

Diana Nyad's Great Regret

Endurance Icon Once Attacked a Record Cuba-to-Florida

By Sharon Terlep

Nov. 14, 2013



Diana Nyad swims from Cuba. Associated Press

In 1978, a 65-year-old Ohioan named Walter Poenisch swam from Cuba to Florida—something no human had ever done—only to encounter criticism from a young swimmer named Diana Nyad.

"He's a gimmick. In the world of sports, he's a cheat," Nyad, then 28, was quoted as saying of Poenisch in a 1978 New York Times article about him. "He does not swim by the rules."

Today, Nyad knows how Poenisch must have felt. After Nyad completed her own Cuba-to-Florida swim in September, other marathon swimmers accused her of violating the unofficial rules of the sport by wearing a face mask and body suit.

"I wish I could look up to the sky and tell Walter that I am profusely sorry," Nyad said in a recent interview.

After her swim this September, Nyad became a national hero. She received a White House welcome from President Obama, made a star appearance at Fortune's "Most Powerful Women Summit" and wants to create her own Broadway show. Earlier this month, Knopf announced that it had obtained

the rights to publish her memoir. The Florida city of Key West, where Nyad staggered ashore in September, is considering building a monument to her.

The criticism of the 64-year-old Nyad seems only to have induced sympathy for her. "People, my Lord, would you leave the woman alone," said Oprah Winfrey in a televised interview with Nyad last month.

In public appearances Nyad hasn't mentioned Poenisch or her dismissal of his record-setting swim. Back in 1978, criticism from Nyad and others cost Poenisch his only sponsor and got him lampooned in sports columns. Afterward, he disappeared from sight, and filed suit against Nyad and the International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame. "As far as I'm concerned, she helped destroy my husband's life," Faye Poenisch, the late swimmer's widow, was quoted as saying last month in *614*, a magazine in Columbus, Ohio. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Faye Poenisch declined to talk about Nyad.



As a young woman, Nyad won several open-water marathon-swimming competitions, setting a record in the 22-mile Bay of Naples race in 1974. But such victories garnered little money or recognition. So she started doing solo swims, in 1975 breaking the record for fastest swim around Manhattan Island and telling the media she was seeking fame and fortune.

That achievement helped lead to widespread media coverage, a memoir and a long career as a sports broadcaster.

Unlike competitions, solo swims aren't strictly governed. But serious marathon swimmers regard English Channel rules as the gold standard, and English Channel rules allow only a swim suit and goggles. No shark cage. No breaks aboard a boat.

When Walter Poenisch made that swim in 1978, using fins and a shark cage, Nyad publicly criticized him. Faye Poenisch

The first two people to cross the 103-mile Florida Straits from Cuba to Florida—Walter Poenisch and Susie Mulroney—used shark cages, which can provide propulsion. In addition, Poenisch used fins and took three short breaks on a boat.

None of that violated rules of the Guinness Book of Records, which until 2000 recognized Poenisch for the "longest ocean swim." But in a recent interview, Nyad said, "We can all agree that getting out onto the boat and using flippers isn't accepted."

English Channel rules would also prohibit the body suit and face mask that Nyad wore to protect herself from the potentially deadly stings of a jellyfish not found in the English Channel. Nyad also received assistance donning the non-buoyant body suit. While some other marathon swimmers assert that those factors made Nyad's feat an "assisted" swim—placing it in the same category as the Poenisch and Mulroney swims—she disagrees. "English Channel rules are not going to save your life against box jellyfish," she said. "The sports needs to take steps to bring a level of credibility to it."

That Nyad never gave credit to Poenisch or Maroney in the wake of her swim "rubs people the wrong way," said Dan Simonelli, who runs a San Diego-based organization that supports the sport. "People have done great things and have big egos, but they temper it with humility. She doesn't."

Nyad responds that she does lend praise to other swimmers and said such criticism may reflect jealousy over the extraordinary attention her swims have garnered, especially considering that her recent feat followed nearly 30 years of retirement. "I can imagine people say, 'Oh great, I've been the one training all this time and working my a— off for 15 years and she just pops out of retirement and gets all this publicity,'" she said.

Characterizing her Cuba to Florida swim as the first one that counts, Nyad has argued that the first swimmer to tackle a particular open-water course ought to set the rules for it.

In the case of the Florida Straits, the first swimmer to make that crossing was Poenisch. By trade a baker, Poenisch was a marathon open-water swimmer who spent about 15 years seeking to gain official approval from the Cuban government to swim from that country's shores to Key West. At more than 100 miles, that distance was about five times as great as the English Channel.

After Poenisch gained Cuban approval in the summer of 1978, Nyad was quoted in the Miami Herald as saying, "A man who's 65 years old and very overweight is not going to swim for two days nonstop."

In July of that year, and on his 65th birthday, Poenisch shared a pineapple juice toast with Fidel Castro, then launched into the ocean. About 130 miles and 34 hours later, he became the first person to complete that swim to Florida.

Poenisch never made any secret of his use of fins. In previous swims exceeding 90 miles, he had worn fins and yet gained official recognition from the International Swimming Hall of Fame. "The thinking was that Walter will be setting the precedent, whatever he does will be the record," Faye Poenisch said in an interview.

After his Cuba-to-Florida swim, however, the hall of fame refused to recognize the feat, and other swimmers—most notably Nyad—publicly depicted Poenisch as a cheater.

That response devastated Poenisch, who all but retired afterward, according to the swimmer's widow and his Columbus neighbor at the time, Joe Thomas. "He should have been a multimillionaire. Think of what an inspiration he could have been," said Thomas.

Fighting back, the Poenisches sued Nyad and The International Swimming Hall of Fame for defamation. As part of a settlement reached almost five years later, in 1983, Nyad and the hall of fame issued a retraction of their comments about Poenisch.

About a month after Poenisch's swim back in 1978, Nyad received approval for her own Cuba-to-Florida attempt. Using a shark cage and a double bodysuit, she made it 32 miles, 80 miles short of her goal. Even so, she won praise and appearances on national television. A Florida Sun-Sentinel headline read, "'I'm A Hero—That's What I Wanted,' Nyad Proclaims."

After succeeding on her fifth Cuba-to-Florida attempt in September, the 64-year-old Nyad stepped out of the ocean and told a mob of reporters, "You are never too old to chase your dreams."

Now, she says she regrets in particular belittling Poenisch on account of his age. "I'm almost the exact age that he was," Nyad said. "Those were foolish days in my 20s. I thought, 'If you are in your 60s, you might as well sit in a rocker and stare off into the sunset.' "

Of Poenisch, she now says: "Whatever he did, he was an incredible swimmer."