

One Hundred Years On, Still Swimming Against the Current

The first woman ever to complete the iconic English Channel crossing did so in 1926. Her name was Gertrude Ederle and she was 19. Exactly 100 years later, Amber-Rose Berry will make the attempt to become the youngest South African to complete the swim. She is 18.

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

At 16, she was the youngest person ever to swim the 33km across False Bay, between Miller's Point and Rooiels. Now, she is weeks away from attempting the world's best-known open-water swim. While the distance is almost the same as False Bay, this is by far the more challenging swim, mainly due to strong currents and shipping.

Since she made her first Robben Island swim at only 13, a large part of her motivation has been to show what women can do. It was on that swim, when her older, male swim companion withdrew after 3km, that she thought, wouldn't it be cool if the girl made it, after the boy pulled out.

"I know it's a very male-dominated sport. Especially the longer, colder, more difficult swims. The women who do complete it ... we've become such a close group. We're such a tight-knit community, really special, supporting each other. But there's always something inside you that wants to outshine the guys and just prove: you know what, this is hard. But the girls are out here doing it."

The challenges haven't all evaporated

The film dramatization of Gertrude Ederle's historic swim, *Young Woman and the Sea*, came out within a month of Amber-Rose's False Bay crossing. She identified strongly with Ederle's experience and emotions – as well as the challenges she faced.

"I watched it for the first time with my little brother. He's never really seemed very interested in my swimming, which is fair. But it was really special to watch it with him. When she's doing that final swim, and during the feeds, and swimming in the dark,

Jamie would look at me and say, 'Was your swim like that too?' And I could say, 'Yeah. That's what it's like'."

Parts of the film spoke to her own specific experience. Ederle faced so many challenges as a woman, and here Amber-Rose is, 100 years later, facing her own.

"She was the first woman, and it was very eye-opening to see challenges that we still face today. It hasn't all changed that much."

The specification list for women's bathing costumes and swimming caps are just one example. *"They're not practical or designed with women's comfort in mind,"* she says. Two-piece costumes are prohibited for ocean crossings, for instance, even though they're the most comfortable to swim in. *"The rules of the sport are still not written with women's bodies in mind."*

Amber-Rose believes that pitting herself against overwhelming odds will inspire other young people, particularly women, 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.

'There's nothing like seeing those little lines'

One part of Daisy Ridley's portrayal of Ederle, in *Young Woman and the Sea*, stands out for Amber-Rose particularly, because she identifies so strongly with what Ederle must have been feeling, a century ago.

"It's at the end of her swim, and they show what she's seeing. It's just darkness and water and darkness, and then you can see the faint lines of the sand. I get goose bumps, even talking about it. Because any swim I do in the sea, it's the best feeling in the world. There's nothing like seeing those little lines. And knowing you've done it."

Two women, separated by a hundred years. But the darkness, the water, and those faint lines in the sand bring them together.