

No Ordinary Day at the Beach

It takes a hardy soul to dash into 35-degree water, dressed only in swimwear or a funny costume. When you have to push away chunks of floating ice to frolic, however, it takes hardiness to a whole new level. Add to the fun 999 additional men, women and children with the fortitude to spend a few minutes in near-freezing water—and you have a successful fundraiser for the Olcott, New York, Lions Club.

They're built tough in western New York, and they prove it every year through some of the country's heaviest snowfalls. When spring comes and the snow and ice is still piled high on the shores of Lake Ontario, Olcott Lions sponsor the Polar Bear Plunge Swim for Sight. Lions have raised more than \$200,000 since 1998 when records started being kept, but the plunge has been a community tradition since 1968. That's when some patrons of a tavern owned by Lion Mike Rann challenged one another to hurl themselves into a nearby harbor of Lake Ontario. From that informal first jump by some seven [fool]hardy men, Olcott Lions helped turn a loosely-organized event into a three-day community tradition.

The 41st plunge this year recorded the largest number of participants—1,000 registrants—and thousands of warmly-dressed onlookers cheered onshore as the wind chill brought temperatures down to five degrees. Lions netted \$18,000, and expect to break records again next year, says project chairperson Bill Clark. In addition to the swim, food vendors, carnival amusement rides, "snowball" softball and volleyball tournaments are part of the weekend fun.

Many of today's participants are the sons and daughters, even the grandchildren, of those who swam back in the



Clowning around for a few minutes is part of the cold water challenge.

1970s and '80s. Some people will just run into the water up to their knees and then quickly get out; many others will frolic, float and splash around for 15 to 20 minutes. "NFL-style tailgating partying takes place throughout the day," Clark says. "Thankfully, the community is quite tolerant of all the crazy activity," he explains. One tradition is a Polar Bear Queen Contest, which Clark points out is definitely not a beauty contest.

"We tell the judge, who is always the District 20-N governor, to select a woman who best exemplifies the spirit and enthusiasm of Polar Bear Day. Every few years we can also convince the reigning district governor to go in the water with them!"