



Unexpected Participant Crashes Polar Bear Plunge

by Mathilda Gregory, Editor-in-Chief

The seventh annual Hardy Falls Polar Bear Plunge turned out to be much more exciting than past events, thanks to an unexpected participant joining the festivities.

Hosted by the Hardy Falls chapter of the Polar Bear Club, the big annual plunge takes place the morning of New Year's Day at Hardy Falls Lake. It's rapidly become something of a tradition for bathers from all of the surrounding communities to welcome the new year by stripping down to their bathing suits and jumping into the water for an icy cold weather swim.

"Hardy Falls Lake is perfect for the plunge," said Mr. Marvin Christopher, owner of The Christopher Lodge and founding member of the local Polar Bear Club chapter. "Because of the waterfalls, it almost never freezes completely. It's just really freaking cold. Gets the blood moving."

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say it "stops the heart."

This year's plunge started innocently enough. 72 brave participants, shivering in their bathing suits, waited at the edge of the lake while over 200 onlookers watched with a combination of laughter, disbelief, and wonder.

Mr. Christopher had just blown a little silver bugle to indicate the start of the event, sending people running into the frigid water, when, without warning, a large, black animal came galloping across the park and jumped into the lake with the plungers.

Many of the onlookers screamed. In the confusion, there were shouts of "A bear! It's a bear!" Mrs. Emeline Ernst's Pomeranian, Buffy, jumped out of her lap and gave chase immediately. Mrs. Ernst tried to go after her little dog but ended up falling through the webbing of the lawn chair she'd been sitting on and required assistance to get out.

"It did kind of look like a bear," said Sophie Barton, who was attending the plunge with her sons, Cliff and Markie. "A young one. Like maybe a cub."

As panicked bathers splashed for the shore, Bernie Housemann started shouting "My gun! I need my gun!"

Mr. Housemann did not have a weapon of any kind in his speedo bathing suit.

As he was scrambling to get back on shore, presumably to get to his clothes, Mr. Housemann slipped on the rocks and fell into the mud. Chet Hinkle and Richie Dunlop tried to help him to stand, but he pulled them down with him.

Mr. Housemann was fortunate that he didn't have a gun. Not only were Chief Jackie Kline and Officer Harry Newman in the crowd, but the animal causing the commotion was not a bear. It was a 100-pound black Newfoundland dog named Spot who had gotten away from her owners. The long tail really should have been a clue.

The dog's owner, Lucas Vasco of New Jersey, ran to retrieve her. Before he could do so, however, Spot jumped on Mr. Housemann and sat on him, pushing him back down into the mud.

"I was face up, but I couldn't breathe," Mr. Housemann said later. "I'm going to sue!"

Chief Kline indicated that Mr. Housemann had been in the softer mud, so he wasn't hurt. Mr. Housemann dropped his threats when Mr. Vasco offered to pay for a doctor's visit.

Mr. Hinkle and Mr. Dunlop tried to help Mr. Housemann, but the dog growled at them and refused to let them get close. Other bathers kept a respectful distance.

At this point, Mr. Vasco, as well as every unleashed dog in the park, had made it to the water. Vasco tried to grab his dog, but she evaded him and ran.

Mr. Housemann made his escape, and a great chase ensued. The Newfoundland was apparently having a wonderful time, jumping and splashing, running to the shore before rushing back to the lake, a pack of dogs following her, including the diminutive Buffy until Mrs. Ernst got hold of her again. Spot was not inclined to listen to her owner, and Mr. Vasco ended up getting as wet as any of the plungers.

Mr. Vasco's wife and their three-year-old young daughter were standing nearby, calling for the dog to come. Mrs. Vasco apparently let go of her daughter's hand as she was shouting, and the toddler made a break for it, running as fast as lightning to the lake. Her mother cried out and chased her, but the child was too quick

Mr. Vasco saw what was happening and changed course. So did Spot. The Newfoundland, with great strides, splashed right up to the little girl and lay down in front of her, blocking her path to the lake. When the child tried to go around her, the dog adjusted position until Mrs. Vasco arrived on the scene and grabbed her little girl. Mr. Vasco caught Spot.

After another half-hour, the remaining dogs were sorted out, the bathers were covered, and the plunge was declared over for this year.

Mr. Vasco, his wife, Katie, and their daughter, Reenie, had been spending the New Year's weekend in the cabins at the Christopher Lodge resort. They'd heard about the Polar Bear Plunge and decided to come check it out.

"Spot was with us, so we brought her along," said Mr. Vasco. "She was on a leash. We didn't think there'd be any problems.

“We hardly ever have to use the leash, and the clasp is old,” Mrs. Vasco said, sighing. “I guess Reenie must have unhooked it when I wasn’t looking. She’s pretty smart, and she loves playing with Spot. The two of them run around the house like nuts. Once the darned dog was free, she just took off for the water like a bat out of hell. I’m so glad nothing happened!”

Reenie, cute as a button with wildly curly black hair, giggled and had to be pulled away before she embraced her dripping dog, which would have gotten her as wet as her father.

“I was here to watch the thing, not be in it,” Mr. Vasco grumbled, sneezing into a blanket Chief Kline had provided from the back of her cruiser. His wife tried to hide her laughter and did not succeed.

Spot herself was not noticeably cowed.

Mr. Christopher wasn’t upset by the turn of events and said it was the most fun he’d had in years. In fact, he said he would give the Vascos a voucher for a free weekend in the future.

“When people hear about this, we might get more members!” he enthused.

“This is my last year,” said Mr. Housemann. He was covered in mud from head to toe but wrapped in a blanket, for which this reporter was grateful as his mud-encrusted speedo was a sight to behold. “I’ve got dirt everywhere.”

Mr. Vasco seemed resigned to the havoc his dog had caused, but he and his wife both said they’d be back.

“It’s kind of the way our lives go these days,” Mr. Vasco said, then smiled and tugged a piece of his wife’s curly hair. “It’s pretty great.”

The year has certainly started off with a bang! Let’s hope things are calmer as things progress.