



THE AUDACITY OF ANNETTE KELLERMAN:

How She Became the Most Famous Swimmer in the World

STORY BY **CHUCK WARNER**

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY
INTERNATIONAL SWIMMING HALL OF FAME

The context for the milestone achievements of a Michael Phelps or a Katie Ledecky lies with knowing the history of their forerunners. The International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale plays a key role in preserving the memory of all aquatic history. Over the next several issues of *Swimming World*, we will bring you some examples of the ISHOF exhibits. This story is drawn from the exhibit, “100 Years of Women in Swimming.”

The early years in the life of Annette Kellerman didn't include an intention of changing a woman's world. She faced personal hurdles first. Diagnosed with rickets at the age of 2, her crippled legs necessitated metal braces for her to walk through her mother's conservatoire, where she dreamed of dancing unencumbered one day.

Born July 6, 1897, in New South Wales, Australia, the expectations for young girls was to fit into a restricted role. The male gender dominated the decisions over what was acceptable in society at that time.

By 6 years old, Annette had struggled and fought to gain the strength to remove the braces off her legs. She enjoyed making an entrance into a room with style and announced to her sister with delight, “I'm going to be wonderful, and everyone is going to love me.”

LOVE OF SWIMMING

Swimming was the designated medicine to help her weakened condition, and the Sydney bath houses were a popular location for frolic and exercise. She explained her love of swimming, saying,

“I learn much from people in the way they meet the unknown of life, and water is a great test. I'm sure no adventurer or discoverer ever lived who couldn't swim. Swimming cultivates the imagination. The man with the most is the one who can swim his solitary course throughout the day and forget a black earth full of people who push.”

Annette's swimming proficiency earned the tutelage of Australian champion Freddie Lane, and then she became a champion herself. In her mid-teens, she won the New South Wales Championships in the 100 and 400 freestyle, and in the mile, she set a world record.

As was common to the way Annette lived her life, she had the audacity to go up on the high diving boards where it was said that “no woman had ever gone before.” There, she learned to dive off 60-foot platforms into pools and, it has been written, from 100 feet into open deep water.

BOUND FOR ENGLAND

When the family music business took a downturn, she was positioned to help her mom and dad by earning some money in open

water/river swimming competitions. Her father, Fredrick, believed that swimming and diving could be turned into an art form. Mr. Kellerman learned that there was more interest in such events in Europe—with bigger crowds and pay. At 16, Annette and her dad boarded an ocean liner bound for England.

Just about the only thing that ever defeated Annette Kellerman in her life was the English Channel. A London newspaper sponsored her effort to become the first woman ever to swim across the 11-mile distance. To build publicity—and contribute to her training—they asked her to prepare in the Thames River. For several weeks, Kellerman reportedly swam through oil slicks, debris and fog as much as 100 miles a week. She gradually drew large crowds, watching along bridges, who cheered her on.

Three times she tried and failed to cross the Channel, but when she completed three-quarters of the distance in 10-and-a-half hours, she set a record that stood for years. She competed with 17 men in a race on the River Seine through Paris, and finished third.

Her demonstrated qualities of courage, competitiveness and achievement built a reputation that resulted in her signing to perform a vaudeville act at the “London Hippodrome.”

Annette’s mother, Alice, was likely proud of the way her stage performance began. She first played a little violin and danced. But then she gradually reduced her clothing to her tight-fitting swim attire and dove into a small tank of water where she performed the forerunner to synchronized swimming—underwater ballet—while holding her breath three-and-a-half minutes at a time.

AN AMERICAN “REVOLUTION”

Her shows became so popular that America beckoned, and off she went.

Perhaps fittingly, it was at the site of the start of the American Revolution,

– continued on 24



ABOVE > Annette’s swimming proficiency earned the tutelage of Australian champion Freddie Lane, and then she became a champion herself. In her mid-teens, she won the New South Wales Championships in the 100 and 400 freestyle, and in the mile, she set a world record (pictured here in 1907 with American Charlie Daniels, eight-time Olympic medalist, world record holder, innovator of the American crawl and fellow inductee of the International Swimming Hall of Fame).

RIGHT AND NEXT PAGE > Dubbed the world’s “most perfect woman,” it was only natural that opportunities would flock Kellerman’s way—movies, endorsements, stage shows. Pictured here are advertisements endorsing Adams Black Jack chewing gum and “the perfect shoe—the La France.” The next page shows flyers for “A Daughter of the Gods” and “What Women Love.”

The Perfect Woman—ANNETTE KELLERMAN
Wears and Recommends
The Perfect Shoe—The LA FRANCE
\$3.50, \$4.00 and \$5.00

The Properties of The PERFECT WOMAN SHOE
ANNETTE KELLERMAN LA FRANCE SHOE

"The perfect woman" appreciates the importance of "the perfect shoe." Do you?
LA FRANCE SHOES are guaranteed. They come in all styles and leathers.
You Can See "The Perfect Woman" in "Under" at the Belasco All This Week.
You Can See The Perfect Shoe at Berberich's Every Day.

Main Store 1116-22 7th St.
Branch Store 813 Penna. Ave.

Berberich's
Washington's Largest and Most Complete Shoe Store—Established 1862

ADAMS
Black Jack
FIVE CHEWING GUM TABLETS
GOOD FOR COUGHS AND COLDS

The Licorice Gum

ANNETTE KELLERMAN, whose great photo play, "A Daughter of the Gods," will be seen this year by millions, and who is appearing in person at the New York Hippodrome, says: "I certainly do like the flavor of your Adams Black Jack Chewing Gum. Besides, the licorice in it is highly beneficial to the throat."

Annette Kellerman



KELLERMAN — cont'd from 23

Boston, where Annette Kellerman's defiance of the expected behavior for a woman helped initiate feminist reforms and greater water safety. She displayed her comfort in her physicality when she walked through the Revere Beach in a tight-fitting one-piece bathing suit. The police arrested her for indecent exposure.

The next day, Annette pointed out to the judge that it was dangerous for women to swim in the long dress-type outfits that covered every inch of their body and weighed them down. She displayed a new styled garment in which she had sewn "panty hose" to the standard men's tank top suit to create a full body suit. Evidently, this conformed to the law of a woman covering her body, but it also achieved the sleek movement through water—and the show of a woman's beauty—that Annette desired. The judge asked her to wear a robe in the future until she was ready to enter the water.

Annette agreed and the charges were dropped. "The Kellerman Suit" rocketed in popularity across the country.

"MOST PERFECT WOMAN"

The publicity was tremendous, but out of Boston came even more marketing for her. In 1910, Harvard professor Dr. Dudley Sargent completed a study of thousands of women, comparing their measurements to the statue of Venus De Milo, which had been said to be that of perfection. He declared Annette Kellerman as the world's "most perfect woman" because of her matching physical traits.

Meanwhile, in 1912, women were first permitted to swim in the Olympic Games in Paris. A request to include the 300 meter freestyle was denied because it was thought to be too strenuous (although it was eventually contested eight years later). The women's events that first year were restricted to the 100 freestyle and the 4x100 freestyle relay.

But in that same era, Annette was writing her own rule book for how a woman could be accepted in aquatics and entertainment.

Kellerman became known as the "diving Venus," and her contract for her vaudeville show rose to \$1,250



NEXT PAGE, TOP > Annette Kellerman's defiance of the expected behavior for a woman helped initiate feminist reforms and greater water safety. She displayed her comfort in her physicality when she wore a tight-fitting one-piece bathing suit in public—a controversial topic in the early 20th century—and was arrested for indecent exposure. The charges were later dropped, and "The Kellerman Suit" rocketed in popularity across the country.

NEXT PAGE, BOTTOM > Numerous aquatic athletes went on to become successful Hollywood film stars, including not only Annette Kellerman, but also such athletes as diver Aileen Riggan Soule, competitive swimmers Gertrude Ederle, Eleanor Holm, Esther Williams, Buster Crabbe and Johnny Weissmuller, along with lifeguards Ronald Reagan, Sean Connery, Paul Hogan, Alexandra Paul, Telly Savalas and Clint Eastwood (*Annette, pictured here with Ronald Reagan*).

ABOVE > Believing that swimming and diving could be turned into an art form, Annette's father, Fredrick, took his daughter on an ocean liner bound for England since there was more interest in such events in Europe than Australia. Her shows became so popular that America soon beckoned (*Annette, pictured here on ship with her pug*).

REX TUES. & WED.

Two Hours of Hilarious Happenings With—

ANNETTE KELLERMAN

In Her Mile-a-Minute Comedy Drama—

What Women Love

A TALE OF TUMULTUOUS COURTSHIP

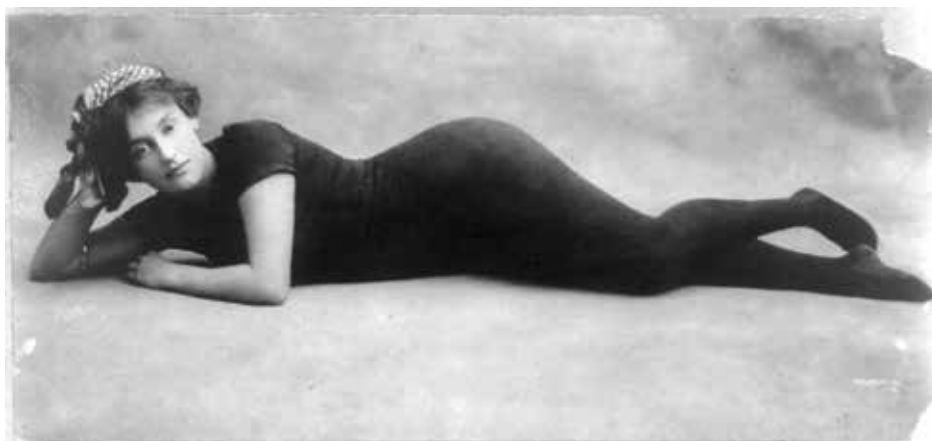
Affectionate Annabel

She boxes like Dempsey—
She swims like a fish—
She dances like a fairy—
She runs like a deer—
She just can't make her eyes behave

FIRST NATIONAL PICTURE

ANNETTE KELLERMAN
IN
"WHAT WOMEN LOVE"

per week (\$30,000 today). Her father passed on in 1912, and she proposed marriage to her long-time publicist and love, Jimmy Sullivan. Imitators came along, as vaudeville was beginning to give way to silent motion pictures. Annette pondered the question, "Wouldn't movement through water look great on the big screen?"



ENTERTAINMENT STAR

Annette took her skill of flowing like a fish through water to Hollywood in 1914 and became a silent-film star. Her belief in the importance of water to the spirit and soul helped make the movie, "Neptune's Daughter," a huge hit. The cost of production was \$35,000, and it grossed \$1 million (\$12.7 million today). The studios were so impressed that they invested \$1 million into a lavish production of water, mermaids and beach scenes for the film, "Daughter of the Gods." Eventually, she made six feature films and earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Before she turned 30 years of age, Annette Kellerman had transformed her swimming ability into becoming one of the biggest entertainment stars in the world.

Longing for the reaction from a live audience, she returned to New York, where the owners of the Hippodrome enticed her to perform the biggest water show ever on stage. They built an eight-foot-deep, 8,000-gallon water tank under the stage of

the 5,200-seat theatre that could be hydraulically lifted to the stage at the culmination of her performance. And they paid her \$2,500 per week to perform two shows a day, seven days a week. In today's dollars, that's about \$3 million per year.

The performance she loved most, Annette said later, was in 1920 as ballerina Anna Pavlova in *The Dying Swan* at the New York Metropolitan Opera House, conducted with a 90-piece orchestra serenading her movement. That was the one she felt her mother would have truly loved.

LIVING LEGACY

As Annette Kellerman's 25-year stage career began to wind down, she capitalized on her worldwide fame by writing books on women's beauty and by marketing exercise programs in which she advocated walking five miles or more each day. She became a mentor to housewives all over the world as a model of not just health, but also of independence and self-reliance. Most of all, she encouraged the positive effects of swimming: "The ocean is worth more to any woman than any serum produced in a million-dollar laboratory."

Gradually over the 20th century, doors for women in aquatics and through society began to open. Perhaps the grand kick that Annette Kellerman provided accelerated the process dramatically? In 1952, Esther Williams starred in a glorious accounting of Kellerman's life in the film, "Million Dollar Mermaid."

In 1970, Annette moved back to Australia, where she and Jimmy enjoyed life on the Brisbane Gold Coast. She continued to swim into her later years, routinely completing one-half mile before breakfast.

Looking back on her life, she observed, "My early days of misfortune has turned out to be my greatest blessing. Without it, I would have missed out on the grim struggle upward and the rewards that waited at the end of it all."

She passed on at 88 years of age in 1975. At her request, her ashes were scattered on the waters of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

In 1974, Annette Kellerman was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame, where her legacy lives today. ❖

