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MARATHON SWIMMER — Russellville's Richard Kersh recently completed the sixth annual Manhattan

Island Marathon Swim in New York. Kersh, 29, finished the 28.5-mile swim in a time of 8:19:31.

28.5-mile swim Kersh's idea of a vacation in New York

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Touring New York — a good vacation by most people's standards.

Taking in the sights — the Statue of Liberty, Yankee Stadium, the Hudson River ...

Taking a dip in the salt water — a 28.5-mile dip for good measure.

"I had a bunch of people ask me why I wanted to ruin a vacation in New York by doing something dumb like that," said Richard Kersh of Russellville.

Kersh began swimming as a sixth grader with the Hendrix Aqua Kids under the guidance of Coach Bob Courtway. He also swam with the Russellville Swim Team, where he hooked up with his present mentor, Dr. Henry Walton, and he swam for four years at Arkansas Tech University.

"All I knew was that I really loved swimming," he said. "It was never work for me. After I finished at Arkansas Tech, I said, 'Just because I'm older doesn't mean I have to quit swimming.'"

For the Manhattan swim

tal in keeping me in the water.

"It's not only a lot of physical strain, but also mental strain. At times you really don't want to finish. You're uncomfortable, then very uncomfortable, then you get numb — you don't feel anything really. Then you're OK again. It's like going through the wall."

The course provides its share of pitfalls, too.

"At one point, where the Harlem and the East Rivers converge — it's called Hell's Gate — there were four- to five-foot waves. They held me in the same place for about 15

For Kersh, the 28.5-mile Manhattan Island Swim was definitely the trip's highlight.

"Of all the sports events I've been in, this was one of the ultimate highs for me," the 29-year-old swimmer/triathlete said. "It was an experience. The main thing was it was kind of an adventure. It was one of the few things you can do in modern times that you don't know what to expect. When you're finished, you forget everything bad that happened.

"I'm going back. I want to go back next year and win it."

Kersh finished the swim through the East River, the Harlem River and the Hudson River in 8 hours, 19 minutes and 31 seconds. Shelley Taylor, a 26-year-old female Australian, won the race in a record 7:24.54.

In all, 41 swimmers from eight countries started the race and 37 finished. The swimmers ranged in age from 17 to 58.

While it was Kersh's first attempt in the Manhattan Swim, it was not his first marathon swim. Previously, he had swam shorter marathons in Canada — at Lac St. Jean in Roberval, Quebec, and outside of Montreal.

For the Manhattan swim, Kersh said he trained by swimming four miles in a pool each weekday and by "going out to the lake on the weekends and doing five- and eight-mile swims."

Rather than conflict with his work, Kersh said the race and the training enhanced his work as an exercise physiologist with Pilgrim Wellness Management Services in Russellville.

"I design corporate fitness systems for companies," he said. "I get the employees involved in a fitness program ... I need to exemplify what I do. And this helped me better understand the body.

"After five hours out there, when you think your body is really tired and can't go on, I know if you just hang on a little longer, you will make it. The mind has so much control over the body."

Don't get the impression the swim was a piece of cake for Kersh.

"I was in third place for about four hours," Kersh said. "At the five-hour mark, I started getting stomach cramps. I guess it's like hitting the wall. Dr. Walton was in my escort boat. He was instrumen-

in the same place for about 15 minutes. Some of the currents were tricky. It's amazing how strong the currents are.

"When you're in water that long, you're going to get cold. The water temperature was about 75 degrees at the start and about 70 degrees at the end. That's 20 degrees below your body temperature, so you get cold. It starts wearing on you bad."

The race was swum in salt water coming in from the ocean. While sharks were not a threat in the water channels, Kersh was stung twice by jellyfish, another ocean creature.

The trip was relatively expensive. In addition to the actual traveling to New York, there was a \$100 entry fee and a \$250 fee for the escort boat.

"It was about \$1,500 altogether," Kersh said. "And it was definitely worth it. This was not a painful thing. It's not like you have to be masochistic to do it. The ecstasy of finishing something like that makes up for everything."

Kersh said his advice to anyone wanting to swim a marathon distance race is "be able to visualize the start and the finish of the swim. Anything you can vividly imagine, you can accomplish."