

Marathon swimmer Cindy Nicholas, who crossed Lake Ontario, dies at 58



Canadian schoolgirl Cindy Nicholas, 17, from Scarborough, Ontario being greased before plunging into the English Channel July 18, 1975, in a bid to set a new cross channel swimming record. (AP PHOTO / Str-LON)

Gregory Strong and Bill Beacon, The Canadian Press
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Cindy Nicholas, one of the greats of marathon swimming who was once known as Queen of the Channel, has died from liver failure. She was 58.

The Toronto athlete, who became a lawyer and served as a Liberal member of the Ontario legislature from 1987 to 1990, was best known for her record-setting solo crossings of the English Channel in the 1970s and 1980s. Her daughter, Leahanne LeGrow, said Nicholas died Thursday.

In 1977, Nicholas became the first woman to complete a non-stop, two-way crossing of the 33-kilometre Channel. She finished in 19 hours 55 minutes, the quickest result at the time for any male or female swimmer.

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She beat American Jon Erikson's 1975 record by nearly 10 hours.

"I think she always liked the title 'Queen of the Channel,'" LeGrow said Saturday. "I think that was something that was very special to her."

Nicholas swam the Channel 19 times overall, including five two-way crossings, posting a best time of 18 hours 55 minutes in one of the two times she did it in 1982.

She first gained fame when, at 16, she swam 64 kilometres across wind-swept Lake Ontario from Youngstown, N.Y. to the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Nicholas was urged to do it by her father, Jim, to match the historic crossing by Marilyn Bell of Toronto in 1954.

"That would have to be the highlight of my career because it was the first time doing a long swim," Nicholas told the International Swimming Hall of Fame, which inducted her in 2005. "It was so well covered by the media.

"I became a celebrity overnight."

Nicholas won the Bobbie Rosenfeld Award as Canadian Press female athlete of the year in 1977, topping speedskating world champion Sylvia Burka for the honour.

Nicholas was named to the Order of Canada in 1979 and was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 1993.

"Canada's Sports Hall of Fame is deeply saddened by the death of one of our inducted honoured members, Cindy Nicholas, an inspiring, record-setting distance swimmer," Hall president and CEO Mario Siciliano said in a statement. "Cindy received the highest sporting honour in Canada when she was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 1993 as an athlete for swimming.

"Her legacy will live on for generations to come."

Before turning to marathon swimming, Nicholas was an elite long sprint swimmer, setting 16 Ontario age group records between 1964 and 1974. She competed in national championships and the 1972 Olympic Trials.

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The 39th Cindy Nicholas Swim Classic, an annual age group meet, was held in January in Toronto. LeGrow said her mother never lost her passion for swimming.

"I know that she really loved it and she still swam regularly at the public pools in the winter and our own pool in the summer," she said. "She enjoyed it a lot."

Nicholas served as parliamentary assistant to Ontario's solicitor general from 1989 to 1990. She returned to her law practice after losing her seat to New Democratic Party opponent Steve Owens in the 1990 election.

Funeral services were scheduled for Tuesday in Toronto.

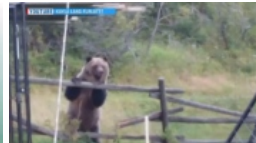
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