

Swimming from Cuba to Key West

The role of kayaks in Diana Nyad's pursuit of a dream

Don McCumber

On September 2, 2013, Diana Nyad stumbled onto Smathers Beach in Key West, afterswimming 110 miles from Havana, Cuba. A fit 64 year old, she proved to the world that age is just a number. It took her almost 53 hours without sleep, without ever having physical support from any boat, kayak or person. She swam without the safety and the drafting effect which is created by towing a shark cage behind a support boat. She accomplished her "Xtreme Dream", a dream that was 35 years in the making.

Diana's first attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida was in 1978, using a 20 by 40 foot shark cage, but encountering storms that bounced her around the inside of the cage. After 42 hours and 76 miles, conditions continued to hamper her progress and she ended the swim. She didn't swim another stroke for more than 30 years.

After that first attempt Diana went on to become a highly successful sports commentator and motivational speaker. Then, as Diana approached the age of 60, the unfinished dream came back to her. She started swimming again and working out in earnest, to pursue what she called her Xtreme Dream. She gathered a support crew—the Xtreme Dream team. I became aware of her efforts when my friends Elke Thuerling, and Anita Allen, along with my girlfriend, Brenda Anderson, joined the kayak team in July of 2011.

Diana's second attempt, this time without a shark cage, began shortly after midnight on July 9th and lasted for 29 hours. She was plagued by shoulder pain from the start and the attempt ended with an unfortunate asthma attack and a mix-up with medications.

Diana's first line of defense against the sharks which constantly patrol the Florida Straits, was provided by a team of brave "shark divers". They kept a constant watch for fins, or dark shapes in the water surrounding Diana's main support boat, *Voyager*. In the event that sharks were spotted, a diver's role was to intercept them using the inflatable outboard Zodiac, place themselves between the shark and Diana, and gently persuade them to go in another direction. They accomplished this by placing a stick on the shark's face, and pushing them in a different direction. Like I said, brave.

The duty of the kayak team was to provide the final line of defense against sharks. We did this by deploying electronic devices called Shark Shields. These shields take advantage of one of the two senses that we do not have. The Shields are, ironically, made necessary by the other sense, the ability to detect vibrations in the water. This sense resides in the lateral line, which runs the length of their bodies. This line and this sense is shared by all fishes, but in the case of sharks, it is particularly effective in detecting erratic movements, such as a swimmer's splashing at the surface. The shark's other sense, is provided by organs known as the "ampullae of Lorenzini".

They are pimple-like dots in the facial area, and along the shark's lateral line. They are filled with a gel that is particularly effective at detecting the miniscule amount of electricity produced by the muscular contractions of all living creatures, but in particular, from the contractions of a beating heart. We had no way of eliminating the splashing that Diana would create, but we could deal with the sharks if they were attracted by those vibrations. If a shark managed to get by the shark divers, or approached from underneath, their electricity-detecting ampullae of Lorenzini would soon be overloaded by the electrical field which was generated by the Shark Shields. The shields have an effective radius of approximately 12 feet. We kept one kayak positioned to the right, slightly in front, while the second kayak followed slightly behind and to the left. This kept Diana enveloped within a dual, protective "force field" at all times. In order to keep the shields effective, we worked in 3-hour shifts around the clock, keeping two units charging when they were not on the water, attached to a kayak. Every 1 ½ hours, a fresh kayaker would replace one of the two kayakers.

My involvement as a member of Diana's Xtreme Dream kayak team began in September 2011, when Brenda took over the role of kayak team Captain, and brought me into the team, along with my good friend, "Gator Dave" Harper. Early on, I began to learn something about this woman, whom I was soon to be following in my kayak, into the Florida Straits. I would learn about her fierce determination to not only follow this dream of hers, but to relentlessly chase it down, despite all obstacles. I had a fairly narrow view of my role as a kayaker. We were instructed to maintain silence during our time on the water with Diana, so that silence, in itself, seemed to serve to narrow our focus. During Diana's breaks for drink or food, she and her handlers were exchanging vital information, so any small talk on the part of the kayakers could interfere with that vital exchange. I understood this need completely. I was determined to follow my orders to the letter. I focused entirely on placing my kayak in exactly the proper position, to give Diana the full protection that I was there to provide. Then came the box jellyfish. Diana suffered through two horrific stings, each just after nightfall on subsequent nights of a more than 40-hour swim attempt. She struggled through the pain, and the effects of the venom on her respiratory system. Despite what she was going through, she struggled on. I watched from close up, as she would swim to *Voyager*, then float on her back, lifting her thigh out of the water without support, while her handlers would swab alcohol and inject her leg with ephedrine, in an attempt to counter the venom. That is when I found that my role as a kayaker could be so much more. I found that my voice had the power to inspire the confidence that the jellyfish had stolen from Diana. Along with the other team members, we spoke, cheered, sang songs, and counted her increasingly strong strokes, helping to restore her inner strength. We helped Diana to get back on her mental "playlist" of songs and writings, which she used as a device to deal with the confusion that accompanies the long hours of sleep deprivation. Despite the fact that Diana once again swam as strongly as she had begun, we had drifted with the relentless Gulf Stream for many hours during her hours of near incapacitation. The swim was ended finally, when John Bartlett, the team navigator, informed Diana that we were too far off course. We were now on course for the Bahamas, and Florida was just not possible.

After seeing Diana's gritty determination during this swim in 2011, I knew that she had the physical and mental ability to do this swim. Her chance came again in

August of 2012. We left Cuba's shore with 3 to 4 foot waves, and at night, it got worse. We could see clouds building up to the east, south, and west, with us in the middle. As the storm bore down on us, the waves built to a point where it became too dangerous to launch and retrieve the kayakers for the regular shifts. The stern of the kayak mothership was rising and falling on 6 to 8 foot seas, with the kayaks doing the same, only in opposite order. One of the kayaks was driven under the boat's hull during these tough conditions, and the swim was halted, due to life-and-death conditions. Despite the declaration by the official observer, Steven Munantones of the Open Water Swimming Association, that we could put Diana back in the water at the GPS coordinates where she would be taken out for safety, it would be for a swim done in stages, not the uninterrupted swim that Diana wanted. After a second night of similar circumstances, She ended the attempt.

Paddling kayak support for Diana may seem simple enough, but it provides some real challenges. In the point position—just to her right, with the bow slightly ahead of her, the paddler strives at all times to keep the kayak as close to her as possible, but not so close, obviously, as to hit her with the paddle. The paddle could cause an injury that would mean an abrupt end to the swim. Brenda and I were well-practiced at the technique, because of a little game that we sometimes like to play while on our regular paddling trips together. I call the game “synchronized paddling.” In this game, one of us, without saying anything, starts to paddle in synch, but opposite the other's strokes, then gradually edges their kayak closer and closer, until finally, there is only enough room for one paddle between our side-by-side kayaks. We continue, alternating strokes in the small space between us, picking up speed as we go, as long as we can, laughing the whole time. While we are on kayak duty our eyes are always on Diana in order to maintain the closeness that the Shark Shields require. You can't look to see the waves that are coming at you. You have to sense the water to know what is coming. You anticipate the waves by feeling that subtle drop at the bottom, and then the lifting sensation as your kayak climbs the front of the wave, just prior to being grabbed by the top. If you don't sense these actions, and react as they are happening, the top of the wave can toss you several feet sideways, right on top of Diana. Learning to feel the waves without looking, in the daytime, was actually great training for paddling at night, when every wave was invisible.

At night, vision was severely restricted because we were allowed to use only red lights. Dr. Angel Yanagihara, a technical advisor for the Xtreme Dream team and an expert on box jellyfish, had discovered that white light would increase the risk of Diana getting stung by the jellyfish. The dangerous box jellyfish spend their days deep in the water column but rise to the surface at night to feed. Angel's research showed that the jellies were attracted to white light, because their food is naturally attracted to the surface by the light of the moon. She found that they did not react to red light. Other lighting used during the swim was also red. A submerged streamer trailed from a long boom extending from the *Voyager*, for an easy reference for Diana to follow. At night, the streamer is lit by a red rope light, giving an eerie quality to the scene. Diana had a small red LED light on the back of her swim cap, which turned side-to-side with every stroke that she took, giving the effect of a blinking light.

Although Diana was unsuccessful in making the crossing in 2012, I had a hunch that this was not her swan song; she would go again. She started making some calls later that year, re-assembling the team. When Diana asked me if I would serve as the captain of the kayak team, I was happy to take the role. I assembled my all-star kayak team: Brenda and Elke (two former Xtreme Dream kayak team Captains), Mike Devlin (President of Paradise Coast Paddler's Club, Naples, FL), Darlene Meadows (like me, a kayak tour guide for Everglades Area Tours) and Buco "Bucko" Pantelis (the one kayak team member who has accompanied Diana on every attempt since 2011).

Diana worked to counter every obstacle that had ended all of the previous attempts. She and Angel worked closely with Finis, a swimwear company, to develop a jellyfish suit that would have zero-flotation attributes and comply with the stringent open-water swimming rules. Angel had also developed and patented specialized creams that Diana could use both to prevent stings and to treat them. Diana brought John Bartlett back to the team as the Navigator. His knowledge of the currents in the Florida Straits, and navigating to take advantage of those currents, was key to the team's success.

Diana also devised a storm protocol for the team to follow in the event of a sudden squall. When it became too risky to deploy and recover kayaks, it was also too risky to keep the group of four support boats in close proximity to each other. The kayakers would be recovered, and the fleet would disperse. Only one inflatable, manned by the 4 shark divers would stay with Diana and the swim would continue. The shark diver team had a Shark Shield to keep the sharks at bay. This strategy was put into action and Nikko Gazzale, the Captain of the shark diver team, held a compass and a small light, and swam ahead of Diana, showing her which direction she needed to go. This storm protocol was not only daring, it was wildly successful. Rather than ending the swim, as had happened the previous year, Diana actually progressed more than 2 miles in the time it took the squall to pass.

Looking back on the successful completion of Diana's Xtreme Dream, I can point to many team members, not just the kayakers, but the handlers, shark divers, boat captains and crews, and media persons, who not only did their assigned tasks so well, but also lent their voices to inspire Diana when she needed them most. There were times, even during this successful swim, when I could see the nausea and the lack of sleep having their effects on her. Diana would respond to my voice for a while, and then she wouldn't. I would ask Elke to switch positions, so she could talk, and Diana listened. When Elke's voice lost its effectiveness, another kayaker, a handler, or one of the shark divers would take over, and Diana would listen again. Lending our voices to Diana was every bit as important as our assigned roles. It was a team effort.

When Diana stumbled, exhausted, onto the beach in Key West, and planted both feet firmly onto the dry sand she said these words:

"I've got three messages. One is: We should never, ever give up. Two is: You are never too old to chase your dreams. Three is: It looks like a solitary sport, but it is a team." Those of us who were fortunate enough to be a part of the Xtreme Dream Team, knew we all had to do our jobs and do them well for Diana to make history. I consider myself to be incredibly lucky, and so proud, to have been a part of that team.

About the author:

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