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Emancipation

The world's first great professional sportswoman was a swimmer. Annette Marie Sarah Kellerman, born on July 6, 1887, in Sydney, Australia, was a pioneer who not only popularised swimming for women across the globe, but made it possible for them to take the plunge as athletes: at a time when women were challenging their social standing in society, Kellerman was the first woman of influence to disprove the lie that women were incapable of strenuous physical exercise. She did so by challenging accepted norms of dress and behaviour, suffering arrest and ultimately by winning an argument that opened the floodgates to a brighter and safer future for women.

Kellerman was the biggest marketing tool swimming has ever known: in her wake, women were able to wear bathing suits that no longer presented the risk of them drowning in their skirts, as did the 1,000 and more women and girls who drowned when the ship ferrying them to Long Island sank in 1904 at a time when women were allowed to bathe but not swim. Her revolution liberated women in the water and led to the appearance of female competitors in Olympic waters for the first time in 1912.

Modern women of power would have been proud of the aquatics star who showed them the way: known as "the perfect woman" long before Elle MacPherson, Kellerman could have taught Madonna lessons in self-promotion, having brought on her own arrest in a deliberate attempt to cause sensation to get her message out to millions. Kellerman was also a fitness guru who taught middle-aged women to keep fit through swimming and exercise long before the world had heard of Jane Fonda. The Australian Mermaid was the first to place aquatic sports on the silver screen, starring in more than 20 major films and being the subject of several others, most famously in "Million-dollar Mermaid"; her character played by Esther Williams, the American who popularised synchronised swimming around the world .

Kellerman was born in Marrickville, Sydney to Frederick William Kellerman, a violinist, and his French wife Alice, a pianist and music teacher. When their daughter was six she had to wear steel braces to strengthen her crippled legs. Swimming was also a remedy. By 15, Kellermann had New South Wales titles in record times. It was when her parents moved to Melbourne that Kellerman took her swimming to a professional level: she gave exhibitions of swimming and diving at the main Melbourne baths, performed a mermaid act at the Princes Court entertainment centre and did two shows a day swimming with fish in a glass tank at the Exhibition Aquarium.

In 1905, she became the first woman to attempt to swim the English Channel, unsuccessfully, though she got three-quarters of the way there at the third time of asking. She wore a one-piece black bodysuit, a garment that revealed curves that were normally kept well undercover in those days and one that was a topic of opinion columns, leading articles and dinner-table chatter. She set up her own brand of suit, known as the "Annette Kellermans" suit, which was the prototype for the modern costume worn by women ever since.

By 1907 Kellerman had established herself as an international star after a winter season of her aquatic vaudeville show - high diving, stunt swimming, underwater dancing and an exhibition of synchronised swimming - at the London Hippodrome. Next stop, the United States. In Boston, Kellerman went for a dip in a thigh-revealing one-piece swimsuit at Revere Beach. Arrested and charged with indecent exposure, Kellerman hit headlines across the world. The judge sided with Kellerman when she said that her suit was necessary for "unrestricted movement when swimming". She famously said: "I

can't swim wearing more stuff than you hang on a clothesline." The new maillot version of her suit became a common sight at the beach, almost overnight.

In 1916, Kellermann became the first leading lady to do a nude scene, but 'A Daughter of the Gods', made by Fox Film Corporation and the first million-dollar film production was lost. No copies are known to exist. Kellermann wrote several books including 'How To Swim' (1918), a book of children's stories entitled 'Fairy Tales of the South Seas' (1926) and 'My Story', an unpublished autobiography. A lifelong vegetarian, Kellermann owned a health food store in Long Beach, California. She and her husband returned to live in Australia in 1970, five years before her death at the age of 88 on November 5, 1975, at Southport, Queensland, in swimming paradise on the Australian Gold Coast. Her remains were scattered along the Great Barrier Reef.

EPSTEIN'S VISION

Charlotte Epstein, born in 1884 in New York City, a courtroom stenographer, founded the Women's Swimming Association (WSA) in 1920, and became famous for promoting the health benefits of swimming as exercise. Epstein coached the USA Women's Olympic Swimming Team in the 1920s, with startling success. One of her coaching protégés was Louis de Breda Handley (p42). Known as "Eppie's swimmers", her charges set 52 world records. Epstein staged "suffrage swim races" and campaigned for women's rights and changes to swimsuits to allow women freedom of movement.

In 1923, a FINA committee was formed to consider the "International Swimming Costume". At the Olympic Games in Paris a year later, Epstein was consulted. What emerged was a rule that dictated that women's suits had to be black or dark blue, be cut no lower than 8cm below the armpit, no lower than 8cm below the neck line, have material that descended into the leg by at least 10cm and, for the preservation of modesty, include a slip, back and front, at least 8cms wide. Epstein served as manager of the USA women's Olympic team in 1920, 1924, and 1928. A Jew, she boycotted the 1936 Games held in Nazi Germany.
