



## Tuff will circumnavigate island to keep bay swimmable

By ohtadmin on July 18, 2019

BY TIM RIEL



Ben Tuff at Green Pier last week. He is training to swim around Conanicut Island.

Under the bridges and through the coves, to great-grandfather's house he goes.

While those 12 words may resemble a poem written by Lydia Maria Child, it actually is Ben Tuff's itinerary for Aug. 5. That's when he will swim from Hull Cove to Mackerel Cove, passing beneath Rhode Island's two longest bridges, finishing around the bend from Mist, the Racquet Road cottage established in his family by Adm. Herbert Seymour Howard, his mother's grandfather.

Tuff, 39, has decided to circumnavigate

Conanicut Island to protect the 23 miles of water he'll be traversing.

"When it comes to the ocean," he said, "there has never been a time more important than now."

While raising awareness about the health of Narragansett Bay is an admirable endeavor, Tuff knows it takes more than bullhorns, slogans and leaflets to solve a global problem. That's why he has vowed to raise \$50,000 for Clean Ocean Access, a grassroots outfit based in Middletown.

### Charity begins at home

Growing up, Tuff and his family led a relatively nomadic life, following his father, a venture capitalist, from Ohio to Toronto to Boston to Atlanta. While he has no qualms about his childhood travels, it did cause a dilemma when he

was asked to write an essay about his hometown.

"I don't have one," he told his mother.

"Yes you do," Pat Tuff replied. "Write about Jamestown."

Tuff first arrived on the shores of Narragansett Bay when he was 3 weeks old. Because the Dumplings had been the family headquarters since Howard acquired 210 Racquet Road after World War II, there was no better place for his parents to introduce their baby boy to his relatives. That headquarters has since expanded to neighboring properties on Racquet Road, including Seaglass, Spyglass and Brushwood. Although the surnames that appear in the real estate records are Bulloch and Tuff, they all remain the blood relatives of Howard, who died in 1977 when he was 92.

"My entire life, there's always been a connection," Tuff said. "This is home."

Tuff was an accomplished scholastic athlete, playing goalkeeper on soccer teams year-round no matter where he lived. During the summer, he played tennis and sailed at the Conanicut Yacht Club.

After graduating from Colby College in Maine, he served as a boat captain at the Bitter End Yacht Club in the Caribbean. He returned stateside, married, had two children, Wyatt, 12, and Maisie, 10, and was appointed director of admissions at Rumsey Hall, a boarding school in Connecticut. For about a decade, raising a family took precedence over the athletic lifestyle that dominated his teenage years. Seven years ago, however, Tuff decided he wanted to be healthy again. He started training for a triathlon.

"I needed to be more active," he said.

While running and cycling posed no problems for Tuff, his first lengthy swim, a 200-yard beeline across a lake, did.

"I almost died," he quipped. "It was the hardest thing I'd ever done."

Then, almost miraculously, as Tuff began to finish more races, he noticed he was winning the swimming portions. His dramatic improvement in the water, coupled with the fact that his wife, Gretchen, was now "kicking my butt" in triathlons, he began focusing on swimming about three years ago.

'Swim Jamestown'



Ben Tuff trains in the Dumplings for his 23-mile swim around Conanicut Island to raise money for Clean Ocean Access, a grassroots environmental group that protects Narragansett Bay. PHOTO BY ANDREA VON HOHENLEITEN

For a man who felt like he was going to die swimming 200 yards across a calm lake, Tuff is now clocking sub-50 minutes in Save The Bay's annual 1.7-mile race across the choppy East Passage.

"I always wanted to do it," he said, "but I never thought that it would be possible."

While 1.7 miles is a feat for most swimmers, Tuff was just getting his feet wet on the open ocean. During the winter doldrums of 2016-17, Tuff, on a whim, began searching for races in warmer waters.

"I was in the regular New England winter funk," he said. "So, I jumped on the computer. That's when I came across Key West."

The 12.5-mile circumnavigation of the westernmost Florida Key was scheduled for June 2018, which gave Tuff less than six months to train. Despite his unfamiliarity with the coastline, he finished with the 10th best time out of 23 swimmers, completing the course in five hours, 32 minutes. On his return trip home, swimming around Conanicut Island popped into his head.

Tuff already had been training for his circumnavigation when he met Dave McLaughlin, executive director at Clean Ocean Access, at the "Swim to Skim" fundraiser two months after the Key West race. Tuff, after participating in the Newport Harbor event, listened as McLaughlin spoke about the importance of improving water quality. He e-mailed McLaughlin the next day about the partnership.

"He's totally aligned with what I believe," Tuff said. "We both want to keep this area swimmable, accessible, fishable."

McLaughlin said he has "been exposed to a new feeling of calm confidence" since meeting Tuff. The event to raise money for Clean Ocean Access has been dubbed "Swim Jamestown."

"It is these types of experiences and interactions that renew our sense of purpose and inspire us to look beyond the current efforts and plan further for the future of ocean health," McLaughlin said.

Tuff estimates that it will take about 10 hours to swim around Conanicut Island, stopping at routine intervals to rehydrate but never leaving the water. Because he sweats 32 ounces for every hour he swims, he will need the support boat to supply him with a pint of water every 30 minutes. Tuff also said he will burn more than 1,000 calories every 2 miles, which he will try to combat by consuming 100 carbohydrates an hour.

"There's no way you can replace those calories," he said, "but I'll try to keep up with the carbs."

Along with his trainer and nutritionist, Tuff is working with Onne van der Wal on navigation.

"He knows these currents better than anyone," Tuff said.

While the team wants to start and end near Mackerel Cove, they will not know for sure until the weather forecast become clearer. Tuff said the key is to get around Beavertail Point early in his route.

"Without a doubt, that's the funkiest area," he said.

Tuff said the strategy at Beavertail, like the nooks at Fort Wetherill, is to go around the eddies. With the water temperature expected to be about 70 degrees to complement the August air, Tuff said a cloudy day with some rain will provide refreshing relief. When he hits the current, Tuff said he will "be flying at some points," reaching 6 miles per hour as he coasts past the shoreline.

"That'll be the satisfying part," he said.

Tuff is asking his neighbors, friends and family to donate online at the Clean Ocean Access website. From the "Swim Jamestown" link at the top, he already has raised more than \$13,000 of his \$50,000 goal.

"Go big or go home," he said.

Every cent raised by Tuff will go toward McLaughlin's mission to keep marine debris from the Rhode Island shoreline so future generations can enjoy the bay. Although Tuff considered partnering with Save The Bay, he decided on the grassroots organization that is leading the statewide campaign to ban plastic bags statewide.

"Yeah, it's small shop," Tuff said. "But they get things done."