

I Thought I Could

Featuring Ann Meraw

Interview

What inspired you to start swimming?

ANN: I thought I could swim as far as I could see! That's more or less how I got started. I swam 10 miles (16 Km.) when I was 10 years old. I entered a 2 ½ mile (4 Km.) swim race and I came first and wound up with two trophies and thirteen prizes out of this swim. They had me up on stage and they said, "Do you have an amateur card?" I said "No, what's that?" They asked, "Well, do you belong to a swimming club?" I said, "I don't belong to a swimming club." So they said, "Sorry we can't give you your awards." With that, the president of the Vancouver Swimming Club rushed up on the stage and said, "If she joins the club right now will she get her awards?" They said, "Yes." So I got mixed up in swimming.

When did you decide to start to swim long distances?

ANN: When I got into the Vancouver Swimming Club. No one could beat me after it got a half a mile (.8 Km). Well, I went up to mile (1.6 Km) swims. Then I started swimming distance and I kept making it longer and longer.

Let's talk about your Bowen Island swim.

ANN: When I swam to Bowen Island, people thought it couldn't be done. I did it in 7 hours and 14 minutes. In 1934, I swam across the Strait of Juan De Fuca, and I swam around Stanley Park.

Could you talk about the Okanagan Lake Swim?

ANN: I was asked if I'd try Okanagan Lake, to try and break the 32 mile (51 Km.) record across Lake Ontario. I decided to swim and it wasn't too favourable on the first try, but I did 42 miles (68 Km.). I established a World Endurance Record for women at that time and I carried on the following year. In 1958, I tried the long one of 55 miles (89 Km.), which I did in 32 hours and 10 minutes. I had a challenge from Bill Sadler of Little Rock who was a world champion. He challenged me \$5000. He started with me but was taken out at 12 O' clock at night because the water was too rough and too heavy a chop, so he lost \$5000. I went on and continued to swim, breaking a new World Distance Record, the Men's Endurance Record, the Women's Endurance Record-which was my own-and set a new Distance Record for Women, Men, and Endurance for both Women and Men.

When you were swimming for long, long periods of time, what kept you going?

ANN: You sort of forget everything else and you keep your swimming rhythm. I used to hum tunes to myself, like "Sidewalks of New York". It was good timing. If you did a slow song to yourself, your stroke would slow down. You'd hum something to yourself that was a little faster than your stroke and you'd try and keep up with it.

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Would you say that your father had a lot to do with your father being a swimmer?

ANN: Oh yes. He was a good swimmer himself. And he played pro baseball and he was top 10 in bowling and a top swimmer, just really into sports. So he saw that I could swim and he kept it up and got me into competition.

What was your father's name?

ANN: William Meraw. He started the first professional baseball on the whole West Coast. He played for the state of Minnesota, which is now the Twins. He got \$225 a month as his salary and he would turn in his grave if he saw what they got today [laughs]. We always followed the baseball.

Can you tell me what it feels like to lose that much weight swimming?

ANN: Actually, when you're swimming, it's no different from track and field. You go in the water the same as you would running. On that first swim, with the water being warm and trying to break a record, I was swimming pretty fast. I took 17 lbs. off in one swim and 25 hours and 1 minute, 17 lbs. less. Now, on the other 2 swims, I never lost an ounce because I had followed exactly what I was to eat, right up to the day I swam. The day before I swam, on the other 2 swims, I ate about 4 hours before I swam. A half hour before I went in the water, I had some macaroni and cheese because it would dissolve in your system. When you swim, if you feel that you're going to get seasick, you drink ginger ale, that will stop it right away. Before you go in cold water, to keep the circulation going you take beehive corn syrup, a small quantity in a paper cup and your circulation will keep up even though you hit cold water. On that first 42 mile swim, they forgot to feed me. You're supposed to feed me every 4 hours, you see, so that helped me lose 17 lbs. Anyway, every four hours, they'd give you a small glass that looked like a milkshake but it was everything you needed. It was the equivalent of a steak and you'd swallow that, anywhere from 9 to 20 seconds, and get right swimming again. If you didn't, you'd lose your timing. If you lose your timing, you would be out of the water.

Do you think there was any difference between how you were treated and how some of the men might have been treated?

ANN: Nope, they treated all as one. There was no difference between men and women. They had a man swim and a woman swim at the same time, and if you beat the man, you were classed as first in the women and first in the open all age. So in other words, you'd get 2 firsts and the announcer would take the prize money away from the man. That was the big thing. [Laughs] But they didn't pay like they do today. And then advertising, I did Ginger Ale and Corn Syrup and Jansen, Minnie Mouse. They didn't put a bathing suit on the market that I hadn't tested, and all I got was the bathing suit. And for the Ginger Ale, all I got was a case of Ginger Ale every month and a case of Corn Syrup every month. A far cry from what they get today. I was born too soon! [Laughs]

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What do you consider your greatest achievement?

ANN: My greatest achievement was the 32 mile swim when I broke the record for both the men and women. For 32 miles, I averaged 31 minutes and 46 seconds a mile for 32 miles.

In the work that you doing today, with all of the things that you do, can you talk about the things you're most proud of or most interested in?

ANN: Well, there's quite a few. I work with the Police Commission, Hospital Foundation, the Community Policing, the RCMP, and I am with the Hall of Fame, of course. I also give Wellness and Keep Fit seminars, and am President of the Strata. And, as I say, I'm at City Hall more than the 8 Councillors are, I should be a member of the Council.

Can you tell me a little about your experience on The Beachcombers?

ANN: Oh, I was Technical Advisor on The Beachcomber for a spell. It was quite interesting. They'd pick me up in Burrard Inlet, fly me up to Gibsons, and then put me in a power boat. They'd do their filming, and it was supposed to be a long swim you see. The swim scenes, I would do. And the other part, I would simply advise them where a boat should be and where a swimmer should be. Such things as that. So I looked at myself on it, and then it took me from an airplane and I looked like a white splash on the water.

Can you talk a little about your days teaching?

ANN: The Vancouver Parks Board hired me. I was the head instructor at Crystal Pool. I was there for quite a spell and I saw the necessity of numerous programs. I started with the Water Babies and I had children up to 3 years old that could swim the crawl for 25 metres. Then I went to preschool, and then I went to Aquatic Keep Fit, but AquaFit is a spin off. I had the Fire Department for the City, and I had to teach them scuba diving and life saving. If they get called to the waterfront, they had to be able to go in and save someone, if necessary.

I was with the Parks Board, of course, so I had numerous jobs for them in the pool. And I started lap swimming, as a first in Canada. With the Aquatic Keep Fit, I gave them land exercises, pool exercises, and got them in good shape before they started lap swimming. And, of course, I was with the Royal Life Saving; still with them, I've been 72 years with the Royal Life Saving.

I taught them Life Saving and I used to demonstrate the Life Saving throughout BC at all the resorts, summer months and the weekends. Our club would give a demonstration of Life Saving and then we girls had a team, eight of us, and we started synchronized swimming. Synchronized swimming, of course, is now in the Olympics. So all of them learned from us really like Kincaid in New York. He picked it up from us and it just travelled all over until it got in the Olympics.

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Can you tell me about life guarding and some of your accomplishments there?

ANN: First, I saved lives before I got into life guarding in the city. But before that at Britannia Mines, some young kids were on a log and couldn't swim, and had got caught in the tide and a couple of them fell off it. Anyway, I wasn't very old myself but I managed to get them all. When I was five and a half, I saved my sister. She had wandered out of the backyard and we always had water right at our door. We had a float in front where people would fish, and there was a big box there where you put your fish in because it was under water. But if you left it out, there was just a hole. Course, how she got on the float, I'll never know 'cause there were huge logs with planks across. She'd fallen in the hole and I was warned about ever going there myself.

However, I went there, and they were looking through bushes and everywhere else for her. I saw this big, white object under the float so I got in the water and reached in and got it out. It was my sister. She was on her back with one of those dresses that had ballooned up with the air in it. And that was with the Life Saving, I'd teach people how to save themselves with their own clothes. They could use a blouse or a pair of shorts or anything like slacks. You can blow them up just by flipping them and get them full of air and that will hold you up. I had quite a session on that.

Then I saved my brother off the same float. It had been raining and he had a big rain hat and a raincoat down to his rubber boots. He had caught a fish and he cleaned it on the float, stepped on that and sunk in the water. He fell in, and sunk with the heavy boots. I got him up to the surface and my mother came running. As he kicked his foot up in the air out, she grabbed his foot while his head was down under water. By this time some neighbours, twelve of them, yelling at my mother, "Let his feet go. Get his head up." She let his foot go, but his shoes filled with water and he went down to the bottom. I had to go back and get him, 'til I brought him up to the top where someone else got him.

I went into one at English Bay...I was sitting at the beach waiting to go and swim myself. A Parks Board Engineer from the Crystal Pool rode the boat, and I was sitting waiting for him. There's an area where you're not supposed to dive off the tower, where the float is, but someone dove off and hit the cable that holds the float and didn't come up from the water. I dove in and I found him on the bottom. He was unconscious. The next one was right in the Crystal Pool, where the lifeguard had gone off duty 10 minutes early, and she dove off the high board. She actually broke her back but managed to get to the ladder. I'd had a class on the end part of the pool and told them to go. I looked around the pool, I found her. I got her out and got her up, and got an ambulance for her and sent her to the hospital.

So you had 7 lives that you saved as a lifeguard and...

ANN: While Life Guarding, I only saved 7 people, but I saved 63 in total. When I was vacationing or at peer trials, I

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went as far as Key West and then was in Florida. It all stands out in my mind: a couple was swimming and they got over their head. Down there the water is shallow and you shuffle your feet in the water so if there's any stingrays around they will get up and leave. But they swam in that area and they went over the top of them and they panicked. The wife wasn't as good a swimmer as her husband and she grabbed ahold of him. Well, he couldn't hold her and I had to rescue both of them. That always stood out in my mind because that was their own fault, what they did. Lots of people do things their own fault but that was warned about stingrays, you see, but they didn't follow the rules.

And the one in Key West stood out in my mind too because we fished off the long floats going out and they have rafts going out over the water. Well, this man was on his stomach trying to get his line that he'd caught into one of the pilings. He reached over to find it, fell in, and couldn't swim. I'm in my Sunday clothes vacationing, but I had to jump in and save him. Just happened we wandered down on this pier to have a look at what kind of fish they were catching and I wound up in the water myself! [Laughs] I got him out without any trouble.

Do you still swim?

ANN: Oh yes, and water ski.

I know you swim in the ocean, just tell some of the encounters you had with sea life?

ANN: Oh, well I had a strange one where I got stung by a jellyfish, the type with the big long tail. And I had what looked like a ringworm, a running sore for six bites after. Then I was followed by a shark one time but it didn't bother me. Followed right alongside 'til I got to the shore. When I go to swim every morning from English Bay to Kits, Jericho, Second Beach and back to English Bay, a seal would pick me up and get me atop behind my feet at Kits Beach. He'd follow me to Jericho Beach, and I wouldn't see him again. The next morning, same thing - he wanted to play, he'd roll around under the water, come up in front or behind. I just kept swimming and then he'd follow behind my feet. [Laughs] But that was about all, I never had any problems.

If you were going to tell young women, or give them some advice to become an athlete, what kind of advice would you give them?

ANN: Well, first of all, I would ask them if there was any particular sport they were interested in. Then I'd say, well now, have you ever tried this or have you ever tried that? I'd get them involved until they found they could do something. When they found out they could do one particular sport, they'd pick one they liked and I would even get them started on it until they carried on and were able to carry on in their different fields.

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So you think it's important for them to be taken by a sport or...?

ANN: Oh yes. When I ran special classes for women, Keep Fit, Life Saving, and you know, weeks I gave them, so that they could carry on with most any sport. I had the men's, businessmen's classes starting. These were all firsts and they had weights to the incline board, land exercises and pool exercises that were tougher in water than the land because you're forcing yourself to do things you normally wouldn't do.

I did want you to talk a little bit about the first women's softball team in Vancouver. Can you talk a little bit about that?

ANN: Well, I started out with Britannia High School and I played baseball for them. And I played follow up field hockey and then I got mixed up with another baseball team—it was the Black & Whites call day. And they had me in as shortstop. In the meantime I was also playing for Britannia High's field hockey team and I carried on and played for UBC. I played 6 years, field hockey too. That's just one of the other sports I did.

Ann, how do you want to be remembered?

ANN: Well, I'd sort of like to be remembered as...have started a lot of people...as a first into the future, what they were going to do. And, amongst some papers I've left with you, you'll see one from George Burrows, Head of Parks & Recreation, where he said, "Worldwide, people owe their future to what [I] have taught them over the years." And I always tried to teach...people something where they would improve and be able to get on a better job than they were actually working on. Mostly in the sports field, but there are many fields open in that field. So.

So you want to be remembered as someone who inspired people?

ANN: Yes, I tried to inspire people for their betterment in the future. And I taught, pretty well all fields in Sports & Rec. And swimming happened to be one, that I liked myself. [Laughs]

How would your life have been different had you not had sport in it?

ANN: Oh, I still think it would have been with sports some way or other, because I was always involved in it, and that's what I always saw because of my father was into sports. Now my mother wasn't any type of an athlete at all. But my dad was involved in most all sports and my brothers too. My brother had to keep an eye on me, and was quite a bit older. If he played football, I played it. It didn't matter what he did, I had to do it. I was involved in what the boys would be doing. [Laughs] That's how I got involved really with baseball and high jump because I could high jump at that time too. My brother wasn't going to watch me with a bunch of girls, so I had to do what he was doing. [Laughs]