

# Winnie Roach-Leuszler



**Ontario Aquatic Hall of Fame**

Inducted as Pioneer Athlete in 1999

# Winnie Roach-Leuszler

## Inducted as Pioneer Athlete in 1999

Winnie Roach was born in 1926 in Port Credit, Ontario. The third oldest of twelve children, Winnie started to swim at age 3. As a competitive swimmer she won her first medal at age 9 for a 1.5 mile swim in the Port Credit River. Two years later, she placed 7th in the 1 mile Senior Women's Championships at the C.N.E. In her teens, Winnie won the Ontario Swimming Championships and in 1944 was the first Canadian to win the Junior National Amateur Athletic Union 2.5 mile long distance Swim Championship in New Jersey, USA. A few months later in Sarnia, Ontario, she won the 50, 100, 220 and 440 yard swims and on the same day placed first in the 3 mile swim over 11 male competitors! After joining the Canadian Women's Army Corps in 1944, Winnie dominated by winning the Army, Navy and Air Force Championships in swimming, track and field and several team sports. That same year she was nominated for Canada's Lou Marsh Trophy. In 1946 Winnie married Morris Leuszler. While stationed in Halifax Winnie won the Maritime Swim Championships for the 100yd Freestyle, Backstroke, Breaststroke, Relay and Long Distance swims. In 1947, three months after her first child was born Winnie placed 2nd in the 5 mile World Championship Swim at the CNE in Toronto. That same year she was the 1st woman hired by the Kitchener Waterloo, YMCA where she taught Red Cross Water Safety, Royal Life Saving and set up new programs for students to learn to swim. Winnie also coached the Cygnet Speed and Ornamental Swim Club for the twin cities. In 1948 Winnie, four months pregnant with her 2nd child, placed 2nd and in 1949 placed 3rd in the 5 mile World Champion Swims at the CNE. Coached by her father, Eddie Roach, Winnie started training for the English Channel Swim, a feat she had dreamed of since the age of nine.

1951 was a time when women were not encouraged to participate outside the home but Winnie was determined to swim the English Channel. As a mother of three children, having no sponsor and with little money, she traveled on a one-way ticket to Europe. There were many who doubted she would go the distance but it never entered her mind she couldn't do it. Halfway across the channel she was stung near her eye by a jellyfish, she had lost her loose fitting goggles at the beginning of the swim. News of Winnie's progress traveled by pigeon and made headlines back in Canada. She was within 100 yards of the shore when the tide changed and she was swept back 6.5 miles. Her umpire refused to let her land on rocks so she had to swim 200 yds down shore to a beach. She pulled herself to her feet and walked the specified 5 yards on land. Winnie had completed the swim on her first attempt in 13 hours and 25 minutes and in doing so became the first Canadian to swim the English Channel. On her return to Toronto Winnie was greeted with a ticker-tape parade and presented with a silver tea set and the keys to the city, then on to North York where she was presented with a silver tray and another set of keys.

Winnie continued to swim and win races while stationed across Canada and abroad and toured throughout the United States. In 1954 she experienced disappointment when she had to abandon her attempt to swim Lake Ontario due to boat trouble. However, she became a hero when she saved the life of a 10-year-old boy whom she pulled out of the cold waters of Lake Ontario. While stationed in Calgary, Winnie became involved with the Red Cross Water Safety and the Royal Lifesaving Programs, set up and organized the Stampeders and Calgary Aquatic Clubs and taught over 5,000 adults and children how to swim with the "Learn to Swim" program she set up. In 1958, while stationed in France, Winnie played with the RCAF women's softball team, which went on to win the European Servicewomen's Championship; she helped coach the Metz track and field club; and lent a hand with the Moselle Gymnastics' Club. She taught Red Cross Water Safety, Royal Life Saving and coached the Canadian Swim Club. Winnie also swam and coached with the French, Metz, Moselle Swim Club and won many swimming events in Germany, Holland and France. An accomplished swimmer, Winnie also participated in several sports throughout her career and excelled in softball. She received numerous honours and awards, including the Mynarski Trophy for best recreation program in Canada and Europe and in 1997 Winnie was inducted into the Canadian Armed Forces Sports Hall of Fame for swimming and softball. Throughout her life Winnie has been a role model to other women athletes. She has always contributed fresh new ideas for organizations and programs, has been a community leader, willing supporter and active participant. Over the years, countless athletes have personally benefited and learned from

Winnie Roach-Leuszler's many achievements in swimming made her one of Ontario's outstanding athletes. It is a great honour to induct her into the Ontario Aquatic Hall of Fame.