

Crawl Space

Swimming from Cape Cod to France, Benoit Lecomte makes the ocean his oyster



"I have to admit it was hard for me to watch Ben swim away last July," says fiancée Trinh Dang (greeting Lecomte on his arrival in France).

Is it possible to swim the Atlantic Ocean? Well, that depends, as Bill Clinton might say, on how you define "swim." But when Benoit Lecomte, a 31-year-old transplanted Frenchman from Austin, Texas, staggered ashore on the coast of his native land 73 days and 3,700 miles after setting out from Cape Cod, he could stake a stronger claim to having done it than anyone else who has ever lived.

Lecomte, a marketing agent by trade, typically swam three hours each morning in the frigid waters of the Atlantic before taking a two-hour break on the 40-foot sloop *Falbala*, which accompanied him. Then it was back in the water for another three-hour session. His only equipment was a mask, flip-

pers, snorkel, two layers of wet suits and an electronic shark repeller (attached to the boat). At night he would rest as he and the *Falbala*'s two-man crew let the boat drift. On a typical day he could cover 40 to 50 miles with the help of the powerful Gulf Stream current. "I kept to pre-

cise rules—never think about the next day or even the next hour," Lecomte said after coming ashore in Quiberon, France. "I lived minute to minute."

Lecomte had little trouble with sea life during his journey. Aside from the occasional plague of jellyfish, about his only companions were sea turtles and schools of friendly dolphins and porpoises. His one encounter with a shark occurred at the start of the swim, when a 10-foot specimen followed him for five days, always at a respectful, if slightly unnerving, distance. "You get used to pushing fear away," said Lecomte.

The weather, however, was less cooperative. About 10 days out of Cape Cod, conditions suddenly grew ugly, with 10-foot waves



Lecomte typically burned off 7,000 to 8,000 calories a day.

triumph

and winds up to 40 knots. The rough water not only hampered his swimming but made it hard to get a night's sleep. Lecomte suffered from seasickness and felt nausea from the constant salt taste in his mouth. There was also the monotony and loneliness of his ritual. "All your senses are deprived," he said. "It's always the same sounds, the same sensations, the same movements."

Midway through the expedition, Lecomte was on the verge of quitting. Instead he swam a 500-mile detour to the Azores, where he rested for a week. The time out was just the tonic he needed. "The joy of the sport has returned," he wrote in his diary. "I want to be in the water now and on my way to France."

Lecomte had conceived his feat as a means of honoring his father, Pierre, who died of cancer eight years ago. (So far he has raised more than \$140,000 for cancer research through pledges pegged to his swim.) To prepare for his ordeal, Lecomte, who was born in the town of En-



BENJAMIN LECOMTE - PARIS MATCH/PIRELLA GÖTTSCHE LOWE

Always fit, Lecomte (at age 2) was a dedicated runner before taking up swimming.

ghien, near Paris, but finished college at the University of Texas at San Antonio, began serious training in 1991. Moving to Austin in 1995, he swam three to five hours a day, six days a week, in a chilly, spring-fed pool and enlisted the help of dieticians and Prof. Edward Coyle, direc-

tor of UT Austin's Human Performance Lab, to hone his fitness. "When Ben announced he was going to swim the Atlantic, my first reaction was, 'You've gotta be kidding,'" Coyle says. "But his steadfastness eventually made me a believer."

Lecomte has been no less steadfast in his personal life. As he waded into the waters off Cape Cod to begin his journey on July 16, he playfully raised a flipper to his girlfriend, Trinh Dang, 23, whom he met while both were working for a marketing firm in Austin. On the bottom he had written, "Will you marry me?" Emerging from the French surf, he hoisted the flipper again, and once again she tearfully accepted. At a celebratory press conference, Lecomte was asked if he intended to attempt any similar feats in the future. "No," he said. Besides, swimming the Pacific would take twice as long.

- Bill Hewitt
- Cathy Nolan in Quiberon and Anne Lang in Austin



Lecomte (relaxing aboard the *Falbala* after his seagoing exploit) posted entries from his diary on the Internet during his journey.