

Solo marathon swimmer from Delafield piles up the miles in the pool and on area lakes



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Melodee Liegl is a solo marathon swimmer from Delafield. Through early June, she's swum more than 860 miles in 2022. *Bob Dohr / Now News Group*

Melodee Liegl said she doesn't put much thought into the 3 a.m. wakeups or the hours she spends in the water, swimming stroke after stroke, mile after mile.

The 55-year-old mother of three from Delafield, a solo marathon swimmer, said she's been doing it for so long, it's just a part of her day.

During the winter months, Liegl (pronounced "legal") will spend up to three hours logging early-morning laps at the Wisconsin Athletic Club pool in Wauwatosa, a stone's throw from the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center, where she works as a senior statistician in the Department of Pediatrics.

In June, she transitions to open water swimming, dipping into one of the area lakes for her daily workout — Beaver, Upper Nemahbin and Oconomowoc are three of her go-to lakes.

And she swims a lot.

As of June 7, Liegl had amassed 867.54 miles so far in 2022, ranking her third in the country in U.S. Masters Swimming's Go the Distance event, a self-directed competition that encourages members to regularly swim and track their progress.

A marathon swim is defined as any swim over 10 kilometers, or 6.2 miles.

Swims planned in Maryland, Nebraska and St. Lucia

Liegl's daily swims are the training, the daily routine. Sprinkled in throughout the year are bigger events.

Liegl has six scheduled this year. One was in Arizona at the end of April, a 10K.

She's heading to Maryland in July; she also has an event in Nebraska, among others.

In September, she plans to travel to the Eastern Caribbean island nation of Saint Lucia for an event.

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Liegl has swum in tropical events before — in Grand Cayman and St. Croix, for example. She's also swum around Key West.



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"That was one of my favorites," she said. "Because I like the warmer water."

So far, she's completed two of three swims on her bucket list.

The first was the END-WET in North Dakota, a 36-mile swim considered one of the largest marathon swims. The other was 20 Bridges, a 28.5-mile swim around Manhattan Island, New York.

A list of all of Liegl's long swims can be found at longswims.com/p/melodee-liegl.

Transition to marathon swimming didn't happen overnight

Liegl's journey to becoming a distance swimmer happened gradually.

Because she was born with hip dysplasia — one leg is about an inch longer than the other — sports such as running were off the table, but swimming was something she could do.

She swam a lot as a kid and competed on the high school swim team, swimming the butterfly and backstroke. She also swam on her own in college.

Then she took a break.

But in 1994, Liegl had gotten married and was looking for an activity, so she joined the YMCA and started swimming again.

She quickly found that she needed time to get back up to speed.

"My first thought after being gone for so long was like, 'Oh, my God, what did I get myself into?'" Liegl said.



Melodee Liegl, a solo marathon swimmer from Delafield, swims in Upper Nemahbin Lake in Waukesha County on Friday, June 3, 2022. *Bob Dohr / Now News Group*

But she slowly built up, joined the U.S. Masters Swimming organization and started to swim in some meets. Pools to start, then open water.

Her first open-water swim was in 1996 in Amy Bell Lake in Hubertus.

"A friend of ours hosted it, and it was just a 1-mile swim, and my first one, and I knew right away that I'd fell in love with open-water swimming," she said.

Liegl kept swimming longer and longer distances. By 2009 or 2010, she said she was up to the marathon lengths.

Passing the time in the water

That's a lot of time in the water. How does she keep from getting bored?

In a word, music.

Liegl uses a Finis Underwater Bone Conduction MP3 Player to pass the time as she swims.

Because the MP3 player's audio is channeled via bone conduction, it doesn't need to be placed on the ears, so Liegl can still hear the outside world and stay observant.

It can hold about 650 songs, and Liegl's song mix runs the gamut.

"I usually say A to Z, meaning Abba to Zeppelin, with a whole bunch in between," she said. "Lots of '70s music. Mostly upbeat, rocking songs to help motivate."

Her swim goggles, also by Finis, serve a dual purpose.

They not only help her see, but also feature a small inset display in the left eyepiece so Liegl can track stats such as time, laps and splits as she swims.

Before, she said, she would have to count laps in her head.

"I was a tester for (Finis), because they know I swam a lot," Liegl said. "This and the music keep me happy."

Currently, the goggles are designed for pool use. Liegl said Finis is working on an open-water version.

Also part of her open-water gear is a small orange buoy she tows behind her for visibility.

Spelling out words with her GPS tracking path

Listening to music isn't the only way Liegl passes the time while she's in the water.

Recently, she's been using her watch's GPS tracking function to try her hand at handwriting. Or swim-writing?

Along with the myriad metrics today's smartwatches can track, they also provide a map of one's route.

If your activity involves running or biking on a road or trail, the trace of your route isn't super exciting.

But if you're swimming in a big lake, and it's early in the morning with no boat traffic, that's a different story.

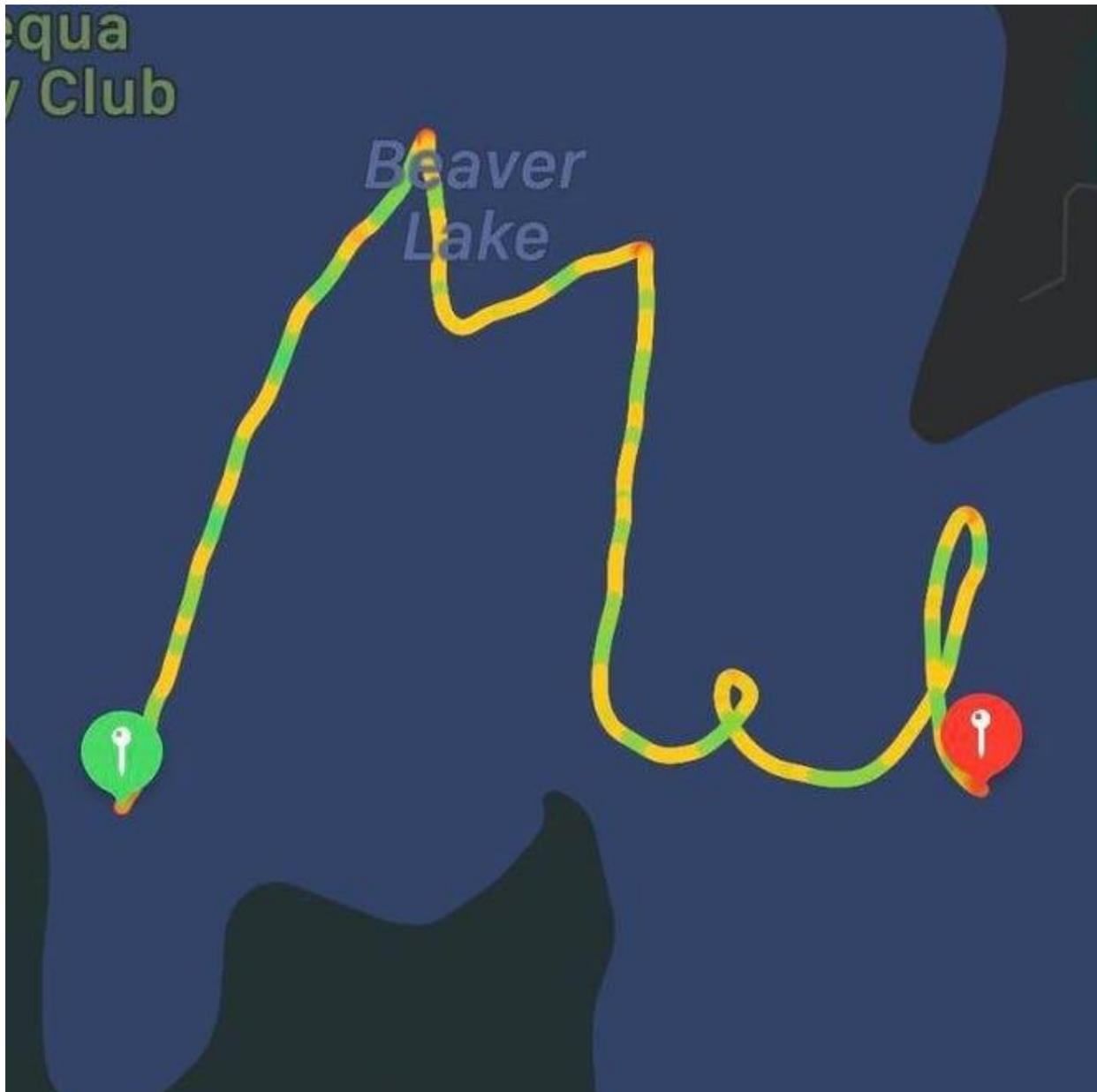
So Liegl has started using her swims to create artwork in the form of words spelled out with her GPS track. "Mel," "Liegl" and "Beaver" are among her creations.

She said she practices on paper beforehand, then figures out how many strokes it'll take to form each letter.

Because it's pre-dawn, she uses lights on the shore as her guide.

It's not an exact science, and wind can wreak havoc, too.

"Sometimes I think, 'Oh, that turned out so great,' and I get home, and I download it, and it was like a windy day and they're all squished together," she said.



Marathon swimmer Melodee Liegl of Delafield sometimes uses her watch's GPS tracking to create artwork while she swims. This tracing was created during a swim on Beaver Lake. *Submitted*

Hoping to inspire others to stay active

Liegl realizes that not everyone has the time, ability or inclination to swim long distances every day.

But she hopes her story can motivate people to get out and do things, whatever those activities may be.

"I know swimming is not for everybody," she said. "Just do something active and enjoy it when it's so beautiful outside like this."

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For Liegl, she's found what she likes to do, whether it's ticking off laps indoors in the winter or gliding through the water of an area lake in the summertime.

"The lake swimming to me is just the best," she said. "Because you're by yourself in this lake, and I just sometimes stop and just look up, and sometimes the stars are just still there and that, before it's starting to get light out, and I'm like, this is just so awesome to be able to experience something like this."

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