

Unit Seven: Youthful Achievers

Lesson 1

Brojen Das: On Crossing the English Channel

Brojen Das was born on 9 December 1927 in Munshiganj. He was a legendary swimmer who became the first person from Asia to swim across the English Channel in 1958. He crossed the channel six times and set a world record in channel swimming in 1961.

The government of Bangladesh honoured him with the National Sports award in 1976 and Swadhinata Padak (posthumously) in 1999. He also received the Pride of Performance award in 1959 from the Pakistan government and the King of Channel trophy from UK. Mr Das breathed his last on 1 June 1998.

Following is an abridged version of a memoir by Brojen Das in which he gives a captivating account of his record-breaking performance in the English Channel.



A. Read the text below and answers the questions that follow.

I had not failed my country

Brojen Das

I could hear very faint voices as if coming from the other side of the world. The time was about 4:00 in the morning and the date September 22, 1961. I was feeling tired and exhausted and was encountering stiff opposition from the strong tide. I looked towards my accompanying motorboat carrying my manager Quazi Mohammad Ali, skipper Len Hutchinson and the official observer, Mr. J. U. Wood. They were all pointing towards the Kent shore. As I looked up, I could see flashes. I realized I was very close to the shore.

I asked what the time was and how far I had still to go. They told me that if I put the last ounce of energy into my swimming, I would set a new world record for France to England swim. This electrified me. The goal for which I had been striving for the past four years could be mine. The aim, which goaded me to swim the Channel six times, each time risking my life and reputation, was so close. Yet it could be far...

Treachery of Weather

The Channel, with its cold biting water, the winds, the waves and the tides does not make things easier. The unpredictable weather changes for the worse after a swimmer jumps in. It has never, to my knowledge, changed for the better for anyone yet... Apart from stamina and practice of long distance swimming, one must have the grit, determination and courage to subdue the Channel. Weather and ill luck have conspired and joined hands many a time to defeat Channel swimmers. They had defeated me no less than five times....

The final shot

On the morning of 9 September 1961, after finishing my swim, I had gone to bed. The BBC-TV cameramen filmed me in my bed. Although very tired after swimming for 11 hours and 48 minutes, I could not fall asleep. The thought that I had once again failed my country, friends and fans was disturbing me. After only four hours sleep the following night, I decided to try again – for the sixth time...I had fixed the tentative date for September 20. On that day I took the ferry to Calais.

Sea Sick

I get sea-sick in the ferry and also during swimming if there are breakers or waves. This sea-sickness was the main cause of my failure to set a world record on September 8/9 or even in 1960. The night rest at the Cap Gris Nez hotel did me immense good. I felt **on top of the world**. The weather on September 21 was near perfect. I jumped into the water within 12 days of my 5th swim, a record in itself, after saying a little prayer, asking God to give me good weather all through and to crown me with success. Nearly the whole of Cap Gris Nez village had turned out to wish me luck and see me enter the water for the sixth time....

Plunge And After

Once in water, you get oblivious of time, distance or direction. The only thought which kept me worried, was that I must make it and that I must get good weather all the way. The second half of the swim is always very difficult. And if even little waves develop, it saps the ebbing energy of the swimmer all the more. Taking a lesson from my previous swims I kept my speed at a steady pace for I knew I would need every ounce of my energy towards the close....



Brojen das crossing the Channel
[Photo: <http://www.brojendas.com>]

I felt hungry and famished and shouted for my manager. In reply, I was told that I could not afford to waste 10 minutes in having the feed! If I have to break the record, I must swim on **with all my might**. But I refused ...I am sorry now for it. For if I had gone on, I might have finished the whole swim in less than 10 hours and 15 minutes creating a new world record from both sides....

Last Efforts

After the feed I really **got my teeth into** the strokes.... I was squeezing my body for the **last drop of energy** I could get out of it.... and edged on inch by inch. The people in the motorboat were cheering me. I saw the flash on the Kent shore very clearly. I realized I was very close. I could see the record, like the proverbial carrot, dangling before my swollen eyes....

I kept pulling myself on ... a little more, just a little more... the momentum was building up- then I felt rocks, sharp and craggy... Then a big rock appeared before me. And that was it....the shore it was...the time: 4.35 a.m. GMT: I had broken the world record by 15 minutes. I thanked God for fulfilling my life's ambition. Then I remembered my parents. I had not failed my country.

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B. In pairs find the meaning of the following phrases/idioms used in the above text and make sentences with them.

<i>Last drop of energy</i>	<i>To be on top of the world,</i>
<i>To get one's teeth into</i>	<i>To be crowned with success</i>
<i>With all one's might</i>	

C. Choose the best answer for each of the questions.

1. The last half of the Chanel swim is -

- i) less challenging than the first half
- ii) more challenging than the first half
- iii) as difficult as the first one
- iv) all of the above

2. Brojen Das went to swim in the English Channel on 21 September 1961--

- i) within 12 days of his 5th swim
- ii) within a week of his previous Channel swim
- iii) immediately after his 5th swim
- iv) after 11 hours and 48 minutes of his 5th swim

3. He finished the 6th swim
- a little bit late than expected
 - just on time
 - 15 minutes after the time set by the Channel authority
 - 15 minutes before the time taken by the previous record holder

4. Brojen Das used to suffer from seasickness -

- when he was in the ferry
- when he was in cold water
- when there were rocks in front of him
- when he felt hungry

5. The people of the Cap Gris Nez came to the shore to

- congratulate Brojen Das upon his success
- to see off Brojen Das
- to welcome Brojen Das
- to take photos with him

6. Once a swimmer gets into the Channel water, -

- he/she cannot keep a track of the time
- he/she cannot keep a track of the directions
- he/she cannot keep track of the distance
- all of the above

D. Suppose you are a sports journalist. You are going to interview a swimmer after his/her record-breaking performance at the national sports competition. Make a list of 5 questions that you would like to ask the swimmer.

E. Now, complete the story about a village girl called Urmila, who became champion in a national swimming competition at the age of 14. Write no more than 180 words.

Urmila was a little girl who grew up in a village named Patuair in Kishoreganj district. A small river called Phuleswari flowed through her village. At the age of five, Urmila used to go to the river with her father and started to learn swimming. Her mother did not like the idea of her daughter swimming in the river. But her father was happy to train Urmila to be a competent swimmer. Who knew that the little girl would become an accomplished swimmer one day!

F. Group project: Visit the website <http://www.brojendas.com/conqueringthe.htm>. Choose some photos of Brojen Das from the site. Write captions for each of the photos. Make a poster on Brojen Das and give a group presentation to the class.