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It's a modest ambition.

You could liken it to Jack Nicklaus entering a putt-putt tournament or Mickey Mantle returning to the little leagues to hit 200-foot home runs.

Walter Poenisch, the human tugboat, simply wants to swim from Cuba to Fort Lauderdale.

For Poenisch, the 200-mile distance doesn't amount to much if he is liberally stoked with "Tiger Juice." Usually in marathon swims he pulls a rowboat, with passengers optional. Once, he dragged a 15-ton steamboat a distance of two miles without even working up his blood pressure.

Poenisch admits his ocean swim may encounter obstacles as weighty as the steamboat. He's concerned mostly about man-eating sharks, but isn't discounting Fidel Castro's ability to make waves.

Walter's trying to take an official route around Castro. He has asked the two U.S. senators from Ohio to try to obtain permission for him to embark from Cuba. If that doesn't work, he'll attempt the offhand technique of telling Castro he's coming and defying him to gainsay.

"Everything is 'go,'" Poenisch says. "The date is set for next March 15. If Castro refuses to let me start from Cuba, I'll start from Water Cay Island instead."

That would be disappointing, though. The Water Cay route is only 145 miles. Either way, it would probably be the longest and most treacherous swim attempted in the history of the world. But Poenisch is the sort of fellow who won't settle for the galaxy when he's angling for the universe. He's a living breathing Paul Bunyan — a human hyperbole.

Once, two years ago, he tried to swim to Fort Lauderdale from an island in the Bahamas. He had gone about 50 miles when his shark net collapsed, forcing him to climb into the boat.

"The net was only made out of steel," Poenisch said with sincere regret. "It didn't have any 'Tiger Juice' in it."

Poenisch, of course, was full of "Tiger Juice." He's always full of "Tiger Juice." It is a secret concoction of juices from natural foods. He has spent the past seven years experimenting with various mixtures that give him the maximum energy and endurance. "Tiger Juice" was the ultimate product.

"When I drink 'Tiger Juice,'" says Poenisch, "I feel like a tiger that has been caged for about six months."

The astounding story of Poenisch's development into the world's foremost endurance swimmer began in 1962. Walter was 49 years old at the time. He was one of the best rodeo competitors in the State of Ohio. But like many weekend cowboys, he was fond of slinging more than one kind of bull. On one occasion, his mouth got the better of his wallet. He allowed himself to be goaded into wagering \$100 that he could beat a stranger in a swimming race.

The stranger's name was Howie Fish, and that should have

told Walter something right there. But he went ahead and swam the race and almost won.

"Afterward, I found out Fish was an Olympic champion swimmer," Walter said, shaking his head. "He told me, 'For a cowboy, you are a hell of a swimmer.'"

Walter decided to reverse the situation. He worked on becoming a hell of a cowboy for a swimmer. And succeeded.

In 1963, after training vigorously for months, he entered the longest swim in the world at that time — a 60-miler on Lake Michigan. He looked around at the competition and grinned. Most of his opponents were sloppy fat. His 225-pound body was as hard as a professional boxer's.

"I thought to myself, these little pigs don't have a chance against me," Poenisch recalls. "Then the race started and after about a half hour, all the little pigs went right past me. I learned something about marathon racing that day."

He spent the next six years training and drinking "Tiger Juice". Then, in 1969, he succeeded in the first of an amazing series of feats. He pulled a rowboat containing his wife and daughter-in-law across a six-mile lake in just over three hours.

"Later, somebody told me the previous record for swimming across that lake was more than four hours," Poenisch said. "But that record was set by a freestyler who wasn't pulling a boat."

Publicity of this accomplishment gave rise to doubts. The world was not ready to accept the idea that a 56-year-old man might be able to pull a boat containing two adults such a long distance in so short a period.

Walter responded with characteristic directness. He announced he would pull two rowboats full of people a mile and, what's more, he'd cover the bets of all those who didn't think he could do it.

He did it.

Next came a \$1,000 challenge race in Biscayne Bay against Jim Woods, a prominent marathon swimmer from Orlando. Poenisch became irked before the race by some comments Woods made about his age.

"I go so mad I told Woods, 'When I'm through with you, I am going to go over and pull that boat.'"

Woods gasped. Poenisch was pointing at a 28-ton yacht.

Walter beat Woods, but it was a tough race lasting more than three hours during which the two men pulled empty rowboats most of the way. Poenisch was "tuckered" when a Coast Guardsman hitched him to the yacht.

"I started churning and pulling and thought I was going pretty good, but then somebody shouted that I was going out with the tide. I had to turn around and it took me 15 minutes of pulling to stop the yacht from going backward. Finally, I got it going forward and moved it about 20 feet against the wind and the tide."

After Poenisch finished, a tugboat was attached to the yacht to pull it back to its place of mooring. But the tide fought the tugboat and the tow rope snapped.

"Hey!" shouted Poenisch, "If you guys can't do better than that, I'll have to jump in the water and pull both boats back where they belong."

Last Aug. 8 was a big day for Poenisch. First, he defeated a 280-pound young man in a boat-pulling contest on Gull Lake near Kalamazoo, Mich., winding up the contest by hauling the young man, boats and all, back to shore.

Then, on a dare, he wagered he could pull a 15-ton steamboat a quarter-mile out on the lake.

"After I went the required distance, I felt so good I just kept going," Walter said. "I pulled the steamboat two miles in less than two hours, and I felt as if I could have gone on for about four or five more hours. Right after I got out of the water somebody took my blood pressure and it was 118-over-90."

Now all Poenisch's thoughts have turned to the Cuba-to-Fort Lauderdale swim.

"I chose Fort Lauderdale because the Swimming Hall of Fame is here and Buck Dawson (Hall director) has done so much for me. All the details have been worked out for the swim. Arnold Pouch of Bahia Mar and Capt. K.J. Mullen of the Coast Guard have been very cooperative."

But no word has been heard as yet from Fidel Castro. If Fidel doesn't cooperate, he shouldn't be surprised to be informed on or about March 15, 1972 that a mysterious force is dragging his island out to sea.