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Storm stops Washago-to-Barrie swim

(Staff/Special) A severe thunderstorm ended a Toronto man's attempt to swim from Washago to Barrie on the weekend.

Bob Weir was taken out of Lake Simcoe near the Hawkestone yacht club at 3:51 a.m. Sunday. He had completed 32 kilometres of his swim from Washago, on the northern tip of Lake Couchiching, through Lake Simcoe to Barrie.

When the storm first struck, Weir and the three boats accompanying him headed toward the shoreline to avoid being hit by lightning. Organizers decided to end the swim after two large lightning flashes.

Weir said he was disappointed that the swim ended prematurely.

"I wasn't the least bit tired," he

said in a telephone interview Sunday morning from his Toronto home. "There was no way I wanted to stop at the point when the lightning came. ... I was going great."

But he agreed with the decision to pull him out of the water 24 kilometres short of his goal. "It was clearly unsafe," Weir said of the 90-minute storm. "It was totally around us, including on top of us."

Lightning is dangerous to both boats and swimmers. Even if a boat is grounded in water, the electric current from lightning can knock out a swimmer, he says.

Weir, a 48-year-old real estate consultant, was attempting to become the first person to swim from Washago to Barrie, a distance of 56 ki-

lometres. Other swimmers have made the trip from Barrie to Washago, which is regarded as being easier because a swimmer is going with the prevailing winds and the current at the channel joining the two lakes.

Wearing black trunks, a white bathing cap and a coat of protective Vaseline, Weir entered Lake Couchiching just after 3:30 p.m. Saturday. About two dozen people, including several members of his masters swim club from Etobicoke, watched him depart. There was no sign of bad weather.

Two boats accompanied him on his swim down the length of Lake Couchiching. He says the lake, at a temperature of 78 F, was too warm.

Waves created by powerboats on the lake also bothered him. "The waves were very close together and pretty choppy," Weir said. "It was hard to establish a rhythm."

Many of the boaters on Lake Couchiching were inconsiderate, he says, adding that a large boat going at a high speed passed within 20 metres of him at one point.

Weir went through The Narrows, a channel joining the two lakes, around 10 p.m. Saturday. He says he made "extremely good time" from Atherley, on the tip of Lake Simcoe opposite Orillia, to Eight Mile Point.

At the point, about five kilometres from the eventual end of the swim, a southwest wind started up and the storm soon followed.

Weir isn't sure if he will try again to add Lake Couchiching and Lake Simcoe to the list of lakes he has swam. In 1989, he became the third oldest person to swim Lake Ontario. He has also crossed Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba.

"I would have been very disappointed if after the two flashes they took me out and that was end of (the storm)," he says.

He would have been equally disappointed, he adds, if a storm had ended his swim two or three miles from Centennial Beach in Barrie.

Weir collected at least \$1,500 in pledges. The money will be split between the Royal Victoria Hospital and Big Brothers.



When Bob Weir started his Washago-to-Barrie swim, the skies gave no indication of the lightning

that was about to strike as he passed Hawkestone.

Marathoners need more than stamina

A marathon swimmer is only good as his support staff.

"I don't think a lot of people are aware of how much organizing goes into one of these swims," Bob Weir says.

Take food, for example.

"I have a number of different high-energy foods," Weir explained before the race. His menu included high-energy milkshakes full of electrolytes, minerals and vitamins, a milk and molasses mixture that is high in iron and magnesium, runny oatmeal with brown sugar, chicken and beef broth, and Lucozade, a high-energy glucose drink.

The crew serving the food in plastic bottles and cups

had to be careful what he ate wasn't too hot. Something that might seem lukewarm to the average person could burn the insides of a swimmer who's been in cold water for hours on end. Weir put a dab of the soup on his wrist as an extra precaution.

There's good reason to serve liquids. Two years ago, he tried to eat a piece of Swiss chocolate during a swim; he was so cold, it took 15 minutes to melt to the point he could chew it.

The organizers take care of other details, including if the swim should end because of bad weather or exhaustion. The swimmer is left to establish the all-important rhythm, Weir says. Then "your mind goes blank. That's the state you want to get to."



As Bob Weir prepares to leave the Washago dockside, a swarm of curious youngsters and cameras listen in on his pre-swim thoughts.

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