“Never Give Up” Study Guide
compiled by Daniel Slosberg

“I’m walking around tall because I am that bold, fearless person, and I will be, every day until it’s time for these days to be done.” (15:02)

Stirring words from America’s best-known marathon swimmer.

Nyad’s TED Talk, however, raises a number of questions. The answers may surprise you, so let’s take a look.

1. **How many athletes besides Diana Nyad have attempted to swim from Cuba to Florida?**

   “The greatest swimmers in the world have been trying since 1950, and it’s still never been done.” (:43)

   Only five people besides Nyad have made solo attempts:

   1. Walter Poenisch—the first solo effort, July 1978, **successful** (with shark cage).¹
   5. Chloë McCardel—2013, jellyfish stings ended the swim after 11 hours.

   The only attempt before 1978 was an unsuccessful 1950 relay.

Nyad’s statement implies that many if not all of the greatest ocean swimmers have attempted to swim from Cuba to Florida. On an episode of the “Brink of Midnight” podcast, she elaborates:

“All the great swimmers of the ocean have tried—male, female, young, strong, fast….” [#9, 28:05]

Poenisch, Storch, Maroney, Palfrey, McCardel—five great swimmers, but not exactly all of the greatest swimmers in the world.

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2. How many people were on Nyad’s crew?

“It’s an expedition of some 30 people.” (:52)

No one, including Diana Nyad herself, seems to know how many people accompanied her. From Nyad’s blog:

The crew is fantastic. 35 people. All first rate, in both expertise and heart.

When skeptics questioned the validity of her swim, Nyad declared…

To think that the 44 people out there would collude in a fraud is absurd.

The only near-complete list resides on the website of FishMonster Magazine, a journal owned by two of Nyad’s crew. Their list includes 40 individuals. Among them:

- **Marlin and Dianne Scott** — FishMonster’s owners. The New York Times featured them, as Scott and Deanne Hopp, in the 2008 article, “Trail of Bad Loans Leads to the Couple Next Door.” (reprinted in Palm Beach Post: [http://tinyurl.com/yc8go85u](http://tinyurl.com/yc8go85u))

- **Niko Gazzale** — A young spearfisherman with a criminal record, took over from Luke Tipple, a respected shark expert, as shark diving captain.

- **Janet Hinkle & Roger McVeigh** — Independent observers are required on marathon swims. For the most important swim of her life, Nyad brought along two inexperienced ones. Nyad waited to ask Hinkle, who had never observed a swim before, until the day her flotilla left for Cuba.

It does not include:

- **Jon Costenbader** — Serving time in South Carolina as Federal inmate #04110-104, he also served as one of Nyad’s shark divers. A month after the swim, federal agents arrested Costenbader after they caught him attempting to smuggle over 1100 pounds of cocaine from the Bahamas into South Florida.

3. What is the cardinal rule of marathon swimming?

From the video and other sources, we know Nyad’s cardinal rule: “Don’t tell me how far I have gone or how far I have to go.”

But the cardinal rule of marathon swimming is slightly different.
“And as you come over toward the side of the boat — not allowed to touch it, not allowed to get out…” (8:45)

Marathon swimmers live by the no-touch rule: A swimmer cannot touch a boat or another person. Doing so ends a swim. Period. That may seem unfair—but it’s a rule everyone agrees on.

Well, everyone agrees except Diana. She pays the rule lip service, but her actions show that she wants her money back. After denying being touched during her 2013 crossing, she grudgingly admitted to it. Video from her 2012 swim shows her holding onto her guide-boat mid-attempt.

No honest marathoner grabs the boat, then continues a swim. That would be like a track-runner walking onto the infield and then continuing to race, or a soccer player dribbling the ball out of bounds and continuing downfield to score a goal.

Perhaps this is why all video from Nyad’s 2013 attempt, except for clips from the start and finish, disappeared a few months after the crossing. Listen to the wind whistle through the desolate canyon of Nyad’s YouTube channel. Also whisked away (from her blog): all photos and videos from her 2012 attempt.

4. How deadly is the sting of the box jellyfish?

“The box jellyfish, the deadliest venom in all of the ocean, is in these waters, and I have come close to dying from them on a previous attempt.” (1:18)

Very few people die from box jellyfish stings. Prompt medical attention almost guarantees survival. Again, check out YouTube. You’ll find many clips of people stung. With only one exception, however, nobody dies permanently.

Nyad likes to exaggerate the dangers of marathon swimming, including that of the box. She gives fatality rates of 90-99% from just being “touched by a tentacle”:

- “90% of all people…die instantaneously.”
- “95% of the people…die instantaneously.”
- “Usually a fatal sting 99% of the time.”

But don’t let the alluring alliteration distract you. Yes, it really, really hurts, but you’ll have to go out of your way to make it kill you.
5. How could she pull off the hoax?

BOOM TIME?

“...lights attract jellyfish, lights attract sharks, lights attract bait fish that attract sharks, so we go in the pitch black of the night. You’ve never seen black this black. You can’t see the front of your hand. And the people on the boat, Bonnie and my team on the boat, they just hear the slapping of the arms, and they know where I am, because there’s no visual at all.” (6:49)

Nyad’s team rigged a boom extending from, and perpendicular to, the starboard side of Voyager, her guide boat. From the boom hung what she called a “directional streamer.” The streamer trailed along under the surface of the water. Nyad followed the streamer to maintain as straight a course as possible. She could also have held or hooked onto it. No one on her other four support craft would have known, particularly at night.

DROGUE ABUSE?

Nyad’s guide boat had two drogues available. But Diana never mentions them. After seeing a photo of one, you can guess why.

No one else on Nyad’s crew mentions them either, with two exceptions. The first exception would be Janet Hinkle, Nyad’s last-minute observer. From Hinkle’s observer report:

“Stability of the boat at such a slow speed has been improved with the launching of a second drogue.”

The second exception would be Don McCumber, one of Nyad’s kayakers. He writes about it on his personal blog. He even provides a photo (right), the only
graphic evidence I’ve found of a drogue in action during Nyad’s crossing. (For more on Nyad’s possible use of illicit drogues, please see “Going Drogue.”)

That makes two possibilities worth hanging onto. In that pitch black of night, she could also have slipped onto the boat. Perhaps one of the observers took her place in the water in order to continue the appropriate splashing sounds.

“This year the mantra is ‘find a way…’”

…and that’s exactly what they did. (5:33)

6. Why would Diana Nyad cheat?

ADORATION, FAME, FORTUNE, & A BOOK DEAL

“In the three months since that swim ended, I’ve sat down with Oprah, and I’ve been in President Obama’s Oval Office, I’ve been invited to speak in front of esteemed groups such as yourselves. I’ve signed a wonderful major book contract.” (14:43)

Nyad now collects $30,000-$50,000 a pop for her speaking engagements. Multiple corporations sponsor her EverWalk endeavor. She has garnered all this support on the assumption that she completed her Cuba to Florida swim in “squeaky clean” fashion, without “any slight thing outside the fair, just, ethical and agreed-upon rules of our sport.”

This was Nyad’s fifth Cuba-Florida attempt. Had she not completed the swim this time around, people would have seen her as a quixotic loon.

Finally, she requires adoration:

“I want to be known as the very best at something and have a reputation for that. I didn’t say be the best because I’ve been that for eight years. I said be known as the best. I feel that pressure very strong.’” (Miami News, 16 June 1978.)
7. Has Nyad lied before?

A few highlights:

- **Manhattan Island** — Nyad was the 7th woman to swim around Manhattan. A year after the death of Diane Struble, the last living of the six women who swam around before Nyad, Diana began saying she was 1st.

- **Olympic Trials** — In her 2015 commencement address at her alma mater, Chicago’s Lake Forest College, Nyad details her experience competing in the Olympic trials. But Nyad never qualified for the Olympic trials.

- **The English Channel** — “The only…world-class swim I had tried and failed at back in my twenties,” claims Nyad, “was going from Cuba to Florida.” However, in 1976, when Nyad was 27, she failed in three attempts to cross the English Channel, THE world-class swim.

8. Sometimes Give Up

Apropos of never, ever giving up, Diana Nyad is well-known in the marathon swimming community for giving up.

“[Diana Nyad is] a very mediocre swimmer with a very good publicist. Most of her swims have been failures. For instance, she has attempted to swim the [English] Channel three times and has never finished.” — Doc Counsilman

“’She has a tremendous reputation for not finishing races,’ complains Tom Hetzel, seven-time conqueror of the English Channel. ‘She has gotten more publicity for doing less than anyone I know.’”

“It grates me hearing Diana say she’s ‘America’s hero’ when she quits 85 miles from the finish the way she did going from Cuba to Florida. Diana is simply not a good woman swimmer. THERE’S no comparison between her and Sandra Bucha…. In 1975, when they both swam Lake St. John in Canada, Sandra went the 20 miles in about 8 hours and 15 minutes and Diana was 2½ hours behind.

…Diana is such a joke to anybody who knows anything about marathons.” — John Kinsella
9. The Big Con

Beginning in the late 1990s and continuing for a decade, French aristocrat Christine de Védrines and her family handed over 6 million dollars to the con artist Thierry Tilly. He had convinced them—some said brainwashed them—into believing that “only he could save them from a sinister masonic plot.” Tilly emptied the family’s bank accounts and destroyed its reputation. Said Védrines afterward:

“We were simply not armed to deal with someone who lied on such an extraordinary scale.”

Neither are we. Diana Nyad is a charismatic, moving and entertaining story-teller. She is also a con artist—a liar, a cheat, and a fraud. She is the Lance Armstrong of marathon swimming.

Nyad’s Cuba-to-Florida story is a fabrication. She inlays it here and there with truth to make it sound legitimate. Such is the way of a great con woman. She looks you in the eye and, without a hint of shame, tells you that she can make miracles happen—just like Lance did.

After Nyad’s crossing, she declared, “…this swim will be ratified in due time….” To date, it remains unratiﬁed.

After her swim, Nyad assured the public that “[w]e proved without a shadow of a doubt that I swam without any assistance whatsoever from shore to shore.” As of today, Nyad has not proven that she swam all the way from Cuba to Florida under her own power.

There’s a good reason for that.

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1 Nyad does not, of course, mention Poenisich, the man who successfully swam from Cuba to Florida a month before Nyad’s first attempt, because it would muddy her claim to being ﬁrst. Also, it would require her to talk about someone who has bested her, something she rarely does despite an inexhaustable pool of candidates. (C.f. “It wasn’t so much about the athletic accomplishment, it wasn’t the ego of ‘I want to be the ﬁrst.’” (3:27)

Another reason Nyad doesn’t mention Poenisich: Before and after his swim, Nyad pilloried him in the press. He sued her for slander, winning a monetary settlement and letter of retraction.

2 Future Farmers of America Convention, Oct 2016

3 Outside Magazine/XX Factor podcast, 16 May, 2017

4 Appearance at Politic & Prose bookstore, 21 Oct 2015

5 “A drogue (also known as a storm drogue) is a device external to a boat, attached to the stern and used to slow the boat down in a storm and to keep the hull perpendicular to the waves.” via Wikipedia

6 Coach of Olympian Mark Spitz. Counsilman swam the English Channel at age 58. Sports Illustrated, 24 Sep 1979

7 People Magazine, 16 Aug 1976

8 Chicago Tribune, 27 Aug 1978

9 The Guardian newspaper, 10 Aug 2013