



AGELESS WONDER

Elaine Howley talks to a swimming hero from the 1950s who's still going strong...

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▶▶ At 85-years-young, legendary professional marathon swimmer Greta Andersen still cuts a lean, bronzed figure, not much different to the persona she cultivated in the 1950s and 1960s as a dominant force in open water swimming. She was fierce then, and she's still fierce now, quick to laugh with a raspy gruffness in her voice, tinged with good cheer at the bright reminiscence of the incredible experiences she's had over the years. Man, does this woman have stories to tell.

Born into an athletic family in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1927, Andersen did not start out a swimmer. "My dad was a gymnast, my brother a cyclist, and my father said I had better learn how to swim. I was 15 years old, and I didn't know anything about swimming. I was kind of embarrassed that I couldn't swim." Her father taught her the basics, but he wasn't a strong swimmer either so couldn't help with perfecting her technique. For that, he decided to put her on a swim team.

And not just any swim team. Andersen tried out for the top team in Denmark, coached by Else Jacobsen, the Olympic Bronze medallist in the 200m breaststroke at the 1932 Games held in Los Angeles. At the first tryout session, Jacobsen asked Andersen if she could swim 50 metres. Andersen hadn't yet mastered how to breathe during freestyle, but she was game to try.

"I swam the whole 50 metres holding my breath," she says.

Jacobsen was pleased and told Andersen, "You've got big lungs," and with that, she was on the team. Within six months of training, she was ranked third in freestyle events in Denmark.

"I have a talent," she explains simply.

A natural talent of unprecedented proportion, Andersen dominated the competition. Andersen rose to prominence on the sporting scene in war-time Europe, and against the backdrop of German encroachment on neighboring countries, she racked up medals and trophies from major international swim meets as an amateur competitor. She rattles off a list of meets: Scandinavian Championships, European Championships, the Olympics, and many more impressive events. At the top of her sprinting game, Andersen swam in the 1948 Olympic Games held in London and earned a Gold medal for the 100m freestyle and a Silver in the 4 x 100m freestyle relay.

"I was the fastest swimmer in the world for about eight years," she says, and in 1949, she set the world record in the 100-yard freestyle.

"I never thought about marathon swimming then," she says. "That became a big item later on."

AMERICAN CHAPTER

By 1953, Andersen was still swimming and travelling all over for big meets including the World Championships that were held in California that year, but she started to realise that while the medals and trophies were nice, she couldn't eat them. "When you're an amateur, you don't make a dime. I got a lot of medals and flowers I donated to hospitals, but that's not money, so I had to figure out how to do something professional."

A Danish rice farmer saw her swim at the meet in California, and offered to become her sponsor if she wanted to stay in the United States. "So he became my sponsor. That's how I became a citizen here in the United States." All of Andersen's amateur pool records and wins were achieved under the Danish flag, while her marathon swimming achievements came under the American flag she says.

Andersen adjusted to life in America quickly and settled right into the aquatics scene in Southern California, where she still lives

A GOLDEN DECADE IN THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

Beginning in 1950, the Daily Mail sponsored a cross-English Channel race from France to England that attracted some of the top open water marathon swimmers from around the world. Capitalising on the public's interest in open water swimming during the sport's golden years, the Daily Mail enticed swimmers with a £1,000 purse; entries poured in.

According to Conrad Wennerberg's seminal 1974 history of marathon swimming, *Wind, Waves, and Sunburn*, the Daily Mail dropped the series in 1952 after a fiasco at the 1951 race's awards ceremony. Several Egyptian swimmers protested about an article critical of the Egyptian King that appeared in the sponsoring paper and walked off the stage in front of an international audience causing deep embarrassment to the newspaper's management. Without a financial backer, there could be no race in 1952.

The following year, however, Billy Butlin came to the rescue. Butlin, owner of the Butlin's Holiday Camps and a man Andersen refers to as a "multi-millionaire," stepped in to run the races by offering thousands of pounds in prize money and free accommodation to competitors. Between 1953 and 1959, dozens of marathon swimmers started one or more of Butlin's Channel Races, with varying degrees of success. Andersen won the race outright in 1957 and again in 1958. She was the first and only female winner and is also the only person to ever win two Channel races.

By 1960, the heyday of both Butlin's parks and the races had waned. There have not been any organised, professional swimming races across the English Channel since the last Butlin's race in 1959 when Andersen claimed first place among the women.

ANDERSEN CONSISTENTLY BEAT THE WORLD'S TOP PROFESSIONAL MEN

today. Having been trained in Denmark at a world-class physical education school, Andersen was well equipped to teach swimming and gymnastics in the U.S. and she began teaching at the local YWCA while still competing as an amateur.

Around that same time, professional marathon swimming was enjoying its heyday, with big races and bigger prize purses all over the world. She thought she should look into it. "I learned marathon swimming would pay me better than working at the YWCA, so I started training in Long Beach. I had to think about making a living, and why not do swimming? That's what I could do, so I did it." Her first event was in Canada in 1954, "and of course that was a big race and the prize money was \$10,000 or \$15,000, and that was a lot of money in those days."

Making the leap from sprinter to marathon swimmer was not difficult, Andersen says. "If you're a good swimmer, you're a good swimmer. I have the talent. I'm high on the water, swimming on the top." She says her training changed a bit when she turned pro, but not as much as one might expect. "I just had to swim about 10 miles a day to be one of the best. As an amateur, I'd swim a lot, too, but it would be more like two hours a day sprinting. It's just different training" ▶▶

Andersen swam big marathon races in South America, Canada, and Italy, among other far-flung destinations, and also took part in several of the storied Butlin's Cross Channel races in the 1950s, winning in 1957 and 1958. "Then [Butlin] shipped me the trophy. It's all pure silver and worth probably over \$100,000. He air-mailed it to me special." Andersen still has that massive trophy, which she brought to the Global Open Water Swimming conference in Long Beach last September. It's almost as big as she is.

LADIES FIRST

While she was busy swimming head-to-head against men in professional races, Andersen was also inadvertently changing the perception of sporting women in a post-War society that encouraged the 'fairer sex' to be obedient and meek wives. (She's been married to John Sonnichsen for nearly half a century; he's a Hungarian-born medical doctor who's still in practice.) Although in most races, men and women were scored separately, Andersen consistently beat the world's top professional men anyway. She was a force to be reckoned with and a strong woman who gave many men pause.

In one of her most dominant events, the around Atlantic City race in New Jersey where she placed first among the women seven times between 1956 and 1963, Andersen also finished as high as second against the men's field when she stopped the clock less than 20 minutes behind winner Herman Willemse of Holland in 1961. Fearless, there was no competitor she wouldn't take on, and no one she couldn't square off against in her vibrant, sassy way.

Of all the big swims she did, including the first ever double-crossing of the Catalina Channel, Andersen says her greatest triumph in the open water came in 1962 when she won a cross-Lake Michigan race from Chicago to Kenosha, Wisconsin. She recounts with glee that the mighty Ted Erickson was the closest swimmer to her and was still 10 miles behind when she finished the 50-mile race after some 31 hours in the water.

"I lost 30 pounds, but I spoke to the newspapers afterwards and was still in good shape. It was a long swim, and Lake Michigan is not that hot. There were 100,000 people on the shore when I finished. That's the longest swim I ever did." For her efforts she won \$10,000 and a car. She says her several English Channel crossings were also challenging, primarily because of the variable weather and water conditions, but that the Lake Michigan swim was far-and-away her greatest accomplishment.

Conversely, Andersen cites an aborted attempt to become the first person to swim the Molokai Channel as her greatest loss in open water. "I was swimming in a shark cage. I was afraid of the big sharks in the Molokai. After I swam for six hours, the cage was swinging forward and back and up and down like a pendulum because of the rough seas for which the crossing has become infamous.

"I started vomiting, and I told them to get me out of that shark cage." Andersen says she was almost halfway across the channel, so the decision was made to drop the cage. "I swam in the free water, and then when I got four miles from shore, I got surrounded by sharks. I thought, 'I can't believe it! They were circling me.'" As the sharks circled closer, Andersen's crew determined the risk was too great, and they pulled her from the water. "That was very upsetting," she says. "I had big sponsorships, and all kinds of things. It was all dropped, and for some reason, I didn't want to go back. Someone else—a swimmer not in my class—did it later. I could have done it, but for the circumstances. I decided to forget about the Molokai."

Greta Andersen today



Photo © Phil White

I LEARNED MARATHON SWIMMING WOULD PAY ME BETTER THAN WORKING AT THE YWCA, SO I STARTED TRAINING IN LONG BEACH

PASSING THE TORCH

Though Andersen left the world of competitive swimming in 1966, her entire life has revolved—and continues to today—around the sport and her passion for it. She founded the Greta Andersen Swim School in Los Alamitos, California, in 1960, to teach children and adults to swim. She still teaches, and some of her most remarkable students are babies, who at just five or six months of age are able to swim clear across the pool (yes, the long way) on their own with no adult assistance whatsoever. She believes that comfort around the water is very important for everyone, particularly children who live near the ocean or in homes with pools.

These days, Andersen spends all day most days in the pool teaching but does not swim for fun or competition. Rather, she applies her talents to passing her passion along to the next generation, a vocation that keeps her young and vigorous. "I could go for 10 hours a day. That's my life. Swimming is my life. I can't ask for anything more. It's been a lot of fun and given me a lot of friends." ●

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, freelance writer and open water swimmer **Elaine Howley** has completed the Triple Crown of open water swimming and helps organise the annual Boston Light Swim. You can read more about her long distance and ice swimming adventures at her blog, blog.talesofthebeerbaby.com