

49-Year-old Becomes First Blind Woman to Swim English Channel: 'Nothing is Impossible'

A Paralympic gold medalist has become the first blind woman to swim across the English Channel, and she finished under time.

She said that being blind has left her feeling “isolated,” but thanks to swimming, she has a “newfound confidence” and hopes her feat “inspires others”.

49-year-old Melanie Barratt took on the challenge after falling in love with open-water swimming.

She swam the Channel, from Shakespeare Beach in Dover to Cap Gris Nez Beach in France, in 12 hours and 20 minutes, faster than the expected 14 hours, and described it as “a dream come true.”

“My life has been filled with challenges because of my blindness, and it often led me to feel isolated and unsure of myself,” said Barratt.

Melanie, now a special needs assistant after winning two gold medals, two silvers, and a bronze at the 1996 Atlanta and 2000 Sydney Paralympics, said she “never thought it would be possible to achieve something like this.”

It's no mean feat, even for an Olympian, as the Channel weather regularly takes the lives of sailors and refugees in crossing.

"I became friends with an incredible open-water swimmer who took me under her wing."

Once hooked on open-water swimming, Melanie competed in several races, including a 10k lake swim, the Thames Marathon, and a relay race in Lake Geneva in July 2023.

It was as freeing as it was frightening, since there were no indicative surfaces or objects for her to use as a reference point. A solution presented itself as her husband paddling alongside her in a kayak, the bright colored paint of which she could see.

"Life is incredibly difficult being blind, and it's very limiting, but sport and open-water swimming have given me a newfound confidence and made me proud of who I am."

"My husband and two boys always know I love to push myself and that I always need something to work towards, and I hope I've inspired others to do the same."