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Nude up for Sydney Skinny swim in Sydney Harbour

Nigel Bowen Feb 23 2016 at 12:23 PM

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Getting naked for a swim in the Sydney Skinny

The world's biggest nude ocean swim attracts thousands of brave souls who bare all in Sydney Harbour. *Vision from Sydney Skinny*

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Even for one of the advertising industry's brightest stars, it's a tough sell. An untimed, non-competitive swimming event held at a beach most people have never heard of, with no prizes.

One which requires its entrants, many of whom exhibiting the sagging flesh of middle-age and often scarred by the ravages of serious illness, to get naked.

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Oh yes, and it's the brainchild not of one Australian swimming's golden boys or girls, but a "fat, pallid Pom who can't swim well".





The fourth annual Sydney Skinny asks entrants to shed their clothes and inhibitions at Cobbler's Beach. Photo: Supplied

The fourth annual [Sydney Skinny](#) asks entrants to shed their clothes and inhibitions at Cobbler's Beach on Sunday, February 28, with up to 2000 participants expected to disrobe and hit the water this year to swim either 300m or 900m. But why?

Fat, forty and fired

To comprehend how the Sydney Skinny came into being, it's necessary to know something about the 'Pom' who invented it. Though well known in the advertising industry beforehand, Nigel Marsh only came to wider public attention when he published *Fat, Forty and Fired* in 2007.

“If people wore their normal gear they wouldn't be pushed out of their comfort zone.”

Nigel Marsh

It's a self-deprecatingly hilarious memoir of a "classic corporate warrior who eats, drinks and works too much", who resolves to take a year off to get reacquainted with his family, give up the booze and get back into shape with the intention of entering the Bondi to Bronte Ocean Swim.



Founder Nigel Marsh turned his life around before writing the memoir *Fat, Forty and Fired*. Photo: Maxwell Photography

GIVE FEEDBACK

(In 2010 Marsh condensed much of what he learnt about work-life balance during and after his sabbatical into a [TED talk](#) that's been viewed over three million times.)

Long story short, training for the Bondi-to-Bronte helped Marsh sweat off kilos piled on during business lunches, and stay off the sauce. Completing the race left him buzzing with a sense of



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accomplishment. One he now hopes to generate in others through the Sydney Skinny.

Joyous circuit breaker

"I'm sure the people who set up the Bondi-to-Bronte didn't do it with the intention of helping me give up the drink and lose weight, but that was its effect," Marsh says.



Around 2000 people are expected to swim either 300m or 900m in the buff. *Photo: Kate Puddicombe*

"My intention with the Sydney Skinny wasn't to compete with other ocean swims or any other event. It was to make it as easy as possible for people to get that sense of empowerment that can come from completing an ocean swim, running a marathon, or walking over hot coals at a Tony Robbins seminar.

"It's meant to be a joyous circuit breaker; one people can project their own meaning onto. Maybe that's moving on after a bereavement, possibly it's a celebration after beating cancer, perhaps it's embracing a positive body image after having a mastectomy."

It would be easy to assume Marsh, a former CEO and chairman of Leo Burnett Australia, was talking up the impact of splashing around for a bit in the buff, were it not for the fact there are plenty of Skinny veterans who back up his claims.

GIVE FEEDBACK



Brian Willis entered last year's event while undergoing chemotherapy for bowel cancer. *Photo: Maxwell Photography*

Confidence booster

Brian Willis is a 38-year-old storeman based in Sydney's western suburbs. He decided to enter last year's event while undergoing chemotherapy for bowel cancer. "I saw something about the Sydney Skinny online and thought I'd give it a go," Willis says.

"It was nerve-wracking when I first arrived and I wasn't sure how well I'd be able to swim because of the effects of the chemo. I did the shorter 300-metre swim first and enjoyed that so much I went back and did the 900-metre one, too.

"After accomplishing that I was confident I could deal with cancer. As it turned out, it's now gone into remission. I'm entering again this year as part of 'Team Nudie' [named for the event sponsor].

"Whether or not they're dealing with the kind of serious problem I was, I'd encourage others to give it a try. It's a fun event. Everyone is really nice and the money raised [\$40 entry fee] goes to supporting charities such as the McGrath Foundation."

Embracing the new

Marsh is asked if nudity is a cynical marketing hook. "If people wore their normal gear they wouldn't be pushed out of their comfort zone and the event wouldn't be as impactful," he explains. "The magic happens when, especially if you've got old and boring, you embrace doing something new, even if it feels uncomfortable.

"What I've noticed happens when people take off their clothes and jump in the water is that it reminds them of their wild youth when they'd go skinny dipping after a party."

Unusually for someone in his line of work, Marsh studied theology at university. Despite – or because of – accumulating a large pile of cheese in life's rat race, he's long been more interested in transcendental experiences.

"If life is just about renovating your kitchen, driving an expensive car and building up your super account, then shoot me now," he says. "I'm not going to cure cancer or bring peace to the Middle East. But if there are a couple of thousand people who experience some happiness, gratitude and empowerment through going in the Sydney Skinny, then that's not a bad achievement."

Naked ambition

And if Marsh realises his messianic ambitions, his event could grow into the aquatic equivalent of Sydney's City to Surf. "We started with 700 people four years ago and are likely to have 2000 this year," he says.

"I'd hope the Skinny will continue to have 40 per cent growth in numbers and become one of those classic Sydney events. The kind tourists plan their visit to Australia around.

"I hope that when I'm dead and buried my grandkids will be going in the Skinny with your grandkids and having a joyous time doing so. I will have left the garden a bit better tended than I found it if that happens."