

INSIGHT

SWIMMING

Holiday in hell – try a perilous passage to Macau

Long-distance ace sets his sights on record for crossing from Hong Kong to gambling hot spot

Rachel Jacqueline

When Simon Holliday attempts to swim to Macau from Hong Kong next weekend, he won't be thinking of the 30-odd kilometres of endless strokes through some of the busiest waters in the world, the major shipping lanes he has to cross, the tidal flows and currents that threaten to push him off course, or the inescapable jellyfish stings.

All things going well, he hopes to think of absolutely nothing.

"There are those moments – split seconds – when you're out there and you think of nothing, and it's really wonderful. If I'm thinking nothing, it will be bliss."

It's an unusual approach, but one he hopes gets him through the 35km to Hac Sa Beach in Macau as he sets off from Peaked Hill (Kai Yet Kok) on the west of Lantau Island early on Saturday.

He's aiming to break the 2005 record set by Beijing marathon swimmer Zhang Jian by completing the distance in under 10.5 hours. To achieve the feat, he will have to swim around 3.3km/h.

It's achievable, but "unlikely", he admits, unless the notoriously choppy and busy waters of the Pearl River Delta "are a mill pond on the day".

The ever-humble Hong Kong-based Brit has other, more important, objectives.

Holliday and team – including skipper Robert "Arni" Highfield, a

retired water police officer, and top ocean paddler Shu Pu – are undertaking the "Clean Cross" venture to raise HK\$200,000 for Ocean Recovery Alliance (ORA) and awareness of plastics in the ocean. "As of last year, Hong Kong was still dumping 450,000 tonnes of raw sewage into the harbour every day," says Doug Woodring of ORA. "The other issue for our water is trash, and sadly there are still a lot of people who use the water or beaches but leave their trash behind, or overboard. Simon might sadly get to see and feel some of this."

Funds raised will support the "Grate Art" project, bringing eight local and Chinese artists to create plaques to remind people not to dump into drains on the street which lead directly into the ocean.

Although Holliday, 35, the senior learning and development manager at law firm Norton Rose Fulbright, is an experienced open-water swimmer, having swum the English Channel in 2011 in 15 hours and two minutes, this swim "is definitely going to be a stretch," he admits.

The biggest concern is navigating the dangerous shipping lanes. "There are two marked shipping lanes to cross: The first he will cross shortly after leaving Lantau, then, a few hours into the swim, he has to cross the route used by the high-speed Macau ferries," says skipper Highfield.

Other concerns include jellyfish and floating refuse, like tree branches. "Jellyfish are common.

Simon is used to minor stings from his local training, but if he gets bad stings, that will end his swim."

Finally, there's Holliday himself. "We don't want to push him beyond a reasonable point," said Highfield.

Getting to launch the swim has been almost more challenging than the swim itself, as Holliday will journey through the waters of Hong Kong, Macau and the mainland. Permits have been obtained from all three governments, and detailed plans have been submitted to the marine police, customs, immigration and sports and swimming bureaux in both Hong Kong and Macau.

"Last Friday alone I got 15 calls from different bureaux requesting additional information. It's been a test of my patience and perseverance," says Pu, 34, an entrepreneur, who will paddle alongside Holliday and has been responsible for the administration behind the swim.

"It's a real team effort," says Holliday. "My team are responsible for everything; all I have to do is swim."

The attraction of open-water swimming for Holliday – a sport he claims is "honestly really, really dull" – is about finding his limits. "People constantly put barriers around themselves. Humans have limitations, but we don't often know where they lie.

"I'm fascinated with the breaking point: how many times in your life have you given something everything? This is why long-distance swimming is appealing – you get very close."

Does he struggle? "Sometimes," he laughs. "After a while, you accept the circumstances that you're in and you begin to enjoy it. You feel a real sense of achievement when you complete these things."

Holliday will try to get through the 10-odd hours in the water, with only swimsuit and goggles for protection, by following the old swimmer's maxim: "swim to your next feed".

"I'll be fed every hour on the hour, and when it gets tough towards the end I may increase that to every three-quarters of an hour."

He'll be sustained by a carbohydrate drink – a personal concoction mixed with Ribena. "And then I'll have some chocolate and jelly babies."

"Once I've done seven hours, I'll just think, I have another five to go. And I know I've done that before. It's all about convincing your mind you can do it."

Besides, if you consider his original plan was to swim 160km to Taiwan through shark-infested waters, a short dash to Macau doesn't seem inconceivable.

"At the end of the day, it's about determination. I don't think I've been blessed with natural ability, but I do have an ability to work at things. And that's what I love about swimming."

His team unanimously agree Holliday has what it takes to complete the journey.

"Simon has a very pure and earthy approach to swimming ... it's not about speed or competing, or fame, he simply goes in, blends in, carries on and through," says Pu, who recalls the experience of paddle-supporting Holliday in the 15km Cold Half swim in February – a feat he achieved in five hours, 44 minutes, with no wetsuit.

"For this kind of distance, it's almost all in your head," says Pu. Or not, if Holliday has his way.

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SIMON HOLLIDAY

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Open-water veteran Simon Holliday, 35, will attempt to swim from Hong Kong to Macau next weekend. Photo: Nora Tam

Illustration: Kaliz Lee

TABLE TENNIS

A mother and now aged 35, Tie Yana's no spr

Veteran paddler looks forward to years more competition at the top level – and sees a bright future for home-grown Hong Kong talent

Chan Kin-wa
kinwa.chan@scmp.com

"When I saw Ni Xialian play in Tokyo, I knew there was still a long time for me to go before I retire," joked veteran Tie Yana, Hong Kong's most successful table tennis player over the past decade. "There are still things I want to achieve and it's a bit early to call it a day, isn't it?"

A former China national team member, Ni is still playing for Luxembourg at 52 and competed with distinction at the world team championships in Japan last month, claiming victories over many of her younger rivals, including both rubbers against Russia in the group stages.

Tie turned 35 this week and has made a speedy return to competition after giving birth to her first child in December, join-

ing a number of other mothers still competing at the highest level, including Li Jie of the Netherlands, Liu Jia and Li Qiangbing, who both represent Austria.

Spanish player Shen Yanfei, one of the hottest paddlers on the pro tour circuit in 2013, missed the world event in Tokyo because she is due to give birth soon to her second baby.

Tie was a member of the

women's team who clinched bronze in Tokyo after a narrow defeat by Japan in the semi-finals. The medal was Hong Kong's fifth in the last six team world championships and Tie has been instrumental every time, including in winning the two silver medals at Doha (2004) and Bremen (2006) and the three bronze medals.

"I have won medals for Hong Kong at the Asian Games, East Asian Games, world championships, World Cup, Asia Cup and many pro tour events, but I am still hungry for success at the highest level, especially as the most important silverware is missing," she said, referring to an Olympic medal.

At the 2004 Athens Games, she was beaten by Kim Kyung-ah of South Korea in the quarter-finals and four years later in Beijing, she departed again in the last

eight, beaten by Wang Nan of China. In the team event, Hong Kong reached the semi-finals but were then knocked out by China. In the bronze medal play-off, Hong Kong were beaten by Japan in the second round.

"Some may say I am a bit old for the next Olympic Games, and to be honest, I know I have to be at my very best if I want to challenge for a medal in Rio," said Tie. "But as long as you participate in the Games, there is a medal chance." Tie, who reached world number three in 2006, said she would continue playing as long as she enjoyed the game.

"I won't look at my age and then say I will retire in two years or three years," she said. "I will continue to play as long as I enjoy the game, pretty much as I am. I like the atmosphere of major games ever since I came to Hong Kong in 2002, especially when standing on the medal podium."

"But if I find I'm losing interest in playing, I will certainly quit without any regrets."



Luxembourg's Ni Xialian is still competitive at 52.

The future of HK table tennis will be with home-grown players

TIE YANA

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Tie Yana's top world ranking, achieved in 2006