

She Thought It Was a Shark. It Became Her Talisman.

Amber Rose Berry was 12 when she entered the coldest open water swim she'd ever undertaken, one of only a few competitors not in a wetsuit. It was a 2.5km event, in Bloubergstrand, outside Cape Town.

She was far out, and still trying to get used to the bun-fight that is a typical open-water start. She was swimming with her eyes closed – scared of what she might see beneath her.

"I think I just got so tired because it was a pretty fast swim. And I opened my eyes, and there was this massive grey thing underneath me, and I thought, oh my goodness, there's a shark, I'm gonna die. And I freaked out a little bit. I put my face back in the water, and it turned over, and there was this massive sunfish right underneath me."

Since then, a sunfish has appeared for her on every big open-water swim. It's become her talisman, representing endurance and overcoming.

This young Pringle Bay woman is going to need both just weeks from now, when she attempts the world's most iconic open-water swim, the English Channel. If she succeeds she'll be the youngest South African ever to complete the swim.

Amber-Rose will represent South Africa in national Women's Month, celebrating the pivotal women's march against the Pass Laws in 1956 – exactly 70 years ago. Her swim is dedicated to South African women: to all they have achieved and still can, and to her country as a whole.

She believes that her swim will inspire other young people to set goals and fight for them. The slogan, Believe in What You Can Achieve, has been adopted by the fundraising campaign set up in her name, and tied to her swim.

The campaign will raise funds for the newly launched Ukukhula Institute in Makhanda. This advanced sports academy provides scholarships for disadvantaged student-athletes from Eastern Cape high schools to attend Rhodes University, the alma mater of her mother, Karen Berry.

“The ocean got me”

Amber-Rose has already made history, becoming the youngest ever person to swim the 33km across False Bay, from Miller's Point to Rooiels. Her swim was recorded in the Guinness Book of Records.

The start of the swim was hard, though. She was just 16 and, before she set off, in the pitch dark at 4.30am, she had to stop to remove her goggles. *“I'd filled them with tears.”* But, within the first half hour, she was visited by a sunfish, which set the tone for the swim, as if the ocean was saying, I've got you. *“I think I did about only an hour in the dark before the sun came up and it ended up being a beautiful swim.”*

By then, she'd become used to the familiar shape, who always appeared for her. On a solo swim around Cape Point in rough conditions, when she was 13, a large grey form had appeared. *“The boat crew thought it was a shark, and everyone was shouting to me to get back on the boat, and then I saw it was this beautiful, big sunfish.”*

The sunfish has shown itself to her, not only on swims, but always in tough conditions when she needs reassurance. This year, she skippered a Robben Island support boat for the first time. *“I was completely out of my comfort zone, and suddenly this sunfish popped up beside the boat.”*

For Amber-Rose, sunfish and the turtles are special and both carry similar messages for her. *“I've had a few really hard swims, and then there's a little sunfish, and I'm like: You know what, we got this, we cool. The ocean got me.”*

Hamilton, a wedding, and the darkness of the deep

Besides, carrying the hope of seeing her talisman on the biggest swim of her career so far, Amber-Rose will be drawing on deep inner resources, to get her through the 10 to 14 hours across the English Channel from Dover to Calais.

“Especially with the distances I swim, it's very easy to get yourself into quite a dark, negative headspace. So, I play little games in my head to keep it all light and breezy.”

She plans hypothetical scenarios in her head and daydreams them into being. *“On my False Bay swim, Derrick Frazer, of Big Bay Events, yelled down to me from the support boat, ‘What are you thinking about? What's in your brain?’ I said, ‘Well, to be honest, I'm busy planning my wedding, so I'd like to keep swimming, thanks’.”*

She sings in her head and recites musicals. *“I can do the whole of Hamilton and The Greatest Showman. I can do Hamilton word for word.”*

Mostly, though, she spends hours reflecting, particularly on her swimming journey. *“It’s really special and beautiful. It’s easy to have little flashbacks to other swims and other milestones. It’s nice to reflect on similar experiences in the journey.”*

Will it find her in the Channel?

It will not be impossible for a sunfish to appear to her on her Channel swim. Though marine life is not plentiful, due to the shipping traffic, sunfish have been recorded in the English Channel, especially in summer months.

Her mother and manager, Karen Berry says, *“There is always a sunfish somewhere in her swim, or under her, or near her.”* But, let’s add: within her. Because, whether or not she sees a sunfish physically, it will certainly accompany her as her mental and emotional talisman.