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DIANA NYAD SHARES HOW HER TITANIUM WILL MADE HER DREAMS COME TRUE

[Dori Zinn](#) | August 22, 2023



Before Diana Nyad spent decades as a sports announcer, she was a competitive swimmer. She didn't swim again until 60.

Diana Nyad gained a lot of attention for swimming without a shark cage from the coast of Florida to Cuba when she was 64 years old. But she had an entire lifetime of accomplishments before then. Possibly more than one.

She grew up with a troubling father, jumped out of a fourth floor building in college wearing a parachute (and got expelled because of it), and she spent decades as an accomplished announcer and broadcaster. It wasn't until her 60s that she took on marathon swimming again. Nyad shares what it took to get here and how she continues to live out loud.

LISTEN: Marathon swimmer Diana Nyad chats with Karen Finerman on accomplishing the Mount Everest of swims (and so much more) on [the How She Does It podcast](#).

THE SALVATION OF SWIMMING

Nyad grew up with a con artist father who got her family in a lot of trouble. While he was an excellent storyteller and dancer, he made some bad decisions that hurt her family.

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“He was a thief, he was a liar, and we couldn’t trust him at home,” she says. “Nothing he said was the truth. He got our family in a lot of trouble financially [and] people started coming to the house at midnight, one o’clock in the morning.”

When he was on one of his business trips, her mother finally divorced him. While a difficult decision, her mother believed it wasn’t right for her family for them to stay together. These home problems helped her find the water.

“I didn’t grow up with a fuzzy, warm family life, and swimming was my salvation,” she says. “I could get in that pool or even get out in the ocean and just forget about everything that was dragging me down.”

For his faults, Nyad says it was her father that helped her discover the meaning of her name. When she was five years old, he brought out the dictionary and found “nyad” listed.

“The classic Greek mythology definition is [that] the Dryads were in the desert, the Triads were in the forest, and the Nyads were in the seas, the fountains, the lakes and the rivers,” she says. “The second, more modern definition of nyad is girl or woman champion swimmer. So I came upon that definition at the age of five [and] became a pool swimmer with a bunch of little kids not too long after that.”

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THE CUBA SWIM HAS BEEN A LIFELONG DREAM

After the divorce, the family moved to Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The idea that Cuba was close by came from her mother one time when they were on a beach trip.

“At age nine, I was already a little competitive swimmer,” she says. “I was on the beach one day and I said to my mother, ‘Mom, where’s Cuba? I know it’s out there, but I can’t see it.’ And she said, ‘It’s just across the horizon. You cannot see it, but you, you little champion swimmer, you could almost swim there.’ Cuba and swimming between these two forbidden lands was in my soul from the time I was nine years old.”

Nyad had made her first attempt at the Florida to Cuba swim in 1978, but was unsuccessful. Then she tried again the next year, but her and her team couldn’t get visas. The same for the following year. After that, she started other ventures.

“I was starting to get offers from the wide world of sports as an announcer,” she says. “And so I left my beautiful Cuba swim behind. At that point – from 1980 – I didn’t swim for 35 years until I took it back up at the age of 60.”

THE POUNDING OF POTENTIAL

Getting through 53 hours of swimming isn’t for the weak. Nyad says she thought about training again, but didn’t tell people at first – because she had to [prove to herself](#) that she could.

“I wanted to find out if I had it in me,” she says. “Swimming is a different animal. And so I wanted to see if I had it in my heart, in my body, in my soul to do this swim before I started announcing it to anybody.”

It was her best friend Bonnie she told first. After a few months of doing pool laps, Bonnie noticed the goggle marks around her eyes. That dream of swimming to Cuba never went away.

“The Cuba dream was never really about swimming,” she says. “It was about chasing my potential. Who can I be? How tough can I be? How resilient to pain can I be? More than anything, I’d have to see if the iron will that I had had as a younger athlete was gonna be there because you’re not gonna do it without a titanium will.”

The perseverance Nyad had was even more than believing she could do it. It was also believing there was no way she could *not* do it.

“Once you start something like this, there’s no space for giving up,” she says. “That’s not going to be an option, no matter what pain comes your way.”

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DON'T BE AFRAID TO FAIL

The biggest issue she dealt with on the swim was the fear of box jellyfish, which can damage your central nervous system. But there’s also sensory deprivation.

“I’m turning my head 53 times a minute to see the boat and Bonnie over to my left by about 20 feet,” she says. “I’ve got a tight cap over my head because you’re trying to keep the heat in your head. And you are very quickly into a state of dreaming and not remembering who you are and where you are.”

To help her get through 53 hours of swimming, Nyad had a playlist in her mind of 85 songs. Headphones weren’t allowed because, as Nyad says, they’re a “cheat.”

“You’ve got to have the power of and the focus of your mind to get you through these numbing hours,” she says. “There’s never such a thing as over the hump. Something could happen. You can be bit by a shark or a jellyfish 20 feet from shore. You’re never relaxed.”

Nyad recalls that on the four failed tries she made to Cuba, it was never her who waved the white flag. She never lost faith in her dream.

“Don’t be afraid to fail, chase big dreams, and you’ll find out who you are,” she says. “You’ll tap into every ounce of your potential. If you get up after you’re knocked down, and get up after you’re knocked down again, and again, and again, one day, you’ll make it to whatever your other shore is. I think that’s what I lived out loud. That is my personality day by day and that is what most people found for their own lives. They don’t want to give up on their dreams, either.”

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