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**August 22**

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**Diana Nyad, 1949-**

*by Alison Osinski*

Born on 22 August 1949 in New York City, Diana Nyad completed her "personal Olympics" as a swimmer on 20 August 1978, almost thirty years later. She began swimming competitively in seventh grade at the Pine Crest School in Ft. Lauderdale. Nyad immediately liked swimming because she was good at it. Because of her success, she eventually lost interest in most other activities. Her training even at an early age bordered on fanaticism. She practiced six hours a day beginning at age ten, and expanded that to eight to ten hours per day of training while in her twenties. In 1966, at age sixteen and during her Junior year in high school, Nyad contracted endocarditis, an inflammation of the valves or membrane lining of the heart. Quarantined bed rest was prescribed. She gradually resumed swimming, but at a much reduced speed.

In January 1970, Nyad enrolled at Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois. College swimming coach, Karl

Sutter, believed she had promise as a long distance swimmer, and Buck Dawson, executive director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, convinced her to join the marathon swimming circuit. Nyad entered her first marathon race across Lake Ontario in 1970. She finished tenth behind nine men, and set a women's 10-mile record of four hours and twenty-three minutes. Over the next five years, she swam distance races in the Coral Sea, Parana River (Argentina), Suez Canal, North Sea, and Nile River, as well as other challenging bodies of water. She was the first person ever to swim across the entire thirty-two miles of Lake Ontario. She was pulled from the water unconscious while trying to swim the return trip.

The American public first became aware of Diana Nyad in 1975, when she circumnavigated Manhattan Island in a record seven hours and fifty-seven minutes, breaking the record set in 1927 by taking a full hour off the old record time. After three failed attempts at crossing the English Channel, Nyad wanted to do something so unprecedented that the feat would be unmatched for years. She decided to attempt to swim the one hundred and three miles from Cuba to Key West. Preparation and training began in earnest one year before the challenge. For six months, her daily training regimen consisted of sit-ups, running twelve miles, skipping rope for an hour, playing squash for four hours, and weight training twice a week. The final months before the attempt consisted of daily swims of up to eight to twelve hours in length. During the attempt, she swam in a

controversial motorized shark cage for protection from sharks and Portuguese man-o'-war. Forty-two hours and seventy miles into the swim, so far off course she would never hit Florida, severely stung by Portuguese man-o'-war, Nyad was pulled from the water in tears.

Undaunted, Nyad's next feat was to swim from North Bimini Island, the Bahamas, to Juno Beach, Florida. Her training for this, even more intense than her preparation for the Cuba-Florida attempt, included swimming a distance of thirty miles from Key Biscayne to Ft. Lauderdale every day for thirty days, and eating to put on weight.

Even with high energy feedings of 1200 calories per hour, Nyad lost twenty-nine pounds during the swim. She wore goggles, and several bathing caps to lessen heat loss through the head and slow the onset of hypothermia. Due to the sensory deprivation experienced by all marathon swimmers, her mind began wandering. She fought a constant battle to stay alert, singing thousands of choruses of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." She began hallucinating that her coach had painted a yellow line on the bottom of the ocean for her to follow to Florida. On 20 August 1978, two days before her thirtieth birthday, she completed her "personal olympics," successfully swimming eighty-nine miles in the open ocean, in twenty-seven hours and thirty-eight minutes. This was also the last time she swam as a competitor or for exercise. Now, she only occasionally enters the water to cool off or to play.

Since retiring from swimming in 1979, Nyad has worked

as an announcer for ABC Sports, covering primarily endurance events. She would like her role to expand to include coverage of more traditional sporting events like football and boxing. She recently moved to Los Angeles, where she has interviewed with local TV news stations. She is also exploring the possibility of writing and hosting a weekly television series docu-drama about fascinating stories of individuals who have triumphed over insurmountable odds, or survived life and death situations.

Nyad believes her motivations are misunderstood. She is not the type of person who sticks with something to the very end once begun, but rather a person who starts a million projects, all in earnest, but only completes a few. Her philosophy of life is expressed in one of her favorite quotes. Paraphrased from the German poet and novelist Goethe—the magic is in the beginning, there's no fault in not finishing.

#### Reference Sources:

- *Current Bibliography Yearbook 1979*, edited by Charles Moritz. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1979.

Well documented biographical sketch of Nyad.

- *The Ocean Almanac*, by Robert Hendrickson. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984. ISBN: 0-385-14077-0.

Touches upon every aspect of the ocean and seagoing life.

- *Sports Firsts*, by Patrick Clark. New York: Facts On File, 1981. ISBN: 0-87196-302-7.

Gives a brief bibliographical reference of the first person to accomplish an athletic feat. Nyad is listed as the "First Person to Swim Across Lake Ontario."

- *Encyclopedia of Swimming*, by Pat Besford. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.

Alphabetical listing of swimming facts, figures, dates, records, and times.

- *The Women's Book of World Records and Achievements*, edited by Lois Decker O' Neill. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979. ISBN: 0-385-12732-4.

Records and "firsts" of acknowledged 19th and 20th century leaders within various fields.

- *New Encyclopedia of Sports*, by Ralph Hickok. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979 (©1977). ISBN: 0-07-028705-8.

Reference book containing information about individual competitive sports, sport topics, and concerns, bibliographies of athletes, and directories of sport associations, organizations, and leagues.

#### **Works by Nyad:**

- *Other Shores*, by Diana Nyad. New York: Random House, 1978. ISBN: 0-394-50175-6.

Nyad's autobiography. Describes her life as a long distance swimmer, her motivations, strengths, and goals in battling herself and the elements.

- *Diana Nyad's Basic Training for Women*, by Diana Nyad and Candace Lyle Hogan. New York: Harmony Books, 1981. ISBN: 0-517-54455-5.

Nyad's goal is to coach and inspire women to begin and stick with a daily training regimen.

- "Diana Nyad Talks About the Bizarre Mental Side Effects of Her Marathon Swimming," by Diana Nyad. *Glamour* (October 1978): 68-72.

The mental side effects of marathon swimming as a result of visual and aural deprivation are examined.

- "Endurance: How Marathon Swimmer Diana Nyad Both Triumphed Over—And Was Beaten by the English Channel," by Diana Nyad. *Mademoiselle* (April 1978): 126-134.

Nyad discusses her 3 unsuccessful attempts at crossing the English Channel.

#### **Adult Works about the Subject:**

- *Water Dancer*, by Jennifer Levin. New York: Pocket Books, 1982.

Fictional novel about a champion female long distance swimmer. Explores the psychological, physical, and emotional demands of training for, and participating in, ultra marathon swimming events.

- "Out of the Water and Onto the Airwaves: The Obsessions of Diana Nyad," by Emily Greenspan. *Ms* (March 1985): 74-78.

Very insightful interview in which Nyad describes her life, her upbringing, and what motivates her to excel.

- "The Clan of the Polar Bear," by John Brant. *Outside* (June 1988): 31-32, 37.

Importance of body type, insulating fat, and strength in delaying the onset of hypothermia in marathon swimmers.

- "Danger: Its Thrills and Chills," by Lisa Collier Cool. *Cosmopolitan* (August 1988): 228-232.

Extremely risky and element challenging activities engaged in by Nyad are compared to the natural high which can be achieved by average people by taking risks in their daily lives.

- "She Takes a Long Swim Off a Short Pier," by Dan Levin. *Sports Illustrated* (6 December 1971): 38-40, 45, 47.

Growing up as Nyad. People and events that influenced her development as a champion.

- "Mind Over Water," *Esquire* (October 1975): 132-139.
- "Dunk for the Apples," by Dan Levin. *Sports Illustrated* (20 October 1975): 89-91.
- "Euphoria of the Long Distance Swimmer," by Adam Smith. *Psychology Today* (April 1976): 48.

Pain, euphoria, trance-like state, hallucinations and sensory deprivation encountered by marathon swimmers, including Nyad.

- "World's Longest (Electronics-Assisted) Swim," by R. Dean Straw. *Motor Boating & Sailing* (January 1980): 128-129, 170-173.

Threat of sharks, Portuguese Man-O'-War, and the 5 knot current of the Gulf Stream were overcome in Nyad's successful Bimini-Florida crossing with the aid of modern electronic navigational equipment, and skilled

navigators.

- "Diana Nyad Heads for the Aegean," by Sharon Begley with Peggy Clausen. *Newsweek* (25 February 1980): 10-11.

Nyad's last planned endurance swim before retirement. She explains that her passion for success in overcoming impossible odds is gone.

- "Because It's There," by Helen Dudar. *New Times* (26 June 1978): 66-72.

In depth cover story about what makes Nyad tick.

- "And One Who Failed," by Donna Foote. *Newsweek* (28 August 1978): 58-59.

Aims to explain what went wrong with Nyad's attempted Cuba-Florida crossing.

- "After 42 Tortuous Hours, Diana Nyad's Marathon Ends," by Ronald B. Scott. *People* (28 August 1978): 26-27.

Describes ordeal of Nyad's unsuccessful attempt to swim inside the *Cleopatra* motorized shark cage from Cuba to Key West.

- "Diana Nyad: The Obsession of the Long Distance Swimmer," by Jane Shapiro. *Ms* (August 1978): 28-29.

Nyad's desire for recognition for herself and her achievements before retirement from swimming.

- "Ill Wind That Blew No Good," by Dan Levin. *Sports Illustrated* (28 August 1978): 22-24.

Effect of natural elements on Nyad's unsuccessful attempt to reach Florida by swimming from Cuba.

### **Young Adult Works about the Subject:**

- *Women in Sports: Swimming*, by Diana C. Gleasner. New York: Harvey House, 1975.

Inspirational stories of 5 well known female swimmers, including Nyad, are presented in an attempt to introduce role models and to interest young girls in aquatic sports.

- "Marathon Woman," by Janice Kaplan. *Seventeen* (February 1976): 14, 149.

Article reports on Nyad's training regimen and diet, background, and motivation for involvement in marathon swimming. Discusses some of her most notable swims.

### **Audio-Visual Resources:**

- *The Worlds Below*. (Sea Studios, 1988). Videotape. 21 min.

Six musical compositions of images below California's Monterey Bay. Narrated by a marine biologist.

- *Solitudes: Wave Watching*. (Dan Gibson Productions Ltd., 1987). Videotape. 30 min.

Digitally recorded ocean waves and sounds.

- *Water: The Timeless Compound*. (Fawcette Communications/Lutheran Brotherhood, 1981). 16mm. 60 min.

An examination of water itself, ocean waves, rivers, and ice.

### **Discussion and Project Suggestions:**

1) Visit the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to view the display on Nyad and other marathon swimmers.

2) Get a taste of open water distance swimming. Enter or just come watch the prestigious La Jolla Rough Water Swim. The one mile event has been held annually for over 50 years in early September at La Jolla Cove in the Pacific Ocean, near Scripps Institute of Oceanography in San Diego, California.

### **Sources of Further Information:**

International Swimming Hall of Fame

One Hall of Fame Drive

Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33316

(305) 462-6536

Don R. DeBolt, Executive Director

US Swimming

1750 East Boulder Street

Colorado Springs, Co 80909

(305) 578-4578

Ray B. Essick, Executive Director

Manhattan Island Swimming Associations

438 West 37th Street

Suite 5-H

New York, NY 10018

(212) 563-3330

La Jolla Rough Water Swim

PO Box 46

La Jolla, CA 92038

(619) 456-2100

**Cross-Reference Dates:**

July 1970: Nyad finished her first marathon swim in Lake Ontario in 10th place.

7 October 1975: Nyad swam the 28 polluted miles around Manhattan in a record 7 hours and 57 minutes.

1 September 1974: Diana Nyad was the first person ever to swim across Lake Ontario.

13 and 14 August 1978: Nyad was pulled from the water after 42 hours and 70 miles into an attempt at swimming the 103 miles from Ortejas, Cuba to Key West, Florida.

4 August 1979: Nyad's first attempt at swimming from Bimini to Florida ended after 12 hours in the water because of severe Portuguese man-o'-war stings.

19 and 20 August 1979: Nyad successfully swam 89 miles from North Bimini Island, Bahamas to Juno Beach, Florida in 27 hours and 38 minutes.

February 1980: Nyad began her broadcast career as an announcer for ABC Sports, covering watersports, the Ironman Triathlon, the bicycle Race Across America, and other endurance sporting events.

Osinski, Aquatic Consulting Services, of San Diego, California. Her clients include health and fitness organizations, service organizations, attorneys, and municipal park and recreation and safety management departments. Dr. Osinski's specializations within the field of aquatics include: aquatic risk management, lifeguard and water safety training, boating safety programs, and swimming pool design, chemistry, maintenance, and operation.

This resource guide has been prepared by Dr. Alison