

WHAT MAKES DIANA NYAD SWIM? AN ABSOLUTELY KILLING AMBITION

by Jane Shapiro

At five o'clock in the morning, Diana Nyad, the world's fastest female marathon swimmer, stands next to the refrigerator in the kitchen and living room of her apartment up a side street from Lincoln Center, eating her breakfast of raw eggs and Sustagen and looking out the window. The wide windows are blank rectangles, trimmed with curtain rods but no curtains, and as she swallows eggs Nyad can gaze out into blackness as swirling and calm as the sea, and think about her night and the day to come. At the age of 12 she arose in Fort Lauderdale each day at 3:30 for swimming practice and rode her bike out through the darkness, a weird serious driven determined little girl, implacable, ambitious beyond belief. She hasn't used an alarm clock for years, and she wakes at five because we aren't alive very long.

At the moment Diana Nyad is probably best known to most of us as a curiosity, a 25-year-old woman from Florida who this fall greased her body, jumped into the East River, and with extraordinary nerve and stamina, unprecedented speed, and impeccable promotional sense, swam around Manhattan. In September the *Times* featured Nyad failing, swimming for nearly seven hours, turning in confu-

sion, dragged from the water. She vomited for three days, and a week later got back into 65-degree water and swam her customary 60 strokes a minute, 600 strokes a mile, all the way around. She was a tiny figure moving hour by hour through calm and rough soup, past ferries and sodden paper scraps and cigarette butts twirling in slime, oil slick, and floating dead rats and birds, and the Circle Line launch; emerging eight hours later to break a record set by some guy in 1927 for the same stunt.

Nyad probably wouldn't want to call the Manhattan swim a stunt, exactly. Great feats, she calls them, and she plans to do more: unique attention-getters which are, above all, athletically respectable. This spring she'd like to swim the Bermuda triangle, or Key West to Havana, 100 miles, or the Great Lakes. She just signed on with a new manager, the man who engineered Joe Namath's hop to stardom, and the manager's eyes, she says, just *light up* when he thinks about making her a superstar, and he can even get keyed up about her doing things like swimming to Alcatraz—one mile! Or, somebody offered her \$2000 to swim up and down Ford's pool. Packageable events, definitely. But athletically ridiculous.

Nyad even slightly regrets going on Howard Cosell's show riding the killer whale from the San Diego Zoo. The whale was trained but very scary, a two-ton wild animal 10 feet longer than a squash court, and if you fell off you had to put the respirator over your

face and hang there in the water quiet and perfectly still, 32 feet down, because if you thrash around the whale gets upset and roars over to try to rip you out of its tank. The whale takes gigantic plunges to the bottom at 45 miles an hour, but on the television screen it looked, even to her, like a little person on a fish, a tiny bounce, and when she got out Soupy Sales was standing there with the mike, and the next night on David Susskind, David said, "Why'd you do that, Diana? My granddaughter could've ridden that thing." He couldn't see it was a real feat. So it wasn't—she got to be good buddies with the whale, but if you want to be respected as an athlete, you can't make a career of going on television with *Soupy Sales*.

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Before her solo swims—around Manhattan and before that across Lake Ontario—for the past six years, Nyad swam the pro circuit, finishing several times as high as third, while other women, she says, rarely finish among the top 10. She holds the world's record from Capri to Naples, the big marathon. She swam from the great barrier reef at its widest point to the mainland of Australia; world's record. Until this year she alternated college with the circuit, racing from February through October all over the world.

At 16 Nyad was a sprinter, but after a bout with a viral heart disease and months off she could never sprint as well as before, and now through years she has trained her body to excel over

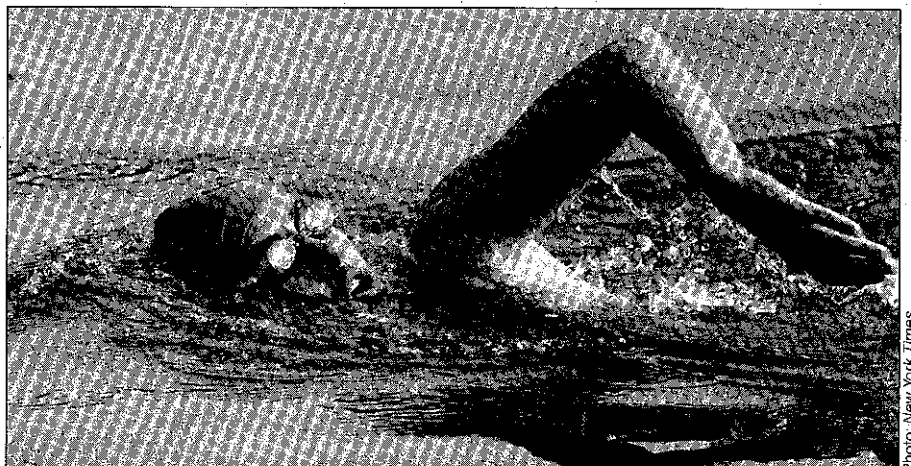


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distance and time. All marathon swimmers learn to tolerate increasing extremes of pain and tiredness, and many are far stronger and better swimmers than she, but she has the strength of will that they—virtually all of them—lack. In saltwater swims her mouth swells to twice its size, sometimes she gags and vomits for hours into the water, sometimes she loses 15 pounds or more of her 125 pounds; after half her races, she estimates, she could not walk or stand; after some, she heard the voices, felt the people around her, but could not speak. Once you train the body to be able to obey the mind, she says, if you *want it enough*, both body and mind will go on past the point of exhaustion. She routinely swims herself into unconsciousness or delirium. At the end, emerging from the water is indescribable orgasm; you don't have to beat anyone, she says, to experience that thrill. All marathoners know these things, and some of them happen to distance runners, cyclists, and rowers. But a marathon swimmer gets to do the *most extreme* sport: You're swinging your arms up and over, repeat and repeat, you can't see, can't hear, you're so alone, and in pain, beyond pain, and your body is freezing, it goes on and on, you're counting numbers, and finally you're slipping, hallucinating, and your mind drifts farther and farther away, and you're gone.

Nyad is fascinated by that faraway drifting, and says she works to get more of it into her daily life. In the most extreme sport, most swimmers have learned to tolerate incredible extremes; Nyad welcomes them.

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At 7 in the morning I am standing on Broadway at 116th Street in the cold wind, waiting to follow Nyad through some of her strenuous day. I've missed the daily five o'clock run. She carries a squash racquet and keeps an eye out for muggers, pumping along under the street lights while the black sky fades up to blue, eight minutes to the mile.

Nyad leaps out of the subway, grinning and racing with energy, self-

contained but souped-up. She hefts her satchel full of assorted racquets, offers the quintessential dry firm handshake, and keeps walking. As we walk she begins to talk, one of her long sweeping monologues, articulate and loud. This one is about her new friend Woody Allen's surprise birthday party, somebody called and said, Just come, it doesn't matter what you wear, and her locker wouldn't open so she wore her squash shorts and a little Head Tee-shirt and a headband, and then all these people were there, Candice Bergen and Lauren Hutton and Diana Vreeland (who was the editor of *Vogue*, she tells me), and: "I thought, uh, this's pretty embarrassing, they're all in these strapless gowns and I'm in the little basketball shorts, hopping around in my Adidas, you know, and—but at this place they: *liked it all*. Everybody said, hhh! Where did you get your *outfit*, I mean Diana Vreeland thought this was the most vogueish thing she had *ever seen*. And as a result Tony Perkins called me last night and said he would very much like to get to know me, that he liked the way I looked and, uh—it's good. I mean, if that's what's impressive, I can do that all the time. I can just walk around in my Adidas sweat-suit. Okay, you guys, sorry I'm late."

We've arrived in a hallway, and the guys jump up, five members of the Barnard women's swim team who have been lying on the floor rolling around on their backs, their giggles and shrieks clanging off the ceiling. At the pool, while she coaches (too egocentric, she says, to be a really good coach), she tells me about meeting John Lilly, who does the experiments with people floating in dark tanks deprived of sensory stimulation, about meeting all the big media people after the Manhattan swim (and they all liked her, and she liked them, just on a personal basis), about doing nude pictures for *Oui*, because she likes that stuff, pictures, if they're *strong*, although that probably wouldn't help her career any either. The new manager

thinks what'll help is if she lays low. A wide smile. Not one to lay low if there's life to be lived. She steps around in one place, looking small and trim, doing the beginning of a sort of bored warm-up dance in a circle, the athlete's little swagger. Greets a young swimmer, 10 or 11, "Hey, how ya doin!" Jumps onto the diving board, flexes her knees, and snaps the board, gazing into the blue swimming pool water to speak to it in a lascivious slurring murmur. "Turns me on," she says to it.

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At Nyad's apartment, walking around on the new carpet, which is strewn with brand-new sprigs of wool. The place looks bare and sloppy but actually contains the essentials of Nyad's life: Tape cassettes stacked in the fireplace, the books lined up in the shelves with their spines even, presenting a smooth straight facade. A new quilt on the bed, and eight or nine squash racquets in a pile on the bedroom floor, where she keeps them. "Where're the recorders?" I say. She has said she plays tapes all night to stimulate the right-lobe, intuitive part of the brain, to help her dream-recall the next day, to get her closer to understanding the shifting dreamworld of the marathon swim.

"Where're the five tape recorders with timers?"

"Hm?" She is running a bath. "Oh, um, at Stuart's, he'll bring them later. I don't like to go a night without them." She leans back against the porcelain, low in shallow hot water. A silent inner chamber, no traffic noise. She splashes water onto her breasts over and over, floating a bit, staring ahead, casting around for a subject. "I told you all about the tapes, right? The tapes contain..." she has talked about them a great deal. Two counting tapes, some Heifetz, some piano solos, some passages of literature read in her own voice, the voice she trusts most. And some tapes of her talking out a couple of problems, actually one problem, a relationship. Her voice drops, husky and slightly sulky. "I can't believe I'm so weak that I can't say, Well, that's

over. It's been 11 and a half months. When I'm doing something, playing squash or something, I'm okay. But as soon as I get contemplative and quiet and alone, if I'm going to sleep, or reading or on the subway, or in the morning when I'm eating my raw eggs—very often I start to cry. Because I didn't like the way it ended. I don't think it was necessary."

For a few months last year, after that relationship changed, Nyad wasn't her friendly, warm, and spirited self; all at once, after years, her motion stopped. She didn't want to eat or talk or see anyone, and she didn't swim for a month. "It was like Jekyll and Hyde. I had my phone disconnected, and I felt I had been given almost a physical blow, there was a... *Sudden change of events*."

"And now what's bad is that I won't give it up. I still see this person. And I fantasize about it, I want it every time I have any chance for it."

And this is on the tapes?

"Well, yeah, I've had thousands of conversations. Even now I have at least one half-hour conversation with this person every day. In the mirror, or on the wall, or just lying in bed by myself talking. I used to have hours of them." Her voice is quiet again, with that little sullen stubbornness. "You know, trying to work out, I guess, what we had before. Because I won't give up." Almost a whisper: "Just 'cause I'm always thinking about it."

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Nyad has a curious detached way of talking about herself, a continuous description going on, as if she were observing someone else, or even discussing a mythological creature. Her drive makes her very special, in her own eyes and the eyes of others. Quicker reflexes than most athletes, she tells people, and I don't even *need* quick reflexes. Nine hundred letters she got after Manhattan, she says. It may sound arrogant, but I know I inspire people. (At the Columbia track, a man watching her said to me, I'm going to double my time tomorrow, just seeing her!) Almost nobody in the world can do what I do. John Lilly thinks my

knowledge about sensory deprivation is as sophisticated as his. And how can floating in a tank of controlled 92-degree water compare with swimming Lake Ontario? I think I'm more sincere, more personable and friendly and articulate than anybody I could send to represent me. (But of course you need a manager to call up and say, oh, *she's cute*, she's this, she's that. Heh, you can't call people and tell them you're cute.) Later I'd like to be an *expert* at something, she says, I had thought maybe a teacher in a university, before that a surgeon, now I think maybe science, some combination of psychology and anatomy, or—I'd like to swim from the Keys to the Bahamas, it would be 197 miles, between 52 and 60 hours, the longest open-water swim ever made. I think I could do it. I think I can do anything I want.

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Even her failings and defeats have a special twist. As a college student in Atlanta, she was caught in Rich's department store with some other girl's shoplifted things in her bag, and although Nyad had been shoplifting routinely for years, she wouldn't say that those particular items were hers. Because it was the *other girl's stuff*. So she got kicked out of Emory, and they said she needed "critical psychological help." I ended up Phi Beta Kappa, she says. I went to Berkeley, and I went to school in France, and I finished up at Lake Forest. I did okay. It's true I used to lie, she says. Only to impress myself. I would tell a cab driver a lie—anybody. I don't have to do that anymore. "But I would never say I took that stuff." Her voice is very low, the tone that of a defiant, immovable child, who knows what's fair: "I wouldn't admit it. Something I didn't do."

When Nyad was a sophomore (before she was kicked out), she put up signs around the campus, telling people to expect a *great happening*, and then she went to the fourth floor of a dormitory, put on an opened parachute, and jumped out the window. "I landed, I rolled around, and I got up." Holds her own fist in the air

and shakes it at an invisible crowd, nodding slightly, happy and bobbing from side to side in the bathtub. "Everybody screamed and yelled. See, it was another *great feat*. That's typical of my terminology."

Strung together the way she tells about them, her list of feats and experiences is impressive and weird, full of magical twists and turns, breathtaking survivals and narrow escapes. Went to India after the Olympic game tryouts, an impulsive flight from the left-lobe competitive American sports world, and strolled around for a month holding hands with one 85-year-old Zen master, half-starving and wild with sadness, spaced-out on a diet of berries and leaves. Went to Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro for five freezing days and nights, and her feet froze so that she couldn't feel them for 24 hours afterward. (Cold, she says, but not as cold as water.) Once a sea lion swam next to her for 13 hours, a wonderful fuzzy face, they were friends. She would be dreaming and swim herself to death, but her little boat plucks her out.

Nyad thinks continuously about why she does what she does, and with some frequency she hands out compelling (although not really illuminating) statements about her own motivations: "Life is going by very quickly, in 70 years it'll be over, and I want to do everything I can, and be as good at everything I do, and know everybody, and have as many lovers, and—I just want to fill my life every minute. I want to embrace life as I see it, as I come to it day by day."

As she says that—with all her frankness, intelligence, humor, and easy contact with the world of people—there is real mystery, a quality of otherworldliness about her. I suppose the shadow of herself at 12 is still there, a small serious freak moving hour after hour, day after day, through water, moving through air, inhumanly determined and unutterably alone. She will swim and run and leave us all behind. □