



Swimming to Antarctica

Tales of a Long-Distance Swimmer

by Lynne Cox

She's known as the best long-distance swimmer in the world. From the subzero waters of Antarctica to shark-infested seas, she has taken on the most treacherous waters of the globe.

The Story So Far...

At ages 15 and 16, she broke the men's and women's world records for swimming the English Channel—a 33-mile crossing in 9 hours, 36 minutes. This is her account of her first record-breaking swim.

Lynne Cox began serious swim training at the age of 9. Now, she swims not to break records but to achieve personal goals.

NOT WANTING TO WASTE TIME OR TO GET cold and have my muscles grow stiff, I began swimming fast again. The juice boosted my blood sugar and I felt a lot stronger. My father had recommended that I stop to feed every hour to maintain my blood-sugar levels, but I hadn't wanted to stop at all. I just wanted to keep going. Now, looking back on it, I knew he was right; it would have helped significantly.

But I was still on pace, swimming better than I had imagined.

About an hour later, Brickell came out of the pilot's house and waved at me to lift my head up and listen. He asked, "Do you think you can sprint for a mile?"

I had been swimming hard already, and the thought of sprinting—well, it would be harder. But yes, I told him, I could do it.

"Good, because there's an oil tanker coming down the Channel at nine knots. He cannot stop for you. You're either going to have to wait here and tread water for thirty minutes or cross the tanker lane before he gets there," Brickell explained. He didn't mention that once we had committed we could not hesitate or we could be crushed by the oil tanker. Somehow I already knew how serious this was.

"Okay, I'll sprint," I said quickly, putting my head down and taking off, moving as fast as I could for about twenty minutes, until I saw Brickell wave to me again and point. The tanker passed us like a whale cruising past a minnow, with the bow waves surging toward us, lifting us high into the air, maybe fifteen feet, and we surfed the waves toward France.

By seven a.m. my arms were burning. They felt like I had been lifting twenty-five-pound dumbbells for hours. My neck was

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sore, as I had been raising my head up to see the French coast, now a dark outline on the horizon. And my lower back ached and I was getting tired. Stopping to stretch my back by grabbing my ankles, I asked for an oatmeal cookie. I was so hungry. For hours I had been dreaming about eating a real American hamburger and a chocolate milkshake. My mother tossed me a cookie. My coordination was off, and I completely missed it. She threw a second. I picked the slightly mushy snack out of the sea and ate it quickly.

“Can you see Cap Gris-Nez yet, Mickey? I asked.

“See that point? The one with the little light’ouse?”

“Yes, I see it!”

“That’s Cap Gris-Nez, Gray-Nose,”

Clockwise from left: Pausing for a “feeding” during an English Channel crossing, 1970; having just become the first person to swim the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, 1977; beginning a series of swims that would take her around the world in 80 days, 1985.



Mickey said.

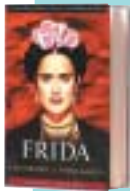
“Lynne, this is going to be the most difficult part of the swim. There’s a current around that point. You’re going to have to hold your pace if you’re going to break the record,” Brickell said.

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Classic Connections

READ ABOUT THREE MORE WOMEN WHO MADE A SPLASH

THE BOOK



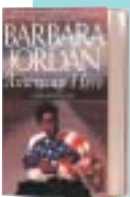
FRIDA: A BIOGRAPHY OF FRIDA KAHLO (1983)
by Hayden Herrera

THE STORY

Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a strong, passionate woman whose life was marked by terrible tragedy but also by powerful love. Her art reflects both her tumultuous life and her tremendous spirit.

THE STYLE

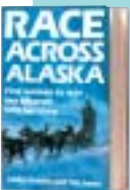
Herrera is an art historian, but don't let her scholarly credentials scare you! Her thoroughly researched biography is a compelling read worthy of its compelling subject.



BARBARA JORDAN: AMERICAN HERO (2000)
by Mary Beth Rogers

Barbara Jordan (1936-1996) was the first African-American elected to the Texas Senate since Reconstruction, and the first black woman elected to the U.S. Congress from the South.

Rogers examines both the public and the private sides of Jordan's life. She portrays Jordan as a strong woman who battled racism and sexism—and multiple sclerosis—with dignity and courage.



RACE ACROSS ALASKA (1988)
by Libby Riddles and Tim Jones

In 1985, Libby Riddles became the first woman to win the Iditarod, Alaska's grueling sled-dog marathon.

Writing in the first person, Riddles describes her adventures during the physically and emotionally demanding race. Jones contributes brief background articles about the Iditarod.



“But I thought I was hours ahead of record time,” I said, somewhat confused.

“You are, but the current’s already pushing you north, slightly off course. You’ve already lost half an hour,” he said.

“Okay,” I said with determination, “this is where all those sprints at the end of workout are going to pay off.”

My mom and Mickey cheered, “You can do it.” “Come on, love. Let’s go.”

Brickell turned the *Helen Anne Marie* slightly into the current to compensate for the northward drift and I began sprinting, trying to break across the current. For nearly an hour I swam harder than I could remember, and I was tiring.

Stopping to stretch my back, I asked for a drink of water and heard Brickell: “Lynne, you’ve got to go faster—you’re not through the current yet.”

My sides were starting to ache from breathing, and I didn’t feel good. I swam faster, but after another half hour or so Cap Gris-Nez didn’t appear to be any closer. And the stench of the lanolin combined with the smell of diesel and dead fish from the boat was making me queasy. The wind was blowing the fumes into my face. “Mr. Brickell, could I move to the other side of the boat? The fumes are bugging me.”

“Certainly. Lynne, you’re caught in the tidal change now. You’re going to have to swim faster. I know you’re getting tired, but if you don’t get through this, you’re not going to get the record,” he said.

“You can do it. Come on, honey,” my mother said, and Mickey cheered as well.

This time I started swimming like I was at the end of a workout, doing the last mile, giving it everything I had. It was painful, but I pushed on. For more than an hour I didn’t look up at shore. When I did, we had drifted farther north, and Cap Gris-Nez had slid more to the south. This was hell, liquid hell.

I began reaching for more energy I’d never known I had. It was from all those cold mornings when I didn’t want to get in and work out, but did anyway. It was from all those years of training when I was tired but pushed myself through the workout. It was from all those people who believed in me. I pictured the faces of my family, my friends, my neighbors, my teammates, everyone who said, *You can do this*, and I sprinted. My breath burned in my throat. My arms were on fire, moving faster than they ever had. I lifted my head. We were making progress. We were directly in front of Cap Gris-Nez.

“You’re a mile from shore,” Brickell called to me. “This is where it gets tough. This is where a lot of swimmers give up.” His voice sounded tired, and he should have sounded happy.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The tide’s increasing. It’s pushing you south now. You’re going to have to sprint or you’re going to miss it entirely . . .” he said.

Now I understood his fatigue and wished

continued ➔

MEET THE AUTHOR: LYNNE COX

BORN

1957 in Boston

Massachusetts.



FOR THE RECORD

Most people would die within minutes in water less than 50 degrees, but Cox has spent hours swimming in water as cold as 32 degrees.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Cox has had to face sharks, icebergs, raw sewage, and animal carcasses in her various swims.

QUOTE

“This is really a book about dreams as much as it is about swims. It’s about following your heart as much as it is about working hard, and it’s about just doing things when you don’t think you can and figuring out another way to do them.”

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I didn't. Sprint, he said. Sprint. *Oh, man. Okay. Okay. You've got to do it now. You've really got to do it. You're only a mile from shore. It's only a mile. You can do it. Come on.*

Again I put my head down and sprinted, and when I looked up I thought we'd be a half mile from shore; but the cape was far to the north. "How much farther, Mr. Brickell?"



On the waterfront in Portland, Maine, in January, 2004.

"Five miles. You've missed the point. . . ."

My brain couldn't register it for a minute. Five miles? How could I have lost it that fast?

"Do you think you can pick up your pace? If you can, we're going to cut a very sharp angle. You're going to feel it pushing right against your face," Brickell said, drawing in a tense breath.

to do was reach the summit. But the summit was where the air grew thinner, where everything became challenging.

DON'T LOOK UP FOR FIVE HUNDRED strokes. *Go as fast as you can go. Push it. Pull your arms with everything you have. Kick. Yes. Kick those legs. Pull deeper. Faster. Come on. Pull.*

In the background my mother and Mickey were shouting, "Come on!" "Go, love!" They weren't letting up. I heard Brickell shouting. For the first time, he was cheering too. And then I saw the excitement in his face.

We were almost there. But I couldn't look yet. I had three hundred more strokes before I could look up. Brickell was turning the boat; I had to look up. Was there another problem? No, there wasn't. We were almost there. The rocks were bigger than before.

Mickey and Reg Junior jumped into the launch and followed me. I swam faster, lifting

Go as fast as you can go. Push it. Pull your arms with everything you have. Kick. Yes. Kick those legs. Pull deeper.
Faster. Come on. Pull.

"How come we're not heading directly for the point?" I asked.

"You'd have to land on the rocks, and you could get a bit cut up," Brickell said.

"They're closer than the beach, aren't they?"

"By half a mile," he said.

My mom didn't like the idea; I could see it in her face. She was almost in tears.

"Mickey, can I still break the record?"

"Yes, love, you can."

"Okay, then, let's go for the rocks. I want to finish this swim now," I said.

Everyone broke into smiles, even my mother—she couldn't help herself. Taking a deep breath, I began sprinting again, counting my strokes, telling myself that I wouldn't look up again until I'd swum one thousand strokes. Slowly I gained a foot, then a few hundred yards. Now I realized why the English Channel was the Mount Everest of swimming: we had climbed the mountain and all we had

my head to pick a landing spot. Waves were breaking on the rocks. I could see the surge and the white water. High above from the cliffs overhead, I heard voices. They were shouting in French. I was excited; I had never been to France before.

For over a year I had rehearsed this in my mind, but nothing could compare with the experience of actually being there and finishing the swim across the English Channel.

Searching for a space between the waves, I sprinted, hoping that a surge wouldn't catch me and smash me into the rocks. I started moving in, and suddenly felt myself being lifted; I was moving too fast, right into a big sharp rock covered with mussels and barnacles. My knees struck the barnacles; then the wave tore me back out toward sea. Another wave, larger than the last, was breaking. Swim forward or back? Oh, no. I had no control. I could see it. I was going to get bashed. My other knee was sliced by the

mussels. There was blood squirting out, but I couldn't feel it much. My legs were numb from the cold. Another wave was surging toward me. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. No: find a spot. You can't turn back. The watch is still ticking. You've got to clear the water for the swim to be completed. Come on, use the wave, let it lift you up, don't fight it, let it carry you into the rocks, don't back down. If you hit the rock, grab ahold of it and climb out of the water now.*

The wave lifted me and I smashed into

another rock. It hurt a lot. I grabbed for the rock and missed, then leaned forward and grabbed a handhold. I pulled myself up. The rock was sharp; it cut my feet, and the barnacles shredded my skin. But I wasn't thinking about it, just trying to find another handhold and pull myself out. *Got it.* I pushed up with my feet, clung with my fingers, reached another handhold, and hauled myself onto a rock, clear of the water.

The crew cheered wildly. We had made it! ■

SKILL DRILL

CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING:

- This excerpt describes**
 - the highlights of Cox's swimming career.
 - Cox's swim to Antarctica.
 - Cox's swim across the English Channel.
 - the history of swimming the English Channel.
- Why did Cox land on the rocks instead of Cap Gris-Nez?**
 - The rocks were closer than the beach.
 - The current pushed her off her original course.
 - Brickell made a mistake in steering the guide boat.
 - An oil tanker forced her to change course.
- What is the name of Cox's guide boat?**
 - the *Helen Anne Marie*
 - the *Minnow*
 - the *Gris-Nez*
 - the *Brickell*
- Cox portrays the swim as**
 - relaxing.
 - terrifying.
 - boring.
 - exhausting.
- Cox writes that swimming the Channel is "the Mount Everest of swimming" because**
 - in both, the end is the hardest part.
 - they are both dangerous.
 - special equipment is required for both.
 - the English Channel is the hardest body of water to swim, and Mount Everest is the hardest mountain to climb.
- What is a barnacle?**
 - a type of seaweed
 - a sea bird
 - a jellyfish
 - a hard-shelled crustacean

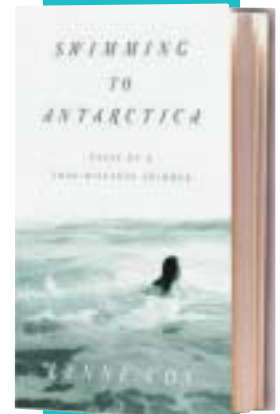
>>Your Turn! What skills can you cultivate through a regular physical practice—like swimming, running, yoga, or working out at the gym—that you can apply to the rest of your life? Explain.



20-Minute Essay
>>TAKE 20 MINUTES

TO PLAN AND WRITE AN ESSAY BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:

What do you think drives people to take on intense physical challenges?



LCBook Club Questions

1 Do you have a dream of undertaking a physical challenge? If so what would it be? If not, why?

2 To many, Lynne Cox is a true hero. Who are your heroes? Why?