

Diana's Big Splash In The Big Apple

By LINDA SHERBERT
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NEW YORK--Diana Nyad sounded like Muhammad Ali.

"I'm the greatest," said the 25-year-old world's best woman marathon swimmer over lunch at a Manhattan cafe.

Eight years ago the claim would have defied belief. Diana, ambitious captain of the girls' swimming team at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale, had failed to qualify for the 1968 Olympics. It was a bitter disappointment.

Even with the expert help of Buck Dawson, now executive director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, she had not yet realized her dream of "fame and fortune."

Ironically, it seemed she could not find success until she left Fort Lauderdale, despite its reputation for spawning champion swimmers. Finally she moved to New York City, believing it was the best place to prove herself.

She has. Diana Nyad has suddenly become the darling of the powerful Big Apple media.

It was only a matter of time. The self-proclaimed

Wonder Women believes she can be the best at anything she attempts. Anything.

The dunk for the Big Apple was her swim around Manhattan Island several weeks ago. Until precocious, determined Diana — whose last name prophetically means water nymph — came along, the fastest time for the 28-mile swim had been set by Byron Sommers in 1927 — nearly a half century ago.

Diana — on her second attempt — churned through the miles of numbing, garbage-strewn water in seven hours, 57 minutes, bettering Sommers' time by an hour.

"The extreme nature of marathon swimming is very attractive to me," she said of the sport. "It's very brutal, and I have to admit something in me thrives on that."

The feat by the 5-foot-6 coach of the women's swim team at Barnard College and Ph.D. candidate in comparative literature at New York University particularly pleased Buck Dawson, who gave her her start in marathon swimming five years ago.

"I think it's just great," said the Fort Lauderdale coach. "Diana has done a lot tougher swims, but New York is where the media is."

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Diana agrees that other swims have offered greater challenges, but added quickly, "The Manhattan swim — where you go eight hours in 65-degree water — is no slouch."

Besides the chilling water temperature, which she said is the absolute minimum for a swim that long, the fair-faced brunette overcame shifting tides cluttered with dead, diseased animals and slick with scum. Certainly the swim through one of America's busiest harbors has brought Diana far more than goggles fogged with oil, sore muscles and a duck's view of the Statue of Liberty.

"I would not deny that the day to day motivations are fame and fortune," she said with an grin. "That's putting it glibly. I want very much to be recognized. I worked very hard for several years. I think after the Manhattan swim, the possible repercussions will be nonstop."

So far, she's right.

Diana says all three major broadcasting networks have asked her to do tapings. She has just completed a CBS documentary. "The networks offered me jobs on any level — sports or news or the Olympic games," she said excitedly. "The world of broadcasting is literally at my feet."

So is the publishing world. E.P. Dutton publishers have already commissioned her to write an autobiography. A Phi Beta Kappa from Lake Forest College, Ill., Diana feels comfortable handling the written language. In fact, she started a book last fall after a five-day climb of Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa — a feat she nonchalantly dropped into the conversation. Her title: "It's Not Easy Being Wonder Woman." It's an even more appropriate designation today.

In her continuing effort to be the greatest, she appeared on Howard Cosell's show recently, riding a San Diego killer whale. She has also just signed with the William Morris advertising agency, which has promised her up to \$75,000 a year in endorsements — about five times as much as she has made in her whole swimming career.

While in California for the whale ride, she got another offer — from the U.S. Olympic women's rowing coach. "He knows I could be an Olympic rower by next year (the 1976 summer games), and I've never rowed in my life," Diana said. She's thinking it over.

Several days prior to the Manhattan luncheon, sandwiched between a Voice of America taping and a Seventeen Magazine interview, she ran 10 miles in slightly over 77 minutes. That's not a bad time for a woman, she said. That led the ambitious athlete to consider another sporting possibility. . . "You know, I think I could be a pretty decent marathon runner, if I were sick enough to try another marathon sport."

Diana believes putting her mind to any task ensures her success with reasonableness and practice. She believes in living up to the Wonder Woman label.

"If you're going to be the world champion in marathon swimming or some other thing, you could probably be the world champion at anything," she said. "If you wanted to be the greatest of all, say the greatest pianist, you could, assuming you weren't tone deaf. . . When I went to sleep last night, I dreamt about rowing in the Olympic games."

Her extraordinary confidence isn't unfounded, as the media has suddenly discovered. Doctors have stood in amazement at her ability to conquer unbelievable physical odds in the water.

"I'm competent, and certainly at the beginning of a race, I'm wanting to win," she said, her brown eyes intense. "I like to be called the greatest and I am the greatest."

New York apparently offered what Diana Nyad needed. She prefers its fast, aggressiveness as opposed to the comparatively leisurely pace of Fort Lauderdale. "I like being in the big city," she said of New York, where she was born. "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather live."

After the New York Times covered her Manhattan swims, she was invited to participate in the annual Superstars competition this winter in which athletes will compete in sports other than their own.

Diana may, however, tackle a variation of her marathon swimming — in a shark cage. Ben Huggard, the Long Island, policeman who last May attempted to swim from the Florida Keys to the Bahamas in a shark cage in record time and failed, wants to race Diana next year in the same swim. She has not decided whether to accept the challenge.

"It would take from 50 to 60 hours of continuous swimming, which is tough, no matter how you look at it," she said. "After 60 hours, anything feels cold. It would be a Billie Jean King-Bobby Riggs-type thing."

Diana now only returns to Fort Lauderdale, where she lived during all 12 years of grade school at Pine Crest, at Christmas to be with her mother, Mrs. Lucy Nyad. A woman who travels frequently and values her privacy, Mrs. Nyad said of her oldest daughter: "We're good friends."

Diana is remembered by her Pine Crest teachers as a dedicated student interested in swimming. "She was a good student, a pleasure to have in the classroom," said Dr. William Drew, her former physics teacher and now a Pine Crest principal. "I remember her very well."

Diana first became interested in organized swimming in seventh grade. Her geography teacher, Jack Nelson, asked for swimmers one day and Diana volunteered. Nelson became the school's famed swimming coach and is now trainer for next year's women Olympic swimmers.

She started as a distance freestyler. In ninth grade, she swam as a backstroker and qualified for the nationals. A heart virus made her miss them. Diana generally discounts her high school swimming as important to her later achievements in marathon competition.

Ask Diana who in Fort Lauderdale helped actively launch her career and she names no one except Dawson. But mainly she believes she got herself to the top through sheer determination.

"Buck Dawson was my first trainer actually, when things weren't going so well back in my youth," she said. "He came to me in the spring of 1970 and said, 'You're unhappy with your swimming career because you didn't make the Olympic team. Why don't you come up to Ak-o-mac and train?'"

Ak-o-mac, the camp run by Dawson and his wife RoseMary 180 miles north of Toronto, Canada, offered Diana a unique opportunity. She had been leading a reckless lifestyle for a couple years in Europe, she recalled. But she got in shape at the camp, and Dawson arranged her first marathon swim, a 10-miler, at Hamilton, Ontario. She beat Judith DeNijs of Holland, the best women's marathon swimmer in the Sixties.

That summer Diana went on to break three other world records swimming in coldest waters against hottest competition. Dawson says that three of the women he's trained at his camp — Diana, DeNijs and Marty Sinn of Michigan — hold all the women's world records for distances longer than 10 miles.

"In the hard-boiled male sports world," Dawson said, "this is the one sport where the best woman can beat the best men." Women's natural buoyancy, extra layer of fatty tissue, and extended endurance enable them to compensate for their lack of male muscular strength, he explained. "Marty Sinn and Diana have periodically beaten the best men in the world."

Diana believes Lake Ontario was her most difficult swim. Last fall she was the first person ever to complete the difficult north-to-south crossing. She failed on her return trip and after 20 hours, 30 minutes, was pulled unconscious from the water.

She has practically scratched her previous plan to swim all five of the Great Lakes next year for two reasons: Possible hosting of Olympic games and the low temperature of Lake Superior. "Lake Superior is 44 degrees on the warmest day," she said, having calculated dates and temperatures by herself in a computer. "So far as I'm concerned, it's impossible. If I swam 18 hours in 48-degree water, I think that I would die. Literally."

Life expectancy, she said, in 40-degree water is only 20 minutes. Once she almost drowned in 40-degree water in Ontario. When she was pulled out, her body crimson red, the places where her rescuer had touched her skin burned and left scars.

Diana is perhaps better physically equipped to withstand the sport than any of her female competitors. Her lung capacity is 6.1 liters, greater than a lot of football players. Her heartbeat is about 47 or 48 at rest, compared with the normal 72. She can do 1,000 situps and she said, "I don't even do situps."

But there is always considerable anxiety just before a swim. Cliff Lumsden, her trainer since 1972, gets her up at 3 a.m. for a breakfast including five or six raw eggs. During a race, she is fed cups of a hot

powdered liquid called Sustagen that provides her with 1,300 calories. The Sustagen, used to boost her blood sugar, contains more protein per tablespoon than a four-ounce steak.

But, Diana added, "Eighty per cent of success in a race is due to mind. Before starting, all natural reserves are working for me, my adrenaline, everything. Once out there, it's a matter of mental guts."

Often she loses weight from the swims; in the Manhattan swim she dropped from 128 to 118 pounds.

Her meals on dry land would drive a weight-watcher to suicide. She eats 12,000 calories a day merely to sustain her 125-pound frame. For lunch during the interview, she polished off a plate-sized omelet, lobster bisque soup and extra-large milkshake.

During the off-season from October to January, she omits the normal five or six hours of swimming laps. But she is on the go 19 hours daily.

Rising on her average day at 5:15 a.m., Diana eats breakfast and by 5:40, she is running in Central Park or on the Columbia University track. From 7:30 until 9 a.m. she coaches swimming at Barnard. Then she rushes downtown for a 30-minute squash lesson.

"I have a burning desire to become a good squash player, and I think that's enough to ensure I will be," she said. Afterward, she plays squash for another hour-and-a-half.

She tries to eat lunch at home from noon till 1:30 p.m., during which she practices Russian language drills. She already speaks French and German fluently.

Other exercises alternate with promotional activities. During the off-season she socializes a bit, but admitted, "I never go out on dates. I really don't terribly enjoy doing that sort of thing."

At midnight she goes to sleep, but for the next five hours, she plays continuous self-recorded one-hour tapes of numbers and other repetitive messages. The numbers simulate the counting of strokes she does while she swims. "I know by the number of strokes I've taken exactly how far I've gone," she said. Determining distance helps in efficiently distributing her energy over a long swim.

She described her sensations while swimming as the most profound aspect of the sport. Deprived of usual sensory stimulation, she retreats into a blurry, quiet nether world familiar to marathon swimmers. She experiences three levels of thinking and feeling.

On the most superficial level, she said she thinks of things like: "I'm Diana Nyad, I'm swimming and now I'm at the George Washington Bridge."

On the second level she counts strokes and often sings to herself. "I do 600 strokes to the mile," she said. "I usually count up to 600 and then start over, but sometimes I do multiples."

"Frere Jacques" is a 12-stroke refrain and I might sing it once in French, once in German and once in English and come up with a 36-stroke multiple. I mostly do that to keep myself focused. If you don't do something like that, it becomes a little frightening. You forget where you are."

Hypnotically lulled by the rhymes and slaps of water on her bathing cap, Diana begins to "hear" what she's thinking. "After a while, it's just like those tapes."

The third and strongest level is trance-like, she said, and visual images appear. "I have these childhood or sexual flashbacks," she said. "It's like when you're dreaming and you wake up. You get to see the end of the dream on the edge of your eyelids."

Diana seeks a scientific explanation of the phenomenon and is working with renowned economist Adam Smith on a study of sensory deprivation. She expects to write some of her conclusions in the autobiography.

Whatever Diana does, she is seeking intensity. Mediocrity holds no place in her life. She is trying desperately to squeeze from life every moment that will make her feel most alive.

She calls them moments of immortality. They are the peaks of our roughly 70-year lifespans, she explained. "A swim gives you an inner thrill when you're finished," she said. "It is the moment of immortality for me. I've done it with my two arms and legs. It is power. I feel very alive. Intensity is it for me."