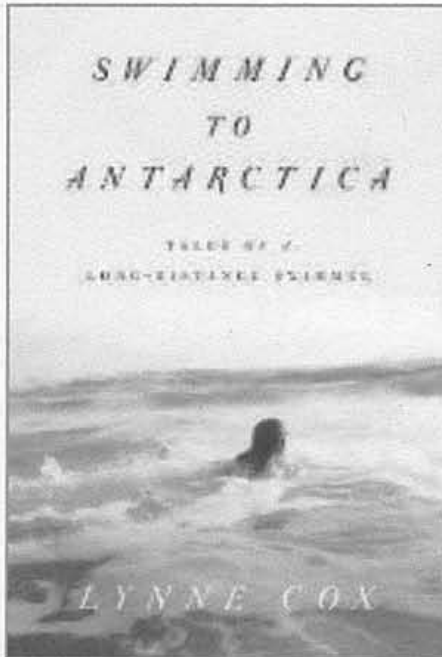


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U.S. Swimmer, Author Cox Seeks Colder Water

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By Nicole Spiridakis

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - On a December day in 2002, Lynne Cox braced herself to plunge feet first into the 32-degree F (0 Celsius) waves of the Antarctic Ocean. Clad in a swimsuit and cap, Cox was poised to become the first person to swim in the frigid, choppy seas off Antarctica.

"I first felt this explosion of cold racing up around me," she recalled. "Immediately, because of the training, it was 'Move your arms, keep your head up, just go,' but I could feel my body changing, my skin

temperature and blood cooling."

Amid penguins and icebergs, her arms churning at the rate of 90 strokes per minute, Cox swam one mile in 25 minutes through the viscous water to reach land -- just one more feat in a string of record-breaking cold water swims.

An endurance swimmer who broke her first world record as a teen-ager, the 46-year-old is no stranger to perilous conditions. Cox was the first woman to swim the 16-mile Cook Strait in New Zealand, and was the first person to cross the 2.7-mile Bering Strait from Alaska to Siberia.

It is her success as a budding diplomat as much as her unique athletic ability that distinguishes her as a swimmer. Cox's 1987 journey across the Bering Strait's 44-degree (6 Celsius) water helped open the Soviet border for the first time in 48 years; a 1990 swim found her in the River Spree, between East and West Berlin.

ATHLETE'S PURSUIT OF NEW CHALLENGES

Reached at a Miami hotel where she was promoting her memoir, 'Swimming to Antarctica' published on Jan. 13, Cox acknowledged that her penchant for swimming in freezing water may seem strange. But she explained that what motivates her is, simply, the athlete's drive to seek out new challenges.

"There were no maps; you have to figure it out all yourself which way the currents move to which way the winds move," she said of being the first person to swim those waters. "It's like climbing a mountain that's never been climbed before."

Cox's ability to withstand cold temperatures has been studied by doctors and scientists to learn more about hypothermia.

She attributes her cold water success to her body type, training and conditioning.

Her body, she said, is adept at closing down blood flow to peripheral areas and she generates more heat than she loses in the water. She said the even distribution of her body fat acts as an insulating wetsuit against the ocean's chilly water.

Still, she said, "People just think that I don't feel the cold or I don't know that it's there. But yes, I feel it."

The Massachusetts-born swimmer now lives in Los Alamitos, Calif., where she trains in the Pacific Ocean. As a teen-ager she quickly discovered the lure of the open sea.

"It was amazing because there were no walls, there were no lane lines, there was nothing holding me back," she said of her "epiphany" -- her first ocean swim at age 14.

Her first marathon swim -- 27 miles across the Catalina Channel in Southern California at age 14 -- led her to pursue her life's goal of crossing the English Channel. At age 15, she broke the men's and women's world records for that crossing, only to have another American break them within months. A year later, she went back and broke them again.

"When you're young and you have these dreams, you just do them you don't think about it," she said. "So much of life is about what people think you can't do and I just try to ignore that."

REACHING OUT TO THE WORLD

Through her swimming, Cox said she hopes to bridge gaps between countries and to foster international diplomacy.

The idea that "maybe these swims could be more than just athletic ventures, they can be ways to bridge distances between countries or focus on cooperation between countries," propelled her across the Bering Strait and the Beagle Channel between Argentina and Chile.

The 1987 Bering Strait swim took 11 years to get authorized by the Russian and American governments, but her efforts helped open the U.S.-Soviet border for the first time in 48 years, she said. Cox swam an extra half-mile against the current to reach the shore where a Russian welcoming committee waited for her with sealskin slippers and flowers. Then, four months later, Soviet President Gorbachev toasted her feat at a White House meeting with President Ronald Reagan.

"I think that people understand the whole effort of the individual going against the tides," Cox said.

While hesitant to discuss future projects, Cox said she is in the "research and planning stages" of another swim.

Meanwhile, she supports herself by working the corporate lecture circuit, writing freelance articles for "The New Yorker" and Los Angeles Times, and by coaching swimmers.

Though her father believes she may have had trouble getting support early on because she was a female swimmer, Cox said times are changing. She is in demand for lectures because she takes a different approach and is a woman swimmer who takes risks.

"It's mental, physical, spiritual. It's all integrated, it's what you are, it's what you do, it's who you want to be, she said. "I'm really bad at running, I broke my elbow playing basketball ... I just did better in water. Add water and I instantly feel alive."

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