

Across the Channel



In the 1924 Olympics, Gertrude (Gertie) Ederle won a gold medal in the 4x100-meter relay and bronze medals in the 100 and 400-meter freestyle races. At the time, the longest swimming event for women in the Olympics was just 400 meters. The idea of women swimming long distance was unheard of and deemed impossible. In fact, it was an era where many found it difficult to take female athletes seriously. But Gertrude Ederle had a dream and was serious about swimming across the English Channel, a distance of 21 miles.

Five men had swum across the English Channel previously but they had all used the breast stroke. Gertrude planned to use the front crawl, a stroke considered too strenuous for a distance swim. Her critics laughed at her goals. She first tried crossing the English Channel in 1925, but after nine hours she was forced to quit.

Nineteen-year-old Gertrude, smeared with sheep grease to protect her from the frigid water, slipped into the English Channel at Cap Grix-Ne, France, on the morning of August 6, 1926. Twice during the swim, her trainer, aboard the boat that accompanied her, suggested that she give up her quest. During the last few hours, she had to swim in a rough sea, the tide pushing strongly against her and the ocean spray stinging her face. The rough seas took her off course and she actually swam 35 miles instead of the intended 21.

With a never give-up attitude, her determination to succeed took her across the English Channel. The swim took 14 hours and 31 minutes; one hour and 21 minutes faster than any man had ever swum it.

Gertrude Ederle's determined effort and extraordinary desire had a profound effect on women's sports. She was one of the first women that helped disprove the belief that women were physically inferior to men. Her crossing of the English Channel challenged perceptions of female athletes, inspiring countless women to take up various sports with a confidence to step up to meet the challenge.

Affirmation: I believe I will achieve.

To think about:

1. Gertrude Ederle helped prove women could accomplish what was once considered "men only" goals. How does a positive mindset affect performance?
2. Gertie failed on her first attempt. How do you take failure and turn it into success?
3. Gertie was blown off her original path and had to swim an additional 14 miles. How do you adjust when you appear to be getting off track?

When somebody tells me I cannot do something, that's when I do it. -Gertrude Ederle