

Marathon Swimming Origin Story

FACTS

Diana Nyad learned about marathon swimming in the spring of 1970 when she was 20. Before that, she had trained and competed only in pools.

20 years old

Buck Dawson, founding director of Fort Lauderdale's International Swimming Hall of Fame, introduced Nyad to marathon swimming in 1970 while she was at Lake Forest College. The following comes from "[*Diana's Big Splash In The Big Apple*](#)," a 1975 article in the *Ft. Lauderdale News*:

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 [*a summer camp in Canada — Ed.*] and train?'"

And from a May 1970 letter that [Dawson wrote](#) to promoter Joe Grossman:

We are training a marathon swimmer to re-inject some glamour into the races this summer. She is a Greek girl (Greek father, American mother), beautiful, determined. . . . Even though she speaks perfect English, I think we can honestly list her as Greek and play up the glamour in our promotion.

21 years old

From Nyad's first memoir, [*Other Shores*](#) (1978)

[After Nyad attempts to parachute out of a dormitory window.]

I was kicked out of Emory. The dean of women . . . suggested intensive psychological care and told me to pack up. Just as it seemed that no one was going to give me another chance (I felt like an ex-con), Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois, let me in. They called me December 27, 1970, and I was there for classes January 2.

. . .

Midway through that first term at Lake Forest, Buck Dawson, an old friend, called with a tempting prospect of trying the marathon swimming circuit. . . . He and his wife run a competitive swimming camp for girls in the north woods of Ontario, about four hours up from Toronto. . . .

. . .

Toward the end of the 1970 school year, I put in some distance in the Lake Forest pool. And from the middle of May to the middle of July I whipped myself into shape at Michigan State University with a very tough coach, Dick Fetters. (p. 20)

24 or older

Nyad turned 24 on August 22, 1973. The following month, she enrolled in graduate school [at NYU](#). She often says that's where she learned about marathon swimming. Here are two examples:

One day I was here at NYU, and I was swimming in a city pool, and a graduate school colleague of mine stopped me. And he said, "I see you, I see that perfect streamlined stroke of yours. I see the fire in the belly. You know, there is a sport beyond sprinting. There's a sport of marathon swimming."

K8 East Keynote, 17:28 ([clip archived here](#); the complete video removed or made private)

[Interviewer Karen Finerman asks Nyad if she began distance swimming while in college.]
It really was when I moved to New York City to go to graduate school. I went to NYU for comparative literature, and I was just swimming in the Columbia University pool one day. And a graduate student friend of mine said, "Nyad, I see that beautiful, powerful stroke of yours. I see you've got the fire in the belly still. Do you know there's a sport called marathon swimming, open-water swimming?"

["How She Does It: The Power of Perseverance with Diana Nyad"](#) (4:06)

29 or older

Timothy Wheeler, Nyad's nephew was born in September 1978. Diana was 29. In her 2015 memoir *Find a Way*, she says that she learned about marathon swimming after her nephew's birth:

During my twenties, the first step toward my own personal healing came with the birth of my beautiful nephew, Tim.

...

My second step toward healing, though I didn't recognize it as such at the time, came when swimming popped back into my life.

It took me by surprise, but I was once again immersed, this time not in a pool but in open water. I hadn't swum since high school. I didn't miss all those mind-numbing laps. ... But a friend started telling me about the organized sport of marathon swimming, and my curiosity was piqued. (pp. 57–8)

compiled by Daniel Slosberg

daniel@nyadfactcheck.com

Updated January 21, 2025

