



FÉDÉRATION  
INTERNATIONALE  
DE NATATION

Published on *fina.org* - Official FINA website (<https://www.fina.org>)

---

## Origins

Synchronised swimming grew as a sport from ornamental swimming and theatrical water ballets of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. In the early days, male swimmers performed round-dances in the water as a swimming art form, decorated with garlands or Chinese lanterns. In 1891, the Royal Life Saving Society of Great Britain (RLSS) published a handbook for swimmers encouraging “ornamental swimming” or “scientific swimming”.

The sport developed from life saving and swimming techniques and the first contests, held in 1891 in Berlin and 1892 in London, were for men. However, artistic swimming became accepted as better suited to women because they were more buoyant, especially in the legs, and able to better make pictures with their bodies on the surface of the water.

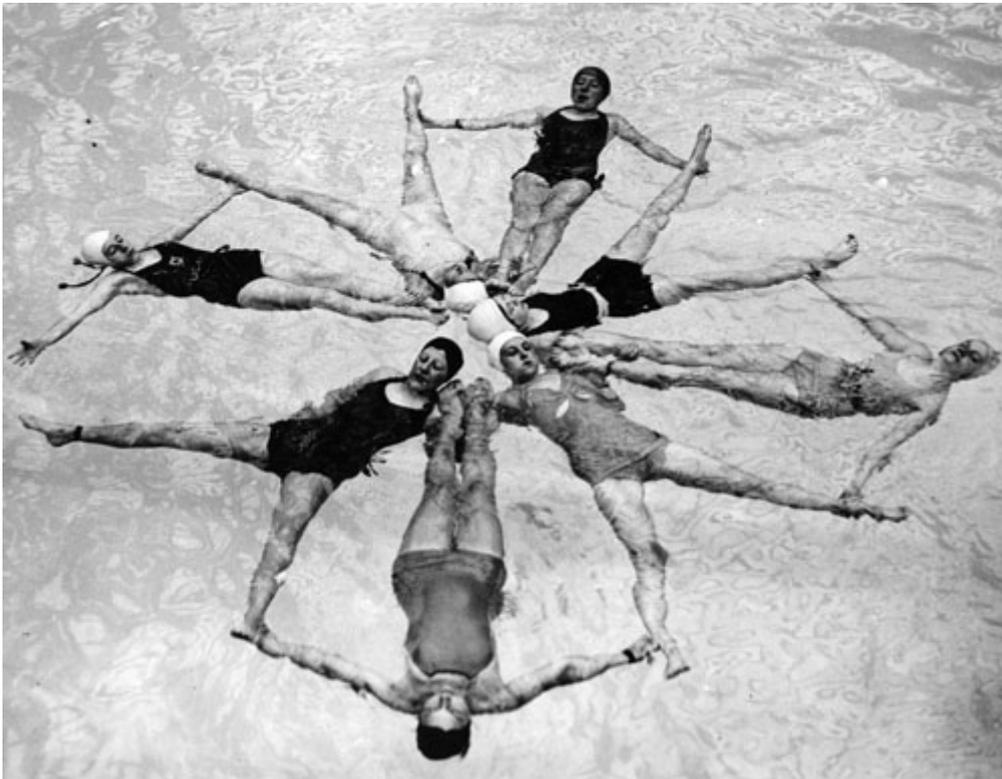
Australian Annette Kellerman (p37) was described as the first under-water ballerina when she performed in a glass tank at the New York Hippodrome in 1907. A group of women opened the German national swimming championships in Leipzig in 1921 with an exhibition of figure swimming but the main impulse came from Canada. In 1924, in a world first, the Quebec provincial championship for figure and stroke competition, limited to women, was held in Montreal, with the figures taken from the scientific swimming section of the RLSS handbook. Top Canadian diver and water polo player Margaret (Peg) Sellers played a pioneering role and, two years later, won the first official national championship in performing figures and strokes.



The sport had also caught on in the United States, where Katherine (Kay) Curtis, who had already experimented with water stunts as a student at the University of Wisconsin, started a water ballet club at the University of Chicago in 1923. At about the same time, Gertrude Goss introduced rhythmic swimming at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she was an associate professor. Curtis took a shoal of 60 swimmers dubbed the Modern Mermaids to perform in the lagoon at the 1934 World Fair in Chicago. It was there that the term “synchronised swimming” was first introduced to a big audience by the announcer, Norman Ross, Olympic freestyle champion in the 400m and 1,500m in 1920 (p72). The popularity of water ballet soared to its theatrical zenith with film star Esther Williams, a US freestyle champion who performed at the San Francisco World Fair in 1940 – the year the first synchronised swimming competition was held in the United States. “Aquacades” also involved the likes of Johnny Weissmuller (p74), Buster Crabbe (p84) and Eleanor Holm. Williams went on to make a succession of hugely popular “aqua musicals”, exposing a burgeoning sport to the world. In Europe, the German Kaethe Jacobi introduced competition in floating patterns with her Isar-Nixen (Isar Mermaids) in Munich in 1934.

Meanwhile, the sport that became known as synchronised swimming grew increasingly technical and athletic, with music accompanying the routines. Synchronised swimming sought a place in the Olympics and featured as a demonstration sport from 1952 to 1968. The sport joined the FINA stable with the 1952 adoption of rules in accordance with proposals from Canada, the USA and Argentina, countries where ‘ornamental’ and ‘figure’ swimming had caught the public’s imagination. However, a 1952 Peruvian proposal to ask the IOC for Olympic status was rejected.

The United States and Canada also demonstrated the sport at the first Pan-American Games in Buenos Aires in 1951 and synchronised swimming celebrated its first official international competition appearance at the next Pan-American Games in Mexico in 1955. It featured solo, duet and team events, and the US swept all three titles. Marion Kane played a major role as founder and coach of the San Francisco Merionettes and as a promoter of the sport in its bid for a place on the world stage. The sport received further recognition in 1967 when Pam Morris of the Merionettes, the nation’s first triple champion in 1965, became the first synchronised swimmer to be inducted in the International Swimming Hall of Fame.



Synchronised swimming entered global competition, with the United States, Canada and Japan competing at the inaugural FINA World Championships in Belgrade in 1973. It finally took its place as a full Olympic sport in 1984 at the Los Angeles Games.

---