus due to the covid cancellations, we made the painstaking decision not to bring the event back in 2022, and to pursue a different direction.

Memories are forever, though. We made history, and it was an incredible run! We will always love our Finheads!

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**August 28, 2021**