

Marathon swimmer circled Manhattan

By Susan Jarvis

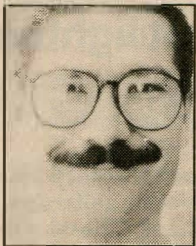
Gazette Staff

Richard Kersh, 33, of Russellville spent last Saturday swimming 28½ miles in the 10th Annual Manhattan Island Marathon Swim in New York in 7 hours, 46 minutes to finish 13th out of 50 swimmers.

Kersh is Arkansas's only competitive marathon swimmer.

In two marathon events before this one, Kersh finished in the top five. He was on course to do it again Saturday until his captain tried a faulty strategy.

"At the six-hour point, in the last leg on the Hudson River, I was



Kersh

jockeying back and forth from fourth to third," he said. "My boat captain made the decision to take me close to the shore and use the eddies there. Sometimes that works.

"But the other boats used a Lowrance instrument to find where the currents were, and their swimmers went to the middle of the river. I was doing 72 strokes per minute just past the George Washington Bridge and a swimmer who was floating in the middle of the river was going faster than I was."

Kersh still did well in the race important to him. He beat his own time and race place from 1987, when his 8:19 performance was worth only 19th place.

Shelley Taylor of Perth, Australia

See KERSH/6D

Kersh

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lia was his trainer for the event. She is the number one marathon swimmer in the world — male or female — and last year was named Athlete of the Year by the Australian equivalent of *Sports Illustrated*.

Also in the boat were Kersh's wife, Rhonda, and his good friend Will Howell of Fayetteville. Swimmers need a boat to watch because they can't tell where they are going while swimming freestyle without losing time. The people in the boat also hand their swimmer food and drinks.

In a marathon swim, an athlete will use from 12,000 to 15,000 calories. Part of getting ready is practicing eating while swimming. Swimmers cannot touch the boat or any person in it. Stopping only means treading water, not a real rest.

Most of what Kersh took in was liquid, such as the Exceed high carbohydrate drink at 1,000 calories per liter. He drank Gatorade

and ate a few soft foods like cheese sandwiches, bananas and even brownies. He had to take in 1,500 calories an hour to maintain his strength.

Bruce Garrett of Russellville has known Kersh since high school and helped him train, paddling a kayak with the swimmer in Lake Ouchita. Daily workouts were an hour and a half non-stop with some three- or four-hour sessions thrown in.

"He's the most amazing thing," Garrett said. "I'll count the number of strokes he does a minute and there are only one or two strokes difference from start to finish."

Kersh said the mental game in an event of this duration fascinates him. He has had to learn how to handle stress.

"In my very first marathon swims, I would hit walls that were unbelievable," he said. "I had psychosomatic pains everywhere.

"There are times when you hallucinate, but not in a dangerous form. Your mind will wander and you'll swim for 30 minutes and not remember taking a stroke."