

SWIMMING HISTORY

SISTER SWIMMERS

Dynamic aquatic duos prove that blood is thicker than water.

By Elaine K Howley

Marathon swimming has long been a family affair, and as such, siblings have often grabbed headlines for incredible feats of fearless endurance. From the English-Australian Cavill family, who broke virtually every record there was to set in the late 1800s, to Ida and Buster Elinosky, who sped around Manhattan while literally tied together in the early 20th century, several notable families have made a lasting mark on the sport.

But there's one particular familial relationship that seems especially well-suited to the vagaries of marathon swimming: sisters. Something powerful often happens between two young women raised in the same home – they become each others' strongest allies and protectors, but also know exactly which buttons to press to get a response. Part built-in training buddy, part fiercest rival. Perhaps it's that intimate knowledge of the inner world of the other that helps sisters succeed in a sport so entrenched in solitude. Whatever the reason, several notable pairs of swimming sisters have done some incredible things in open water, with each others' support and encouragement, and a good measure of competition along the way.

GOING FOR GOLDING

In the late 19th and early 20th

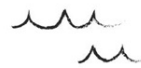
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“The older sister walked ahead of the younger so the younger one always knew where to go. The older one took the younger to the river where they floated on their backs like dead men. The older girl would say: Dunk your head under a few inches, then open your eyes and look up at the sun. The younger girl: I’ll get water up my nose. The older: C’mon, do it. And so the younger girl did it and her whole world filled with light.”

— Jandy Nelson, “The Sky is Everywhere”



century, two young sisters from the appropriately named Bath Beach section of Staten Island, New York, rose to stardom in the swimming world. Two of four children born to Mr and Mrs Stephen C Golding, Ethel and Elaine Golding “have been taught the art of swimming in all its phases, Miss Ethel having become particularly expert,” crowed the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in May 1901. At the time, Ethel was about 20 years old, but her younger sister Elaine was reportedly just 7 (estimations of her age vary widely, and she was apparently quite cagey her entire life about her true age) when she began showing signs that she might one day eclipse her pace-setting sister who had already claimed the title of “champion swimmer of Long Island and New York... It is believed that before long Elaine will be crowding her big sisters and even her brother for their honors, for she has already developed a degree of skill and endurance which is little short of marvelous.”

Ethel’s champion status earned her wide recognition and respect and, in 1901, newspapers around the country began carrying articles by her that described swimming and water safety techniques to other women. Sadly, Ethel died in March 1904 at age 23 of Bright’s disease, an inflammatory kidney condition that’s now called glomerulonephritis.

As it turns out, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle reporter who predicted that Elaine would rival her sisters and brother was right, and she soon eclipsed

Ethel’s legacy. In 1902, Elaine began making headlines for “performing some remarkable feats of endurance” including a swim across the Narrows between Staten Island and Fourth Avenue, a busy waterway that today is spanned by the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. Continued first place finishes at various competitions around the New York area pushed her to the forefront of women’s swimming and, by 1908, the same year she won a race across the Hudson River at Tappan Zee, “Elaine was viewed as such a paragon of female athleticism” that



she was asked to undergo a series of quasi-scientific tests measuring the effect of administered oxygen before a race, writes Lisa Bier in her 2011 book, “Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women’s Swimming, 1870-1926.”

In 1911, Elaine swam the 14 miles from Manhattan’s Battery to Coney Island’s Steeplechase Pier where she was greeted by a large crowd. She recovered from the 6-plus-hour effort with a hearty dose of beef broth and ice cream, tools of her trade, Bier writes. “Elaine was a particularly frank individual, and freely admitted that while many women took up swimming for the sake of their figures, that wasn’t her concern. ‘Although I swim probably more than any woman of my age, I am sorry to say it has never kept me slim. But I happen to be a heavy type of person. I was heavy when I was a champion, too, and one of the first things I used to do after winning a race was to sit down and eat four big slices of brick ice cream. Flesh, of course, is not a handicap in swimming. Some of the best swimmers are heavy.’”

In the culmination of her storied swimming career, Elaine set sail for Central America in 1913 and undertook a five-day staged swim through the newly completed Panama Canal. She was unable to swim all sections of it, and was burnt badly by the sun, but her absolutely gruelling adventure made her world-famous.

THE SISTERS SHEFFIELD

Around the same time that the Golding sisters were claiming titles on the East Coast, the Sheffield sisters were tearing up the Pacific coast. Born a year apart, Nita and younger sister Lyba dominated the local swimming scene around their Venice, California home. Unsatisfied with shorter sprints along the beach, on 20 August 1911, Lyba and Nita, then 17 and 18 years old, swam across the treacherous Golden Gate in San Francisco in 43 and 46 minutes respectively, cheered on by some 5,000 spectators. Their success in that event led to wide acclaim and the understanding that it isn’t always the older sister who introduces the younger to the wonders of swimming; sometimes the little sister leads the way.

Amid the commotion over their success, an October 1911 San Francisco Sunday Call article told the



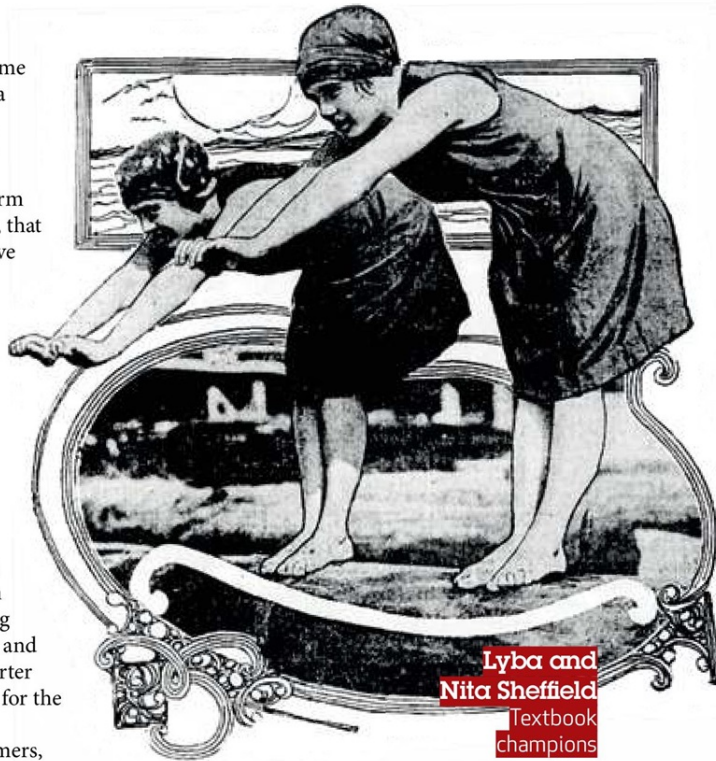
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← story of how the family came to live along the California coast. As a younger child, Lyba had been diagnosed with an undisclosed "handicap," likely some form of consumptive condition, that required the family to move to the coast, to "see what salt water, fresh air, and sunshine would do for her" in extending her life expectancy beyond the year most doctors predicted. Instead, the southern California climate seemed to more than agree with her, and she soon became a champion swimmer and a certified water nymph. "In the doorway stood a young girl, golden brown, sturdy and radiating health," the reporter noted upon meeting Lyba for the first time.

Not just fantastic swimmers, the Sheffield sisters also dominated in rowing and were chosen to join the women's freshman crew at the University of Southern California in 1912. Later that summer, they reportedly completed a 50-mile walk near Lake Tahoe in 15 hours. The two went on to win many races and both became swimming teachers, penning the 1920 book "Swimming Simplified," as they did most everything else: Together. Billed as a scientific textbook on proper swimming technique, the manual showcased the knowledge of two "expert girl swimmers," who by the time the book was published were in their late 20s.

TEAM RIVARD

Although other dynamic sisterly duos have made their mark on the sport since the Sheffields and the Goldings, few have been as youngly formidable as the Rivard sisters of Springfield, New Hampshire. Over the past couple seasons, Vera, age 14, and Margaret, 11, have completed some age-defying feats of stubbornness and stamina.



Lyba and Nita Sheffield
Textbook champions

It all started with simple water safety – the family lives on a small lake and mom, Darcie DeBlois-Rivard, and dad, Kevin Rivard, wanted their kids to be safe around the water. But as swimmers often do, Vera began

looking across the water and wondering. Could she swim that half-mile to the other side? That "mini-challenge," as Vera calls it, escalated quickly.

In 2014 when she was 10, she swam the 3-mile Caspian Swim event in northern Vermont.

The following year, she swam 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6-mile courses in Caspian

Lake, Lake Willoughby and Lake Memphremagog, also in Vermont. By 2016, the 12-year-old had graduated to finishing 19th overall in the 16-kilometre Kingdom Swim and second in the 5-mile Lake Willoughby Swim, along with a long list of other accomplishments. In 2017, she finished fifth in the 25-kilometre Border Buster in 7 hours, 15 minutes. In July 2018, Vera swam the 25-mile length of Lake Memphremagog, becoming at age 14

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the youngest person ever to complete the transnational crossing that finishes in Magog, Quebec.

Vera's rise has been nothing short of incredible, but hot on her heels in cold water is her younger sister Margaret who started pool racing at age 4. In 2015 at age 8, she became the youngest person to swim the 3-mile Caspian Lake event. Since then, she's progressively climbed the ladder, ticking off ever longer events in varying conditions. In 2018, Margaret finished the 25-kilometre Border Buster event in Vermont, bounding up the beach all smiles like she'd just completed a lap across their home pond.

The Rivard sisters might be amazingly mature and articulate, but they're still kids and they're still siblings, and a good-natured ribbing shows up in flashes throughout the conversation as the two talk about their swimming and their relationship over an early dinner snuck in before swim practice. "They're best friends most of the time until they're in the same lane, then it's a free-for-all," Darcie says.

There's always a why, and for the Rivard sisters, it seems the why is also the who. The two are swimmers and sisters and they swim together. It's just what they do.

Being the older sister, Vera started swimming first and loves the challenge of marathon swimming – the tougher the conditions, the more focused and engaged she becomes. For Margaret, the motivation right now is less internal and more sibling rivalry.



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Vera Rivard



Margaret Rivard

LOOK FOR TEAM RIVARD TO CONTINUE TOPPING THE PODIUM AT THEIR FAVORITE EVENTS IN VERMONT

"I'm just trying to beat her," she says, with a toothy grin pointed at her sister. The three-year age difference puts Margaret at a disadvantage currently, but in a few years' time, Vera will need to watch out for the young nipper who finished 10th in the 500-yard freestyle at a regional championship swim meet in 2018.

Although it might be tempting to write off the two young phenoms' success as being driven by their parents, that's not the case in this family. Darcie and Kevin are working hard just to keep up with their progenies' proclivities and seem perplexed as to the source of this deep well of love for swimming. Although she'd swum for recreation, Darcie was largely unaware of the range of competitive open water opportunities

before Vera started showing a talent for it. "I did the half mile across [their home lake] with them, but then they got too fast. So we bought a kayak," she laughs, adding that she'd never been in a kayak before. Necessity is the mother of all things, so this mum quickly got up to speed and has since supported both her daughters on multi-mile events all over New England, spending more than 16 hours steadfastly paddling along beside Vera during the 25-mile In Search of Memphre event.

Though they haven't made any major decisions about next big swims, look for Team Rivard to continue topping the podium at their favorite events in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. And keep an eye on the broadsheets for more impressive news of these feisty young women. Both their worlds are filled with light, and that's largely because of each other 🌟

