

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

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Pittsburgh's Polar Bears

Tune in to the news on New Year's Day and you can expect to see coverage of people lined up along rivers, lakes, or shorelines preparing to take the plunge. What drives people to jump into freezing water in the middle of winter? For some it's fellowship and fun. Others say it's a novel way to welcome the New Year and extend the celebration from the night before. Raising money for a good cause motivates some. Others see swimming as a spiritual exercise—a way to be reborn in the water on New Year's Day. Tradition is also a factor—in Greek culture, the blessing of the waters takes place on Epiphany, January 6, and often includes a priest blessing a cross then casting it into the sea—the diver who recovers the cross is thought to have good fortune for the coming year. In Pittsburgh, the Polar Bear Plunge takes place at the Mon Wharf, where most regulars are seasoned cold-water swimmers, not once-a-year plungers.

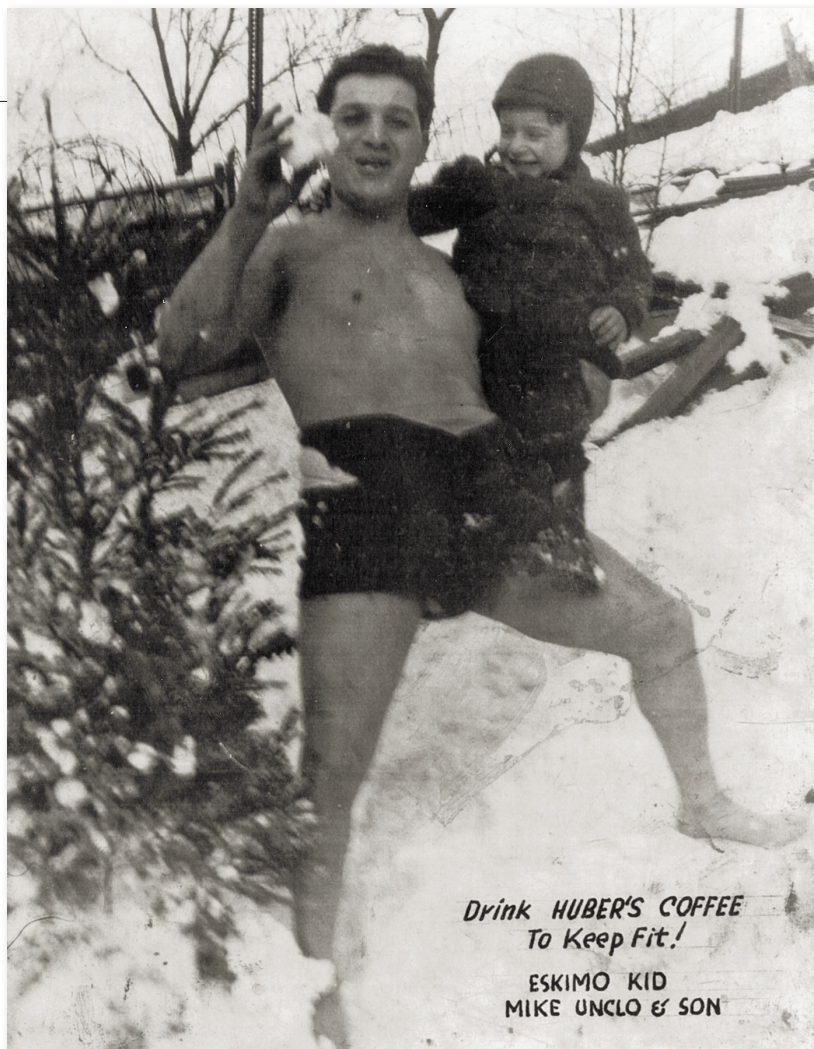
Gus Brickner is one such example. Born in Charleroi in 1912 and raised in this Monongahela River town, Gus left school at age 12 and went to work after his father died. Two years later he moved to the Macbeth Evans Glass factory and began to swim in the cooling waters of the river before and after his shifts at the glasshouse. Gus swam less for fun than for fitness and liked to challenge himself. Many of his swims were for distance—in 1927 he swam 760 feet across the

Mon. Inspired by Gertrude Ederle's famous swim of the English Channel in August 1926, Gus dedicated himself to achieving that same goal. He realized that swimming the English Channel meant conquering not just distance, but also cold water. Gus began to swim every day, year-round, to train for meeting that goal. For the next 43 years, until he retired in 1970, Gus swam no matter the weather or the water temperature.

Brickner achieved some amazing feats in his time. On January 24, 1963, with an air temperature of 18 degrees below 0 and 40-mile-per-hour winds, he spent six minutes and 22 seconds swimming the river channel carved by a tow boat through 10-inch ice. Gus earned the nickname "Human Polar Bear" for feats such as this and captured two Guinness Book of World Records as a cold water

swimmer. He recorded his swims and when he retired had logged more than 38,000 miles. Gus twice tried to conquer the English Channel, finishing 400 feet from shore the second time when high winds and waves repeatedly pushed him off course. No matter, he set an example in cold water swimming for the polar bears who followed.

Frank Nelson took his first winter leap in 1966 as a 16-year-old. He walked from his home on Mount Washington on New Year's Day, jumped in the Monongahela River, swam with some like-minded "bears," and then went home. He's done it ever since—for more than 50 years. Over time he has seen a lot of changes in this tradition. When he first started only eight or 10 men would show up on the Mon Wharf on New Year's Day. As the media



Michael Unglo and son Paul, c. 1940. Michael loved the water and swam most mornings in the Allegheny River near his home, not minding the frigid winter waters of the river or the snow in the backyard.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Paul Unglo.



Gus Brickner, here in the 1950s, often had to break up the river's ice before swimming.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Gus Brickner Jr.



Gus Brickner in the Monongahela River, January 24, 1963. Brickner set the cold-water swim record this day, staying in the water for six minutes and 22 seconds while the air temperature was a terrifyingly frigid 18 degrees below zero.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Gus Brickner Jr.

began covering the annual event, the numbers grew. Eventually the Red Cross showed up to serve warm drinks and tend to frozen bears, then River Rescue began to patrol offshore. Some of the longtime swimmers arrive early to clear the stairs and water of large debris or break up the ice on particularly cold days.

A small group of them do more than jump: they actually stay in the water and swim. While most newcomers get in and out of the river in record time, these men swim for 20 to 30 minutes. A few, like Frank, are former competitive swimmers or coaches. Paul Unglo follows in the footsteps of his grandfather Michael. Known as the “Eskimo Kid,” Michael Unglo, a Sharpsburg contractor, swam in the Allegheny River year-round. Since 1990, his grandson Paul

has joined the Polar Bears at the Mon Wharf each New Year’s. He dedicates his swim to his grandfather and considers it his baptism for the year ahead. And Frank Nelson, the Polar Bear Club’s unofficial president? His goal has remained the same for 50 years: to have fun, enjoy the bracing swim, and make friends.

Like Gus Brickner, Delmont native Darren Miller challenged himself to accomplish an arduous and sometimes dangerous athletic feat. He set out to complete the “Ocean’s Seven Challenge” and swim the seven most difficult channels in the world—the English Channel, Catalina Channel (California), Molokai Channel (Hawaii), the Strait of Gibraltar (Spain to Morocco), Tsugaru Channel (Japan), Cook Strait (New Zealand), and the North Channel. On August 29, 2013, when Miller finished his 21-mile

crossing of the 54-degree North Channel between Ireland and Scotland, he became the first American man to conquer the challenge and the first in the world to complete each of the seven swims on the first try.

A competitive swimmer at both Franklin Regional High School and Penn State, Miller adapted to open water swimming by training for the cold, the rough seas, the punishing currents, and the dangers of jellyfish and sharks. On each leg, he swam not just for personal achievement but to inspire and motivate others to set goals and dream big. Miller also raised money for the Forever Fund, a charity that assists families with the costs associated with infant cardiothoracic surgery at UPMC Children’s Hospital. His achievement is just the latest for Pittsburgh’s Polar Bears, the water warriors of winter. 🌟



Polar Bear Club members in the Monongahela River, 2014. Carlos Schrader, John Buckwalter, Frank Nelson, and Paul Unglo are all longtime Polar Bears. In the 30+ years each has plunged, they have seen the crowd increase from 10 or so people to hundreds.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Frank Nelson.