

I Thought I Could

Featuring Ann Meraw

Athlete Article



Two Remarks characterize Ann Meraw's swimming career: her coach's – "she didn't quit" and on her own, "I felt I could swim as far as I could see," and that's just what she did. Ann was almost headed for early retirement at the age of 14. The year was 1931 and she was swimming between Vancouver and Pt. Atkinson. The sickening motion of the rough water and the nauseating smell of the axel grease she'd used, combined to make her seasick – a problem she's had to combat many times since. Luckily for Canadian swimming history Ann Mundigel, as she was then, didn't quit but went on to gain 1st place, a fear she's repeated many times and she delayed her retirement for almost 50 years.

Never one for short sprints Ann started her career, at the age of 10, with a 10 mile swim across Howe Sound. When she was 13 Ann discovered her father had entered her for the Burrard Inlet PNE Swim. She was the youngest and most confused of the 79 entrants and decided to jump in the first boat which came by, but she stayed in the water and came first in the high school division.

Not belonging to any club she had no official amateur standing and couldn't receive her awards. The following day Vancouver Amateur Swim Club accepted her hurried application and acquired one it's most famous members. Walking off with first prize became quite a habit during her time with the club. Impressed by her daughter's talent, Ann's parents moved from steady employment in Britannia Beach to an uncertain future in Vancouver so that she could be closer to the facilities she needed.

During the late 1930's Ann strengthened her swimming skills by winning Royal Life Saving Society medals and awards from both the Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance societies. In 1934, at the age of 17 she turned professional in order to pit herself against a stronger competitive field. She became a member of the "World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation" and took part in the C.N.E. Toronto marathons in 1934 and 36. In 1938 she decided to do battle with the strong tidal currents in Howe Sound by swimming from Vancouver to Bowen Island. Everyone said it couldn't be done in that direction, which just added to her determination. All Ann lost in the attempt was her swimsuit! She added to her growing reputation as a long distance swimmer. During the swim her motivation was increased when someone in the accompanying boat started to sing, "I put my head down and tore right in. Anything to stop him singing. I can't stand crooners."

It worked – Ann completed the 14 treacherous miles in 7 hours and 14 minutes and remains the only person to have swum that route. Encouraged by this success Ann's coach, Pat Roach of Toronto, was making plans for her to

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swim the English Channel but war intervened and Ann gave up that attempt, "I didn't want to be torpedoed."

However the war did further her career in other directions; in 1943 she had the distraction of becoming Canada's first woman lifeguard, in charge of 5 other women guards. A Local paper claimed that "attendance of male swimmers should reflect a definitive uptrend this season." Her list of firsts continues when, in 1945, Ann inaugurated the Water Babies Programme at the Hastings Community Centre, the first of its kind in Canada. She didn't entirely neglect her own swimming and still trained for the C.N.E. "Exhibition Swim" in 1949, when she established the professional qualifying time for entry into long distance swim competitions at 5 hours for 10 miles.

If Ann makes all this sound easy lets take a look at her training schedule for the next hurdle in her career. She swam twice a day; in the morning for one full hour with iron weights on her arms and a rubber harness to give herself something to work against. After that warm up she'd probably spend two hours working on a kickboard. So as to not get stiff in the evening she'd go for another nice long swim. All this was to get back in shape after taking a few years off to bring up her son, Bill, with the result that in 1956 when she made her first attempt to conquer Lake Okanagan the headlines declared "Housewife Prepares For Lake Swim"

Not everyone thought that was a great idea. Some people called it "impossible", others "foolish" and "dangerous" even "disgusting". Ann went ahead anyways. Coach Cookie Ryan hearing that she was to swim from Kelowna to Penticton during Regatta week commented "Goodness me there are a few rough spots on the highway but I didn't think it was that bad." But anyone who knows her knows that Ann doesn't take the easy way out.

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Undaunted by her failure she tried again the next year and again set a record even though she didn't reach Penticton. This time she swam 32 miles in 16 hours 14 minutes establishing both the women's and open speed records. Finally in 1958 she swam the length of the lake and although Pat Wicks set off earlier that day and finished first, she swam only 34 miles. Ann emerged from the water with 3 new records: by swimming 55 miles in 32 hours 12 minutes she now had the women's and open endurance records. Nearly 30 years later her distance and speed records still stand.

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Not one to let her talents stand idle, Ann had been involved in many varied coaching programmes since her life-guard days during the war. She wanted to pass on her skills to young people and apart from the Water Babies Programme she taught grade 5 pupils for the school board then moved to the Parks Board to teach all levels from preschoolers, polio victims to fire department instructor and air stewardesses. She coached and trained Bill Slater and Ken Jensen, turning both from short into long distance swimmers and medal winners.

In 1977 she changed hats yet again and became technical advisor for a series of "The Beach-combers", teaching the actress the correct strokes, showing the coaching boat how to help the swimmer, explaining in-water feeding techniques and even acting as stand-in (or swim-in) on the long shots.

Finally Ann decided to take a long earned rest and retired in 1980.