

# Disappointed today ... grateful for yesterday ... hopeful for tomorrow

(A recap of my September 2-4, 2024, Lake Michigan swim)



**Jim Dreyer embarks on his attempt to swim self-sufficiently across Lake Michigan in Grand Haven, Michigan, on September 2, 2024. Photo: Shelly Andrade**

How the \*\*\*\* did I swim alone across Lake Superior in 2005 with just a \$6.99 wrist compass after my \$750 GPS died? This is a fair question after experiencing navigational issues that curtailed my two attempts at swimming self-sufficiently across Lake Michigan this summer.

Somehow in that Lake Superior swim I self-navigated and survived a raging thunderstorm with 50 mph winds and 15-foot waves. I kept a pretty straight line and successfully found my way to Canada where I was rescued from the side of a 100-foot cliff following the storm. Yet, with the advances of today's technology, I have found that self-navigating across a Great Lake is indeed *extremely difficult*. I have not yet been able to duplicate that initial success, even in more forgiving conditions.

I started my latest Lake Michigan swim at 6:16 p.m. on Labor Day, and the first 24 hours were mostly a navigational nightmare. Anyone watching my satellite tracker may have questioned whether I was drunk. I promise, I was only drinking meal replacement drinks. I was all over the place, piling up mileage with limited forward progress, and wasting valuable time with a closing weather window of opportunity.

Without getting into too many technical details, let me explain that I had to coordinate my magnetic wrist compass with a high-tech electronic compass displayed on my swimming mask. First, I had to look at my wrist compass while being pitched in waves and try to get an accurate westerly heading (not easy). Then, I would swim off in what I hoped was the right direction. I had to be in motion for the compass to work on my mask. Once I got a heading on my mask, I would hold that direction, hoping the pointer on my eye matched the "west" on my wrist. It never did.

Finally, I gave up on this strategy and went more "old school." I used just my wrist compass and also wave direction, the sun, and the stars for navigation. When I would feed from my supply craft in tow, I would look at my GPS and see exactly where I was located and make course adjustments as necessary. Yes, unlike my previous attempt, I was able to keep batteries in my GPS. 😊

For the next two hours or so, this worked perfectly, and I kept a straight line to the west. I had to put the first 24 hours behind me and get back in the game.

At about 8:00 p.m. the second night, around a half-hour after getting back on track, my *Raven Strategic Group* Michigan rescue team came out to check on me, fearing that hypothermia may have depleted my brain power and ability to navigate. After seeing I was physically in great condition and now tracking straight west, it was decided that they would check on me again in the morning and see if I was indeed back in the game.

I was hopeful this would be the case, as the marine forecast called for favorable conditions until Friday. I knew that losing 24 productive hours would push my swim into Friday, but I believed I could be far enough into Wisconsin waters that I would smell the finish line and nothing would stop me at that point.

This is an 83-mile point-to-point swim, and I had already swum an extra 9 miles in just the first 24 hours. Even if I swam a perfectly straight line for the rest of the way (which could never happen), this would already be a 92-mile swim. The reality was that I was in for more than 100 miles, while pulling 250 pounds for perhaps 100 hours or more. This challenge actually intrigued me and fired me up ... provided I could maintain the course I was on now!

Around 10:00 p.m., after only about two hours of everything clicking, the waves came up quickly and turned against me. The marine forecast did not call for this! Five-foot waves out of the southwest were catching my supply craft and pushing me far to the north, while I was only making minimal progress to the west.

When my team returned around 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday, I had made almost no forward progress to the west for the past 12 hours. These were truly 12 lost hours, on top of the 24 hours of navigational setbacks. My GPS said that I had swam 32.03 miles, yet I was just 17 miles off the Michigan coast. To complete the swim from this point in a perfect straight line, it would now be a total of 98 miles, and I had covered less than a quarter of that distance. Doing the math, if the extra 15 miles swum in the first 40 hours were multiplied by four, this would equal 143 miles and 160 hours without sleep.

But could the weather possibly turn in my favor again to improve these numbers?

To assess whether it was any longer possible to get back in the game, my questions for my team were strictly weather-related. I was told the conditions were not supposed to improve throughout the day. Even if things improved on Thursday, I would now be faced with swimming all day on Friday, possibly seeing a fifth night. The Friday forecast was now worse than before ... even calling for waterspouts.

It was a limited weather window to begin with. Then the incorrect marine forecast made the window of opportunity much more difficult. Losing much of my forward progress the first 24 hours due to navigational issues pretty much sealed my fate. I truly had only about two good hours during this 40-hour swim. While I've faced more dramatic challenges in other swims, I've never had a swim of this length with more constant challenges. Lake Michigan can be very unforgiving.

In dealing with this disappointment, I think about all my wonderful supporters. I am sure they are disappointed also, but I hope they are not disappointed in me. I have the utmost appreciation and respect for my supporters! I will never give less than 110%.

I sincerely thank all the people who showed up on the beach for my send-off, those who came out in boats and kayaks to see me, and everyone who followed along and provided words of encouragement. You really lifted my spirits!

Then, of course, there is my loyal and diligent team ... a group of fine professionals and friends who are adrenaline junkies, like me. I may be swimming self-sufficiently, but make no mistake about it, it will take a team to pull this off.

So, where do I go from here?

I took two shots at this in 2023 to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my first record swim across Lake Michigan in 1998. Then, I made two more attempts this summer. Obviously, I am out of time for 2024.

In 2025, I am dedicated to managing the *Edmund Fitzgerald Memorial Swim*. I am truly honored to deliver this event and film project to help carry on the legacy of the 29 mariners who perished and raise funds to preserve the *Whitefish Point Light Station*, safeguarding mariners of today and tomorrow. Nothing will get in the way of this priority next summer.

Then, in 2026, I will be launching a swimming-related venture that I am not yet ready to announce. I cannot be distracted by anything else that summer.

Does this mean I will make another attempt at swimming self-sufficiently across Lake Michigan in 2027?

I turned 60 in 2023, when I first started this quest, which was partially to mark that occasion. If my next attempt is in 2027, that will be the year I turn 64.

The Beatles sing of turning 64 ... "*Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?*" Well, since that song was written, I hope 64 has become the new 54 (or even younger).

The good news is that after all I have been through this summer, I feel great! I think the worst physical damage I sustained in this last swim was when I was pulled from the water and landed crotch-first on the edge of the boat.

I will keep training, dreaming, hoping, and praying. 2027 will come and we will see.

What if I never make it?

I am truly grateful for my life. I have been blessed with great health, a wealth of wonderful experiences, and a life filled with meaningful relationships. Should I really complain if I accomplish all I set out to do except for one final thing to cap my athletic career? Actually, falling short here would not be unprecedented. If I accomplished everything I wanted, I would have had a 20-year career playing third base for the Detroit Tigers.

No, I certainly am not complaining. It has been a great ride.

My faith in God is not contingent on getting outcomes as I have drawn them up. I trust God will bring about the outcomes he has planned for me if I am following his direction ... and if doing that, I can't go wrong when it comes to the big picture. I believe God's direction for me is to use my athleticism to help worthy causes (like the *U.S. Coast Guard's Chief Petty Officers Association*), to inspire others to reach for the stars and never quit, and to demonstrate where following God will take you.

What do you think I will do in 2027?

~ **Jim Dreyer**  
**September 6, 2024**