

Lynne Cox

Long-distance swimming is gender-blind. One of the sport's first superstars was Gertrude Ederle, who set the record for swimming the English Channel (14 hours, 30 minutes) at the age of 20 and returned home to a ticker-tape parade. Previously, Ederle won two bronze medals in individual events and one gold medal in a relay at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. In 1950, Florence Chadwick earned headlines when she broke Ederle's record in becoming the first woman to swim the Channel in both directions. Both are members of the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame.

More recently, Diana Nyad capped her brilliant, decade-long career in 1979 with the longest swim in history, a 102.5-mile, two-day journey from the island of Bimini (Bahamas) to Florida.

Lynne Cox may just be the greatest of them all. Born in New Hampshire, Cox grew up in Southern California. Before she had enrolled in high school, she was training daily in the Pacific Ocean. It was the beginning of a life-long love of open-water swimming. At age 14, she swam from Catalina Island to the California mainland. At age 16, she not only swam the English Channel, but shattered the men's world record.

After graduating from University of California, Santa Barbara, Cox went global. She became the first person to swim the Strait of Magellan and the first to navigate the Bering Strait, from American territory to Russia, in 38-degree water. She also swam in the disease-infested waters of the Nile River, in the shark-infested waters off the Cape of Good Hope, and in 32-degree water in Antarctica. That's right: Antarctica.

Having survived these and other aquatic adventures, Cox entered the rough-and-tumble waters of book publishing. Some 20 years after starting

her first book, she emerged with a smart, entertaining memoir about her astonishing achievements. In “Swimming to Antarctica: Tales of a Long-Distance Swimmer” (Alfred Knopf), as she details her training methods, she also attempts to answer the question that many people ask her: “Why do you do what you do?”

The answer, it seems, is both very simple and very complex: Lynne Cox swims because that means she’s alive.

Now 47, Cox spoke with SportsLetter by phone from her parents’ home in Los Alamitos, Ca.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Each of the swims you write about is so vivid, even though many of them took place years ago. Did you keep a journal?

Lynne Cox: I kept notes and kept a journal. But there are many moments that I can never forget, that are imprinted in my brain. When you train so much and are so focused on one thing, you remember a lot.

On the last re-write of the book, I cut things to the essence. I’d be swimming and thinking: ‘Explain night swimming. Oh, black-and-white photography.’ When you’re swimming, you have so much time to stretch your imagination.

SL: When did you decide to write this book?

LC: I always wanted to be a writer. I was an avid reader as a kid, since I was nine-years-old. I remember just being in awe of people who could write and move me. I wanted to be able to do that, too.

I started writing this book 21 years ago. It took incredible tenacity to get the book published. There were so many obstacles and rejection. It’s just like on a swim when you thought you’d lined up a sponsorship and then it didn’t come through. You just have to keep going.

I went through 11 major re-writes. I went through four agents and I don't know how many rejections from publishers. One publisher told me, 'I love the story, but we think you should have a ghost-writer.' Well, I didn't want a ghost-writer. I felt that this is my story and I should be the one to tell it.

Finally, I sent a 60-page outline to Anne Rice [author of, among others, "Interview with the Vampire" and a distant relative]. I basically asked her, 'Should I pursue this, or is it time to pursue something else?' She loved it — she said, 'This is a fantastic story,' — and asked me if it was okay to send it to her publisher. What was I going to do: say, 'No'? That helped me line up with my agent — and she got it . . . I brought it up to date — I condensed certain sections and added the part about the Antarctica swim — before it was published.

SL: What did you learn from your experience?

LC: I've learned to trust my own voice. I know that it's different from other writers. Really, the book is a metaphor for holding true to the dream. The essence of this process is having goals and dreams and then continuing to pursue them.

SL: What else did you do during this time?

LC: I would go and do another swim. I worked a lot of different jobs to raise money. I taught swimming. I was a massage therapist and a water therapist in Seal Beach. I worked as a substitute reference librarian in Orange County. I spent years trying to arrange the Bering Strait swim. I would ask the librarians advice about how to get a hold of [former U.S.S.R. President Leonid] Brezhnev and how to get my book published.

SL: There have been several famous female long-distance swimmers, including Gertrude Ederle. Growing up, was she an idol of yours?

LC: I knew about Gertrude, but I never met her or talked to her. I did get a chance to speak with Florence Chadwick before her death. I wrote her a note about my training methods, and she called and encouraged me. She said, 'You are right on track. Go for it.' Later, I met her at the La Jolla Rough Water Swim. She was both a great athlete and a great person.

SL: When was the first time that you remember swimming and enjoying the water?

LC: At Snow Pond in Maine — at my family's summer home — when I was 4 or 5 years old. Just the sense of looking at my hands under water and seeing them magnified. I remember looking at a leaf — and how it was green above the water and silver below the water — and seeing little flies skim across the water, looking like spiders. I had this instant fascination with the whole changing environment of the water.

SL: You played water polo in high school and college: what was that experience like compared with competing solo.

LC: I was actually the first girl in California to play high-school water polo — I played for the boys' team [at Los Alamitos High School]. The coach encouraged me to play, but the boys weren't convinced that they wanted a girl on the team. But when they saw that I worked just as hard as they did they began to accept me. My attitude was always positive. I was never 'one of the guys,' but I was a teammate.

SL: Some of your swims — like the English Channel and Catalina — were established routes. Others — like the Bering Strait — were unique. What is the difference between being the first in something and attempting to break a record?

LC: Doing a swim like the Bering Strait crossing is like climbing an unclimbed mountain — there's similar motivation to trying something new. It's just a horizontal challenge instead of a vertical one, and instead of climbing in stages over a week, you have to do it in one day. Either way it's challenging.

With routes that had never been swum before, there's so much that is unknown. With the Antarctica swim I didn't know what the tides would do and how fast would they change. I had to deal with icebergs, killer whales, and leopard seals. You can only control certain things with your preparation, and then you just have to go.

SL: Which swim do you consider your greatest?

LC: Each one because I could not have done the next one without the one before. Bering Strait did open borders between the U.S. and Russia and elevated sport to a bigger level. I worked on that — I stuck with that idea — for 11 years.

Antarctica was huge for me because I had to train in an entirely different way. I had to be in the greatest shape of my life because that was a situation where I could have hit the water and died.

SL: Many of your swims — like to Antarctica — seem about setting personal challenges for yourself. Why do you keep extending yourself? What is the challenge for you?

LC: I just know that I need to work out daily — I need to be doing that to be healthy — but I also need some focus when I work out. Having a goal focuses my attention and makes me productive. I think that pertains to my writing — I need to have a goal. The swim itself is important, of course, but part of the reason I do what I do is because it gives me a chance to go to these places. I want to see what it's like to be in Belize or wherever. I want to explore the world.

SL: Your body — and its capacity to withstand extreme cold — has been the subject of medical research: What have scientists discovered about your body that is different than “normal” people's bodies? How have these studies helped scientific research?

LC: They found that I'm able to close down the blood flow to the peripheral area — to skin, to fingers. I take that blood and throw it into the core of my body. My body says, lose the feet and hands. With other people, their blood eventually rushes out to protect their extremities. That way, they lose a lot of body heat.

When I'm swimming, I'm working at 70-80 percent of my maximum. When you work at the maximum, you create heat. I have the muscle mass to create a lot of heat. I've got body fat well distributed over my body, and the body fat acts like an internal wet-suit. I'm not really proud of that, but it allows me to do this stuff.

SL: What is it like to swim in 40-degree water?

LC: Forty-degree water will take your breath away. You have to move your arms very fast, and you do not like putting your face into the water.

SL: What about 38-degree water?

LC: It's the next leap. Once you go below 40, the feel of the cold is exponential. It's more like 40 degrees lower than 2 degrees.

SL: How do you train mentally for the swims?

LC: I do what I need to do. When I was in Argentina, I trained for eight days down there. I took me all day to psyche myself up for my daily swim. But I knew that there was going to be no time to hesitate when I did the swim, so that became part of my preparation. I would go to the edge of the water, take my shoes off, and jump into the water. When you saw me walking down to the water with my goggles on, ready to jump in, that was my mental training. I was ready, I was focused.

SL: What is the most difficult part of long-distance swimming for you: the physical aspect or the mental aspect?

LC: I can't really separate them. People have said, 'Oh, it's 90 percent mental.' Well, if you're not physically ready, you can't do it. It's all together.

One of the parts that is hard comes when you're tired and sore and hitting bad weather. You think: how long can I continue? Can I go further? Can I make progress? I mean, in the English Channel, I ended up swimming in place for an hour, making no progress because of the currents. It was liquid hell.

Actually, I try to teach people about their body's limits. Early on, when I swam in the Nile River, I got sick and nearly died. I had to stop swimming. I was disappointed for a long time, but it taught me a great lesson. You need to listen to your body. You need to know when to stop, because you can always come back.

SL: What is the most enjoyable part?

LC: That moment when it all starts happening. You train hard for months, you plan the trip, you line up sponsors, you organize the local crew, and then you jump in the water. That's when it's most enjoyable: you have the whole experience to go through.

SL: What is your training regimen?

LC: These days I spend an hour in gym doing weights and cardiovascular work. Then I spend an hour walking Cody, my yellow lab. I'll also do occasional swimming.

SL: Are you training for a swim now?

LC: There's no next swim right now. These things take time to plan, to research how to afford this.

I have other books in mind and other swims. I want to take on new challenges, do new things. Last year, I learned how to scuba dive because a lot of my friends do that. It was awkward at first, but it was neat to look at everything below the surface of the water.

SL: You still live in Southern California, near the Pacific: Could you ever live away from water? What is the attraction of water for you?

LC: No, I don't think I could. I guess I'm attracted to the sense of wide open space that doesn't have any boundaries. It's what can be. There's nothing in the way, and it's always changing depending on the wind, the light, the weather. It's the place where we're buoyant, free of earth.

I never realized the attraction until I went to visit a friend in Tulsa for ten days. I loved it, but it was . . . oh my God, so far from the ocean.