

Editor's Note

Growing Pains

Knowledge, sometimes born from debate, is good for sports



I know next to nothing about sports other than swimming. I'm an anomaly in almost any crowd—my friends tease me for not knowing what a first down is or look aghast when I suggest that the stuff you endure at a live baseball game is manufactured to distract you from the low energy level (Hey! It's time to stand up and sing now!).

Baseball, basketball, and football are so popular that many, many people know the rules of those games. Yes, there is controversy (betting, steroids, the NCAA, etc.), but the technical rules are generally understood (seemingly by everyone except me) and you can find lively, informed debate at watercoolers and in sports bars and broadcast booths around the country.

Swimming is pretty far behind the ball sports in terms of mainstream understanding, but intensive media coverage of the swimming events of the past two Olympics means your office mate—whose only previous definition of an IM was instant messaging in the 1990s—is now on a first-name basis with marquee swimmers: "Can't wait to see Michael and Ryan go at it in the 400 IM!"

Not so much for open water, or more specifically, its lesser understood and gangly cousin, marathon swimming, which is currently experiencing growing pains thanks to the media coverage and subsequent controversy that surrounded Diana Nyad's recent Cuba to Florida swim.

It didn't take long for debate to brew around Nyad's swim; within days of her staggering ashore in Florida, marathon swimming insiders began asking questions that touched off a lengthy, ongoing conversation about rules, transparency, and the very integrity of the sport. What bloomed online is a debate that most people don't have any way of participating in because marathon swimming is not a watercooler topic in most places.

Still, most nonswimmers have heard of Nyad and her swim and comment frequently to us swimmers about it. It's easy to see why her story has broad appeal: It touches on aging better, goal-setting, perseverance, and other inspirational themes that extend beyond the sport. And whether you know a lot or nothing about swimming, what she accomplished was impressive.

But marathon swimming is a sport with a rich history, traditions, and technical rules, just like other sports. The small but vocal group of experts—many of them accomplished marathon swimmers—who are asking questions about Nyad's swim have the opportunity to educate journalists, so that journalists, in turn, can educate the public when they start asking questions around the watercooler: Are you allowed to touch the boat? What is the difference between a marathon swim and an exhibition swim? What is the difference between assisted and unassisted? *When do we stand up and sing?*

There will always be debate, and that's a good thing, but knowledge is the key to informed debate. Let's hope that Nyad's swim and both its supporters and detractors bring a new level of understanding to a beautiful, sometimes brutal, sport that tests the limits of both physical and mental endurance in ways most people cannot imagine.

In this issue of *SWIMMER*, we're excited to bring you profiles of two people who have been influential in helping us understand both marathon swimming and ball sports. Associate editor (and Triple Crown marathon swimmer) Elaine K. Howley writes about Michelle Macy's amazing Ocean's Seven feat in "Swimming Life" (Page 6) and frequent contributor Jim Harper writes about legendary sports journalist and Masters swimmer John Feinstein, who credits swimming with saving his life (Page 14). Reading his profile has made me want to read more about other sports. Feinstein is a gifted writer, and that's something I can wrap my brain around, even if I don't (yet) understand the seventh-inning stretch.

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Laura Hamel, *SWIMMER* editor

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USMS NATIONAL OFFICE
655 North Tamiami Tr., Sarasota, FL 34236
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Rob Butcher
Twitter: @RobButcher_

» » Facebook: facebook.com/usmastersswimmingfanpage
» » Twitter: @MastersSwimming

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Laura Hamel
E: editor@usms.org
Twitter: @usmseditor

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Elaine K. Howley
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR: Bill Edwards
COPY EDITOR: Meg Smath

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ANTHEM COMMUNICATIONS
7101 College Blvd. Suite 400
Overland Park, KS 66210
913-894-6923
www.thisisamg.com
PRESIDENT: Tom Pokorny
ART DIRECTOR: Annie Sidesinger
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Virginia Dyer

CIRCULATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Anna Lea Matysek
Tracy Grilli
T: 800-550-SWIM (7946)
F: 941-556-SWIM (7946)
E: info@usms.org

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Kyle Deery
T: 941-556-6274
E: kdeery@usms.org

BUSINESS AND FINANCE

Susan Kuhlman
Claudia Woods

ON THE COVER

A swimmer exits the pool during the 2014 Marriott USMS Summer Nationals, held at the Marguerite Aquatic Center, in Mission Viejo, Calif. Mike Lewis/Ola Vista Photography

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