



## Nyad, Diana (b. 1949)

by Linda Rapp

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Diana Nyad first earned fame as a long-distance swimmer. She went on to become a respected sports commentator on television and radio, and she has, in more recent years, spoken out on issues of glbtq rights. In 2013, at the age of 64, she finally completed a historic swim from Cuba to Key West, Florida.

She was born Diana Sneed on August 22, 1949 in New York City. Her parents divorced while she was a toddler, and her mother subsequently entered into a second marriage with Aristotle Nyad, an immigrant from Greece, who adopted the child and moved the family to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

In a 2005 piece in *Newsweek* Nyad remembered her stepfather as a sophisticated, handsome, and charismatic man who "made his living as a con artist." Nyad's mother eventually divorced him, and in 1964 Aristotle Nyad fled the country one step ahead of the law.

Although Diana Nyad admitted in an interview with Hector Ruiz that she "was terrified of [her stepfather] in some ways," in her *Newsweek* article she recalled that "there was another side to [him]." Because of his love for literature and his culture he read to his little stepdaughter every night from the *Odyssey*, making it, she wrote, "the first book I ever knew, even before *Babar*."

Nyad also recounted a vivid recollection of an occasion when she was around six years old and her stepfather showed her the word *naiad* (the original spelling of the family name) in a dictionary. The time, she stated, was "just at the juncture when I was developing an ego, the id of self-definition. The first meaning of *naiad*: 'from Greek mythology, the nymphs that swam the lakes, fountains, rivers and seas to protect them for the gods. The second meaning: 'girl or woman champion swimmer.' Aris winked at me, and we both understood that this was my destiny."

The impetus for Nyad's entry into the world of competitive swimming would come, however, not from predestination but rather from the offer of a geography teacher to give an A to any student who joined the swimming team.

Nyad, then ten years old, jumped at the chance, and her spirits were buoyed when her teacher and coach, a former Olympian, declared on her first day of training, "Kid, you're going to be the best swimmer in the world."

Swimming proved a refuge from Nyad's tumultuous home life. She specialized in the backstroke, won numerous titles in her age group, and dreamed of Olympic glory at Mexico City in 1968.

At fourteen Nyad was poised to contend for the Florida state championship. On the eve of the competition, however, her (male) coach molested her. For the first time in two years she lost her races.



Diana Nyad following her historic swim from Cuba to Florida in 2013. Still from ABCNews YouTube video.

The abuse went on until Nyad graduated from high school. She chose not to report it for fear of causing embarrassment to her mother. Articles in the *New York Times* in 1975 and 1979 attributed the temporary slump in Nyad's performance to an attack of endocarditis, an infection of the heart, when she was sixteen.

After graduating from high school Nyad entered Emory University as a pre-med major. She was less than serious about her studies, however, and was given to pulling pranks—including jumping from a fourth floor dorm window with a parachute—and the combination led to her expulsion.

She subsequently enrolled at Lake Forest College in Chicago, where she excelled as a student, majoring in French and earning membership in the Phi Beta Kappa honor society.

Nyad returned to swimming but changed her focus to marathon events. Her first major competition was a swim across Lake Ontario in 1970 in which she finished tenth in a field of sixty and set a new record for women.

Nyad's career in swimming took her to exotic locales around the globe, including the Suez Canal, the North Sea, the Nile, the Parana River in Argentina, the Bay of Naples, and the Great Barrier Reef. Her 102.5-mile journey from the Bahamas to Florida in 1979 set a record that still stands as the longest swim by an athlete not using a shark cage or fins.

The effort that most drew the attention of the American public was a swim around Manhattan Island in 1975. Her first attempt, on September 25, had to be aborted because of adverse weather conditions. She was taken to Brooklyn Hospital, where, despite the fact that she was "cold, frozen, and tired," she declared to John Corry of the *New York Times*, "You know what? I'm going to do it again."

And so she did on October 5 of the same year, completing the circuit of the island in 7 hours and 57 minutes, besting an unofficial record of 8 hours and 56 minutes set by Byron Sommers in 1927 and demolishing the women's record of 11 hours, 59 minutes by Diane Strubel in 1959.

Nyad's achievements were recognized with her induction into the International Swimming Hall of Fame (2002) and the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame (2006), on which occasion Martina Navratilova gave the valedictory address.

In 1980 Nyad embarked on a second career as a journalist focusing mainly on sports. Roone Arledge, then president of ABC Sports, having seen Nyad on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, and impressed with her ability as a story-teller, offered her a job as an announcer on the network's popular weekend *Wide World of Sports* show. She worked for the network through 1988.

Nyad had always been open about her sexual orientation with family, friends, and fellow athletes. Word of it had also spread among avid sports fans; nevertheless, Nyad stated to Robert Lipsyte of the *New York Times*, "she was told not to bring her partner to [ABC] company social events and to make sure her lesbianism stayed in the closet where it couldn't scare the Nielsen families."

As an announcer for ABC Nyad reported on three Olympic Games as well as numerous other important international competitions.

Nyad next moved to CNBC, where she hosted *One on One with Diana Nyad* (1989-1992) and earned a reputation as a skillful interviewer. She subsequently worked on documentaries for the Outdoor Life Network before becoming a senior correspondent as well as a writer and producer for the Fox Sports Network (1996-2001).

Nyad also works as a radio journalist, having begun an association in 1988 with NPR (National Public Radio), where her credits include hosting *The Savvy Traveler*, serving as sports business analyst on *Marketplace*, and offering commentary on sports on *The Score*.

Although Nyad's lesbianism was something of an open secret, she was not among the most visible members of the glbtq community until 1999, when she participated in a forum sponsored by the *New York Times*, moderated by Lipsyte and also including Dave Kopay—a retired football player who had the courage to become the first man in one of the four major United States team sports to come out as gay—and Billy Bean, a retired major league baseball player.

Nyad also hosted an episode of the PBS series *In the Life* (April 2007) entitled "The Last Closet" that dealt with the heteronormative culture of sports and the prejudice faced by glbtq athletes. The program featured an interview with retired professional basketball player John Amaechi, who recounted the painful experience of having to conceal his homosexuality during his career.

Nyad narrated the documentary *Training Rules* (2008, directed by Dee Mosbacher and Fawn Yacker), concerning the lawsuit filed in 2006 by student-athlete Jennifer Harris against Pennsylvania State University and its women's basketball coach, Rene Portland, whose "training rules" had, for over two decades, included "no drinking, no drugs, and no lesbians."

After some thirty years Nyad returned to the water to attempt a marathon swim from Cuba to Key West without a shark cage in August 2011 on the eve of her sixty-second birthday. She had first tried to make the passage between the two countries in 1978 but had to be pulled—protesting—from the water after high winds and swelling waves had driven her hopelessly off course.

Nyad's 2011 effort at the swim ended after approximately twenty-nine hours, the last twelve of which she spent battling an asthma attack and pain in her right shoulder.

Nyad's subsequent remarks to Bill Dwyre of the *Los Angeles Times* showed her to be the quintessential athlete—always committed to doing her best and always aspiring to do even better.

"I do not feel at peace with the way this ended," she told Dwyre, [but] "I feel proud of what I did. . . . I would have tried anything to get there. I would have crawled or dog-paddled to the shore if I'd needed to. If I had seen the lights of the Florida shoreline, I would have found a way to get there. . . . I showed what a human being can do, but I didn't complete what a swimmer can."

The following month Nyad made yet another attempt that she also had to abandon after being stung so many times by Portuguese man o' war jellyfish that medics warned that risking another strike could endanger her life.

However, on September 2, 2013, Nyad made history by becoming the first person to swim the Florida straits from Cuba to the Florida Keys without the security of a shark cage. She arrived at the shoreline of Key West after 53 hours in the water. The 64-year-old was greeted by cheering crowds of fans, some of them waving rainbow flags, as she triumphed on her fifth attempt to achieve a "life-long dream."

As Alistair Jamieson and Tracy Connor reported on NBC News, "Her tongue and lips were swollen by sun and seawater, and she had abrasions in her mouth from a special silicone mask meant to keep the jellyfish at bay."

At two miles from shore, Nyad seemed to realize that she was on the verge of success. "I am about to swim my last two miles in the ocean," she told her handlers. "This is a lifelong dream of mine and I'm very very

glad to be with you," she added, praising her team. "So let's get going so we can have a whopping party."

Only one swimmer, Australian Susie Maroney, had previously crossed the Florida straits. But during Maroney's 1977 swim, she used a protective cage.

In addition to her work in sports and broadcasting, Nyad has authored three books, *Other Shores* (1978), a chronicle of her life as a swimmer, *Basic Training for Women* (1983), and *The Boss of Me: The Keyshawn Johnson Story* (1999) about a professional football player.

Because of her interest in promoting women's health and fitness, Nyad has recently joined with Bonnie Stoll, a former professional racquetball player—once ranked third on the world tour—in founding the business BravaBody.com, an on-line resource dedicated to providing advice to an audience of women over the age of forty.

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