



Home > Commentary > On NYAD: An open letter to the marathon swimming community

Commentary

On NYAD: An open letter to the marathon swimming community

31 August 2023

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Was Diana Nyad's Cuba-To-Florida Swim Legit? Haters Want To Know.

By Dom Cosentino
Published September 6, 2013

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Proving once again that no significant achievement becomes official until it's picked apart by people on the internet, [Diana Nyad's historic swim](#) from Havana to Key West is now coming under fire.

My favorite headline from September 2013 ([source](#)).

by Evan Morrison

Fellow marathon swimmers:

Through my various roles in marathon swimming — administrator ([MSF](#), [SBCSA](#)), [observer](#), developer ([LSDB](#), [track.rs](#)), [forum](#) moderator, and [swimmer](#) — I've paid as close attention to the sport as just about anyone over the past 15 years. The sport has changed profoundly during this time. Massive increases in participation. An explosion of new swim routes around the globe — along with pilots and organizations to support them. Continuous refinement of [rules](#), standards, best practices — befitting a real sport. An [authoritative results database](#). We've come a long way. This should be celebrated.

Amidst all this change, one of the few constants of this era has been ... **Diana Nyad**. Her [four attempts](#) to swim from Cuba to Florida after the age of 60. The controversy that followed the final, successful one in 2013. And the criticism of Diana personally, by some members of the marathon swimming community (including, at times, myself). The controversy and criticism continues even now — flaring up again recently with the upcoming release of [NYAD](#), a film adapted from Diana's memoir *Find A Way*.

Today is 10 years to the day since Diana set off from Havana on her fifth and final attempt. And we're still talking about her. In some ways, the current discourse within the marathon swimming community is bitterer, more personal, and is getting more [media play](#) than anytime since September 2013.

This is unfortunate. I've been as staunch and vocal a defender of traditional solo marathon swimming rules and standards as anyone. But I believe the continued criticism of Diana no longer serves our community, at a time when potentially millions will be exposed to marathon swimming through a major motion picture. If even a tiny fraction of these viewers are inspired to dip their toes in the open water for the first time, this translates into a vast influx of new swimmers.

The person vs. the swim

I also think people are confusing certain critical — but separate — issues. Given Diana's celebrity and "[brash, larger-than-life image](#)," some may find it difficult to separate Diana — the person — from her swim. But that's just the thing: these are separate issues. *Diana* is a human being, imperfect as we all are. You might love her, you might not. A *swim* is a set of facts, detailing an athletic feat. We must evaluate it as such, regardless of how we feel about Diana the person.

Diana Nyad swam from Cuba to Florida

Regarding the *swim*, I want to be clear: In light of the [extensive documentation](#) released in August 2022, I believe Diana swam from Cuba to Florida without artificial assistance to her propulsion, and without using a shark cage (as had been used in previous Cuba-Florida swims by [Susie Maroney](#) and [Walter Poenisch](#)).

I also believe that according to the current standards of the sport — which distinguish between [Unassisted](#) (English Channel rules or equivalent) swims and those which utilize additional equipment or involve supportive contact between the swimmer and any other person or object —

About

ultraswimming is written and edited by members of the Marathon Swimmers Federation (MSF) [core team](#).

MSF (founded 2012) is dedicated to developing and promoting the sport of ultraswimming – also known as unassisted solo marathon swimming.

MSF Resources

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- [Marathon Swimmers Forum](#)
- [MSF Documented Swims](#)
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Diana’s swim should be categorized as **Assisted**. Poenisch’s and Maroney’s swims were also Assisted. Diana’s swim was *less* assisted than these previous swims — she didn’t use a shark cage or flippers. Unfortunately, the sport of marathon swimming has not yet developed a system of categories to capture more nuanced distinctions among Assisted swims.

It’s unclear if it is possible to complete an Unassisted swim across the Straits of Florida. Two of the greatest marathon swimmers of this era, [Chloe McCardel](#) and [Penny Palfrey](#), made admirable attempts that were derailed by jellyfish (in [Chloe’s case](#)) and swept off course by currents (in [Penny’s case](#)). I hope other swimmers will try, and that someday someone will complete the first purely Unassisted swim of this epic route.

Beyond Diana’s well-documented deviations from standard marathon swimming rules, **there is no evidence that she cheated**. There is no evidence that she snuck onto a boat under cover of darkness. There is no evidence that she was surreptitiously towed by a rope.

Incidentally, here’s what I [wrote](#) after the conference call of September 10, 2013, in which Diana and her team answered questions from a panel of marathon swimmers and administrators (including myself):

While many questions about Diana’s swim remain to be addressed, I have not yet seen any evidence to suggest that Diana did not do as she is claiming — swim from Cuba to Florida. However, because of the repeated physical contact with her crew in putting on her stinger suit, I consider it an ‘assisted’ swim – the third after Walter Poenisch and Susie Maroney.

Some may find this surprising, but my general view has not changed from 10 years ago — except now, with far more documentation, far fewer questions “remain to be addressed.”

Ratification Shenanigans

Aside from the assisted/unassisted distinction, in my view, the newly released documentation meets and often exceeds [MSF requirements](#). This is notable since these requirements were not developed until 2014. MSF has not traditionally considered Assisted swims for ratification, but since the new WOWSA owner is using Diana’s lack of official ratification as a cudgel to [target her listing](#) in Guinness World Records and generate further controversy (read: clicks), we may reconsider this policy.

What the new WOWSA management doesn’t seem to understand, since they weren’t around at the time, is that **in 2013, there was no system of ratification for independent solo swims, or generally accepted standards of documentation**. MSF’s efforts since 2014 have changed this significantly, and the expectations for high-profile swims are now quite different.

In the early 2010s, if you attempted an independent solo swim and you wanted it *recognized*, the main option was [Steven Munatones](#), maintainer of the [Daily News of Open Water Swimming](#) and [Openwaterpedia](#). In that era, having a swim “recognized” meant having a DNOWS post written about you, along with an entry in Openwaterpedia. Note, this is *not* a criticism of Steven. He has consistently maintained that his primary focus is promoting enthusiasm for open water swimming, not developing documentation standards and ratification platforms.

In summary, “ratification” was not a relevant concept for independent solo swims in 2013. Is it fair to hold Diana accountable to standards that shifted beneath her feet in the years following her swim? In any case, if 2023-style ratification is what will help the sport move on from this unrelenting embarrassing debacle, then let’s define an appropriate category and ratify it.

Time to move on

To those who [asked questions](#) in September 2013 — our questions were valid and honorable. We asked for documentation, and now we have it. I wish we had it sooner, but we have it now. This is a vindication.

To those who have criticized Diana for past misstatements — I don’t disagree with you. It’s important to speak with integrity about one’s athletic achievements. But I think we’ve made our point, by now. Is the ongoing vitriol helping the sport, in 2023?

Let’s focus our energies on continuing to build and develop — new routes, new races, new communities. Rather than undermining the film, let’s embrace the interest it brings and harness it towards building our vision of marathon swimming in the future.

In 25 years, I believe we’ll look back on all this as growing pains of a rapidly changing sport. In the meantime, let’s embrace the rising water as it lifts all our boats.

Evan Morrison is an [Honor Administrator](#) in the [International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame](#).

Like 346

Previous article

LongSwims Event Reviews: A First Look

Next article

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amy gubser (2) anthony mccarley (2)

avishag turek (2) awards (2) Bodensee (2)

boston harbor (1) boston light swim (1) catalina (2)

catalina channel (1) chad hundeby (1)

course record (1) Craig Lenning (1) data viz (2)

documentary (1) documentation (1)

Eddystone Rocks (1) Emma Radford (2)

english channel (7) Flathead Lake (1)

israel (3)

marathon swimming
(18)

margaret rivard (1) Mediterranean Sea (1)

Michael Johmann (1) Michael Rice (1) Montana (1)

MSF Awards (2) neil agius (3)

new hampshire (1) north channel (1)

oceans seven (4)

open water swimming
(15)

photo calendar (2) records (2) routes (2)

Santa Barbara Channel (2)

sarah thomas (12)

sea of galilee (3) Stacey Wong (1)

swim caps (4) Swimming News (3)

Triple Crown of Open Water
Swimming (4)

Ultraswimming (16)

video (3) world record (1)

Analysis & Stats 4

Awards 1

Challenge Lists 3

Commentary 1

Documented Swims 29

External Content 1

History 7

In the Wild 5

media 2

merchandise 2

MSF 7

News 5

Q&A 1

Race Reports 2

Rules & Standards 3

Solo Swims 15

Tips & Technique 1

Uncategorized 5

May 2025 (1)

February 2025 (2)

December 2024 (2)

November 2024 (2)

October 2024 (5)

September 2024 (3)

August 2024 (3)

July 2024 (3)

August 2023 (3)

November 2022 (1)

August 2021 (6)

July 2021 (2)

June 2021 (1)

March 2021 (1)

February 2021 (1)

December 2020 (4)

November 2020 (2)

October 2020 (3)

September 2020 (12)

August 2020 (4)

July 2020 (3)

June 2020 (6)

February 2020 (1)

January 2020 (11)

December 2019 (4)

November 2019 (3)

October 2019 (3)