S.D. girls complete Catalina Island relay swim

Ocean's Seven team doesn't beat record but raises $15,000 for charity

By Michael James Rocha | 3:56 p.m. Sept. 12, 2015
The Ocean's Seven is seven North County teenage girls, ages 14 and 15, who swim with North Coast Aquatics. On Sept. 11, they completed a relay swim of Catalina Channel (20 miles) to raise money for Fresh Surgical Gifts, which provides free reconstructive surgery to poor children with birth defects. From left, Anna Brooker, Erin Taggart, Mia Thomas, Mia Ryan, Lindsay Turner, Heloise Leblanc, and Tegan Preston, photographed in the sea cave at La Jolla Cove. — John Gastaldo

Seven teenage girls from San Diego County swam from Catalina Island to Rancho Palos Verdes overnight Friday, reaching land in 7 hours, 51 minutes and 37 seconds.

It wasn’t quite enough to break the previous Catalina Channel team relay crossing record of 7 hours, 4 minutes, set in 1995. But no matter: The girls — ages 13 to 15 — knew they accomplished something special.

The team from Carlsbad’s North Coast Aquatics — known as Ocean’s Seven — hoped to raise $10,000 for Fresh Start Surgical Gifts, a San Diego nonprofit that provides free medical and dental care to disadvantaged children.

A brainchild of 14-year-old Erin Taggart and 13-year-old Tegan Preston, both of Carlsbad, the relay team’s focus was primarily on charity rather than breaking records.

By Saturday morning, when they completed the 20.2-mile swim, the team — which also includes Mia Thomas, Heloise Leblanc, Anna Brooker, Lindsay Turner and Mia Ryan — raised $15,000.

“The girls were amazing, just amazing,” said Mathias Leblanc, whose daughter, Heloise, swam in the relay. “We’re very proud of them, not only for accomplishing the swim but for raising all that money.”

The first swimmer dove into the waters off Catalina Island at 11:14 p.m. Friday, and for the next several hours, the girls alternated in one-hour intervals.

“The conditions were extremely good for three-quarters of the way, but the winds started to pick up, pushing swimmers away from the course,” Leblanc said Saturday morning. “They worked so hard to finish it under eight hours.”

His daughter was the second swimmer in the water, and despite a few nerves, she felt prepared.

“I was nervous, but it was mostly excitement,” Heloise said of her first hour in the water. “But since I was the one who was supposed to finish, all I could think of was going straight on and finishing.”

Upon reaching land, Heloise had one thing on her mind: “We did it!”

By completing the crossing, the girls join an elite group: Only 128 other teams have completed the challenging swim across the Catalina Channel since 1926.
“They’re all very competitive,” Leblanc said of the girls. “Besides the strong currents, they all got stung by jellyfish. But all they wanted to do was just finish it, and they did.”

What’s next for the Ocean’s Seven?

“Focus on their studies and their upcoming swim season,” Leblanc said.

“And a nap.”

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