

# The challengers of the Channel

Fifty years after Gertrude Ederle's famous swim, Diana Nyad—soon to attempt the Channel herself—dropped in for ginger ale and cookies

by REBECCA MORRIS

On Aug. 6, 1926 a London newspaper set the following editorial for its next day's edition—and went to press:

Even the most uncompromising champion of the rights and capacities of women must admit that in contests of physical skill, speed, and endurance, they must forever remain the weaker sex.

*The paper should have waited. At that very moment far out in the English Channel a small figure in a red bathing cap, buffeted by waves, was moving relentlessly toward the Dover coast. At 9:35 that evening, 19-year-old Gertrude Ederle touched shore. She was the first woman to swim the Channel; she broke the existing men's record by two hours.*

*On Oct. 6, 1975 passengers aboard Manhattan's Circle Line boat who happened to look over the rail got the shock*

*of their lives. Below them, pushing through the cold, polluted water, a determined young swimmer stroked steadily toward the Battery. By evening, 25-year-old Diana Nyad had swum completely around Manhattan Island, also setting a record for the feat.*

Gertrude Ederle's scrapbook weighs 36 pounds. Diana Nyad and I can hardly lift it. It's not the weight, mind you, we're both strong women; it's just a very big scrapbook. We are in the den of Miss Ederle's Flushing home looking at her swimming trophies. Aug. 6 will be the 50th anniversary of that historic English Channel swim, and in celebration of the event, Diana is planning later in the month to swim the Channel also. Diana Nyad is the world's first-ranked woman marathon swimmer.

"The papers are always saying 'Whatever happened to Gertrude Ederle?'" Miss Ederle's black eyes



Begoggled Diana Nyad seems to be waving as camera catches her in mid-stroke, one of thousands she takes every day. Out-of-water views of her after swim, right; in park, at top.

flicker with amusement. "What do they think happened? I got older, just like everybody else. Do they expect me to be out there in the Channel still swimming? I'm 69."

She looks at me. "Still I've always felt a mite of sentiment for The Daily News. They backed me in 1926 and printed my signed, exclusive stories while I was training for my swim. And when I returned to New York, The News gave me a red Buick roadster. As a teenager, I was thrilled." That red roadster had impressed her far more than the fact that she was a national heroine. New York gave her a ticker-tape parade on her return that some say was even bigger than Lindbergh's.

"Suddenly everyone knew my name, though most people thought I'd just appeared from nowhere. What nonsense. I had already broken 18 world swimming records and won a gold, silver and bronze medal in the 1924 Olympics."

Diana had also aimed for the Olympics as a teenager but a bout of viral heart disease at 16 ruined her chances. When she began swimming again in college, she concentrated on distance rather than sprinting. For the past three years she has attended NYU where she is a doctoral candidate in comparative literature and coaches the Barnard College swim team.

The small room is stacked high with trophies, cases of medals, framed awards and photographs—and a silver loving cup the size of a beach ball, presented to Gertrude Ederle after a poll declared her to be "the most popular personage of her time." Babe Ruth came in second.

On one page of the scrapbook is the photo of a little girl in a racing suit. She has dimples and long, long curls. Miss Ederle smiles: "I was 15 then and desperately wanted to bob my hair. We lived on Amsterdam Avenue at 64th St. above my pop's

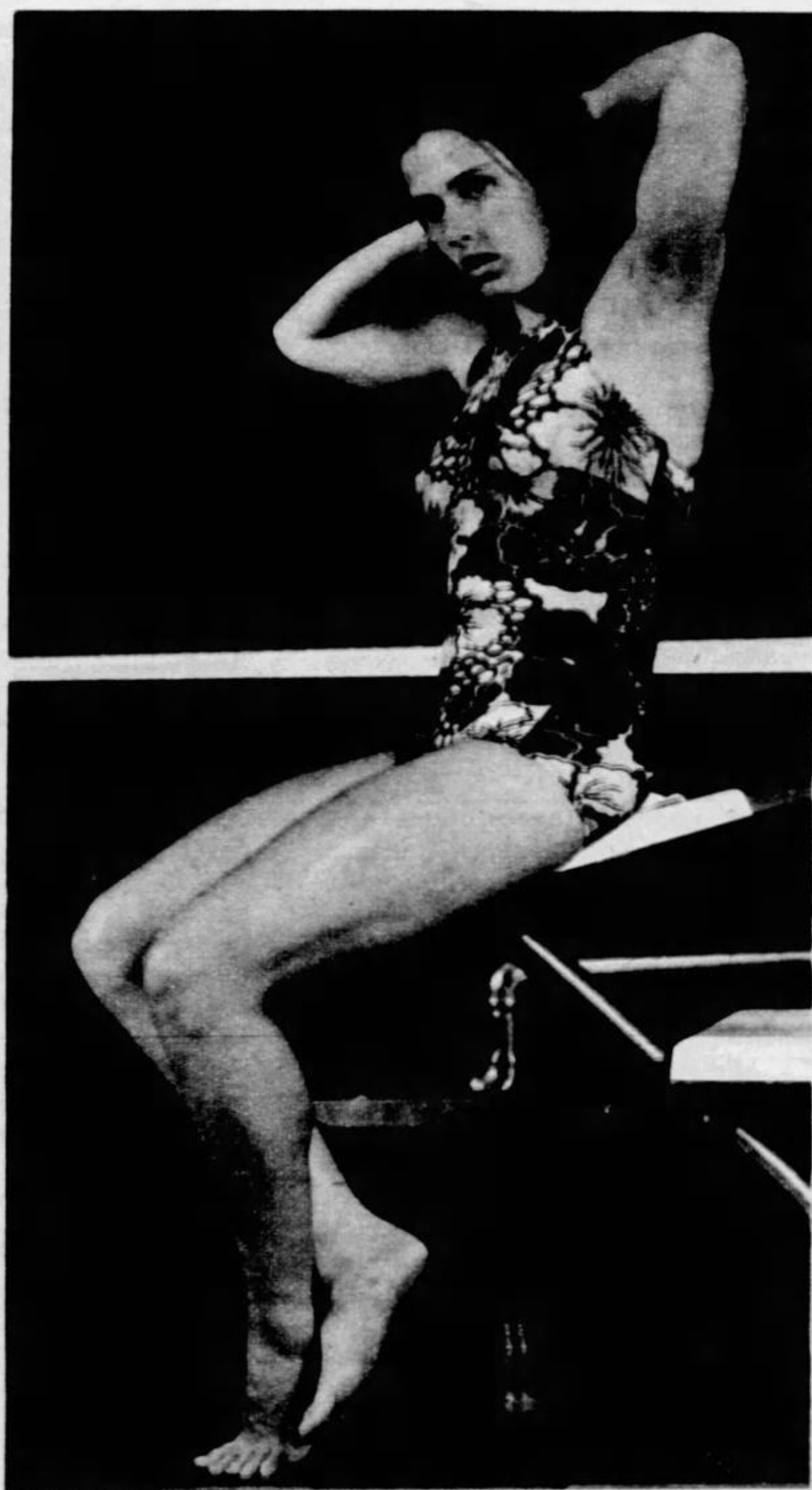


butcher shop—where Lincoln Center is now, and that summer Mom said, 'Trudy, if you enter every race while I'm gone, and do your best, I'll let you cut your hair.' I entered *everything*. Even the International Day Cup Race: 3½ miles, Manhattan Beach to Brighton Beach. There were 52 entrants in the race including the American and English women champs. I'd never competed any distance greater than 220 yards and had no thought of winning. I entered that race just to get my 'bob'—but I kept swimming and when I looked back, everyone was behind me."

She shows the next picture, of a grinning teenager with very stylish short hair. "That bob started me distance-swimming. Later I swam from the Battery to Sandy Hook in a record 7 hours, 11 minutes."

"I hope the water was better then," Diana says. Diana had to be

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Queens of the waters of yesterday and today: Gertrude Ederle and Diana pose together.

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inoculated against hepatitis and typhoid before her Manhattan swim, and when her first attempt failed just below the Brooklyn Bridge—she was caught in strong shifting currents and had to be pulled out—she caught a virus from pollution that made her ill for days. Two weeks later, on her second try, she swam the 28-mile loop easily.

"I was plugging for you," Miss Ederle says. "When you went right back and tried again, I wanted to come down, jump in the water, and maybe swim along a way to encourage you."

"That would have been great." Diana stretches her long legs, then grins, "But I bet you would have wanted to race."

Marathon swimmers are a breed apart. Few sports are as punishing or require longer training. Swimming also burns calories faster than any other sport. Diana, who is 5 feet, 6 inches, remains a slender 126 pounds despite the 12,000 calories, six times the food an average woman needs, which she consumes daily.

Diana was the first person to swim the 32 miles, north to south across Lake Ontario. She holds the Capri-to-Naples record as well as the Great Barrier Reef-to-Australia title. She has raced in the Nile and the major waters of Europe and Latin America.

But nothing compares with the English Channel. Swimmers have crossed longer, colder stretches, but that 21-mile strait between England and France has scuttled almost as many swimmers' hopes as ships. The first successful Channel swim was in 1875 when a certain Captain Matthew Webb breast-stroked his way from Dover to France in 21 hours and 45 minutes. Thirty-six years went by before the next successful swim, although 70 attempts failed in that period. When Gertrude Ederle succeeded 51 years after Webb, only five persons—all men—had made it.

Only during the months of July, August and September are Channel water temperatures warm enough for marathon swimming. Even then the tides seldom cooperate. Twice each month slower-running tides called "neap tides" occur. When this happens there are about five swimming days—provided the water is calm. Which is seldom. Storms rise so quickly that in minutes a calm sea will be fetching 15-foot waves. With everything else in his favor, if a swimmer finishes on the wrong tide, he may struggle for hours within sight of shore knowing he probably

won't make it. The best time for a Channel crossing is 9 hours 36 minutes France-to-England made in 1964 by Barry Watson of England. In 1973, Lynne Cox of California, swimming England-to-France, missed the record by exactly one minute.

A Channel aspirant must be prepared to set up training quarters on the French or English coast, and wait. Should conditions suddenly become favorable, an accompanying launch must be in readiness captained by an experienced cross-Channel pilot. The night before the swim it is this pilot who decides which direction—England-France, France-Eng-



Gertrude Ederle's scrapbook proves Daily News considered her the world's top story.

land—looks better and charts the course. An official observer from the Channel Swimming Association must also be alerted of the swim. Among supplies aboard the boat, your trainer will need a large blackboard—something a swimmer far out can see—on which to chalk instructions or encouragement. Feedings, necessary to keep up a swimmer's strength, are extended from the boat by a long pole with a cup or net at the end. Rules state that if a swimmer touches the boat or is touched by another person during his swim, he is disqualified.

"I heard what happened to you on your first Channel attempts," Diane tells Miss Ederle, "Someone touched you and you were disqualified."

Gertrude Ederle relives that moment: "Oh, I was so angry. I'd only swallowed some salt water. My trainer sent someone in to get me. They said I was unconscious. I was no more unconscious than you are."

"The same thing happened to me once," Diana says. "I'd just swum 32 miles across Lake Ontario and I was going for a double crossing, and was signaling for my cup. Another swimmer who'd got in the water to pace

me, thought I was calling for help; she started over to grab me. I tried to push her away and they disqualified me. After 20 hours. I'd been swimming 20 hours!"

Both older and younger champions are silent, sharing that bitter frustration. "You either make it, or you pass out and can't make it," Diana says vehemently, "But you don't quit!"

"That's right," Gertrude Ederle agrees. "The next year I got a different trainer and I made my father and sister Margaret, who both came along in the boat, promise no one would take me out unless I asked." When she was nine miles from the

coast, strong winds blew up, bringing rain and heavy swells. It took her four hours to go three miles in this turbulence. The sea had become so wild that William Burgess, her trainer, grew frantic (he had himself made 19 Channel attempts before succeeding). "You must come out," he shouted. "Gertie, you must come out." She merely looked up and said, "What for?"

In another three hours she reached the English shore. Because of the storm, she had been forced to swim 35 miles to cross the 21-mile strait. Yet before the exhausted, dripping-wet girl could rest, an English immigration officer was demanding to see her passport!

"I'd like to ask your advice about something," Diana says to Miss Ederle. "I would like to be the first woman to do a double Channel crossing. Four men have done it now, but no woman ever has. It would be tough, very tough. What do you think?"

Gertrude Ederle looks doubtful. "You'd have to have a perfect day." They are briefly silent, then Miss Ederle continues:

"We had a victrola aboard the boat—so the music could pace me—the first year we took a five-piece jazz band, but they all got sea sick. On the boat all my friends were playing records and singing for me: 'Yes, We Have No Bananas,' 'After the Ball is Over,' 'Let me Call You Sweetheart.' That was my favorite song. I was deliriously happy and singing right along when I started out. Miss Ederle begins doing crawl armstrokes in the air, singing. 'Let me call you sweetheart, I'm in love with you . . .' Diana moves her own arms to the tune. 'Let me hear you whisper that you love . . .'"

Miss Ederle was the first woman to swim the Channel wearing a two-piece bathing suit. The year before, her suit had become water-logged and chafed her terribly. "All the men swam the Channel nude," Miss Ederle tells us, "But with the press around all the time, I didn't want to do that—even covered with a thick layer of grease. So my sister Margaret cut up my favorite racing suit and made the top into a brassiere that hooked in front so I could take it off if it chafed; she made the bottom into a pair of panties. I think that summer on Cap Gris Nez we may have invented the bikini . . ."

"I remember trying not to swallow any salt water, holding my breath, I had good lungs—a chest expansion of 7½ inches then. More than Jack Dempsey."

Diana nods, "My lung capacity's been measured at 6.1 liters. That's better than any player on the whole Jets football team."

At this moment, Miss Pura Espada, who has shared the house with Miss Ederle for 32 years, comes in with a tray of ginger ale and cookies. "Do you like these? Yes?" says Miss Espada. "I'll make up a bag for you to take home." We protest but she is off to the kitchen. The two older ladies have begun to remind me of my own aunts. Though she has never married, Miss Ederle has had a lot of practice being an aunt. She has five nieces, five nephews and twelve grand-nieces and nephews. All swimmers; she taught them.

Until a few years ago, Gertrude Ederle also taught swimming at Lexington School for the Deaf. A childhood bout of measles weakened her own hearing and two years after her Channel triumph, the deafness recurred and she was forced to cancel a lucrative tour of swimming demonstrations. She had been doing water shows throughout America. Today she wears a powerful hearing aid and has no trouble conversing.

As we leave, Miss Ederle hugs Diana, wishing her success: "When

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the hard part comes, stay with it."

"I've got an idea," Diana says, "Why don't you come along with me on my swim, in the boat."

Gertrude Ederle shakes her head — but looks interested. You can tell that she's thinking about it.

**A**t six in the morning the Columbia University swimming pool is the liveliest place on campus. Diana Nyad, who has been up since five, greets several members of the Barnard Swim team that she coaches. Diana has already breakfasted on raw eggs, and has run three miles around her Lincoln Center neighborhood, carrying a squash racket to ward off muggers. Now she will swim four or five hours.

Long and slim, she sets the pace. All the endless miles of swimming, lap after lap, up and down the pool. Merely a job. She has always been in training. It's what she does. Her tanned arms cut the water with strokes so smooth and graceful that, as in ballet, they belie the power of muscle beneath. Narrow hips, long legs churning, an athlete's body. She has spent a lifetime perfecting this slender machine, and when the long, impossible swims begin, that body will not fail her. Last year, *Esquire* retouched one of her swimming photos to give her "an hour-glass figure." "They wouldn't do that to a picture of Ali" she says angrily. Anyway she doesn't need retouching: she has been approached by *Playboy*-type magazines to do centerfolds. Diana merely grins — that's not really her field.

She has great plans: the Channel this year; then there are the Great Lakes, and she'd like to swim through the Bermuda Triangle to see what happens. Yesterday a company making motivational films had her back in the Hudson, swimming around the Battery while a camera crew in a helicopter followed above. The water temperature was 50°. Great plans.

But right now she is swimming, swimming. A *News* photographer leans out over the water snapping as she passes, finally asking her to slow down and pose. Some 12-year-olds, members of an AAU team, have come out to practice. Skinny, wet, freckled kids. "Hey, Diana," they call out. It is obvious that she is a heroine to them, but it wouldn't do to let on.

"Smile, Diana . . . Hey, Diana, what are they taking *your* picture for?"

Diana Nyad grins up confidently from the water. "Mad Magazine," she says. □

Nyad says nothing about Cuba. That swim was likely the idea of a promoter. Chuck Jones?