

MEMORIES OF THE BLACK SHARK ERNST VIERKOETTER

The year was 1947 when I first learned about and later met Ernst Vierkoetter.

The Canadian National Exhibition located on the north shore of Lake Ontario in Toronto, Canada had resumed its Professional Men's Marathon Swimming Championship after being dormant during World War II.

It was twenty years earlier that Ernst Vierkoetter, representing his country of Germany, had won the first C.N.E. Marathon Swim defeating a field of one hundred and seventy four entrants including Canada's Catalina Kid, George Young, the first person to successfully cross the Catalina Channel earlier that year.

My dad had been present at that swim and he took great delight in describing the surprising results of that inaugural swim to this fledgling competitive swimmer as we watched a fierce looking, barrel chested man in a spotless white suit bark out orders to a large group of swimmers on the starting barge.

As daddy and I followed the swimmers' progress from shore I learned of the epic battle in 1927 between Ernst Vierkoetter and George Young. Ppl

The man in the white suit was known as the famous Black Shark, Ernst Vierkoetter, who had relocated to Toronto and opened a swim school. He also was an swim official for all C.N.E. Swims and a in our family was renowned for having taught my mother to swim.

So it was that I was destined to meet my mother's famous teacher as I approached my 11 birthday. I was a late bloomer, not learning to swim until age nine and by ten I was swimming competitively, albeit with not much success. I loved being in the water, loved practice and my teammates, but I could never make it to the wall first.

My parents determined that a new coach was needed and Mr. Vierkoetter was consulted. After a few private sessions, my parents and I learned that I needed to begin to breathe on my left side. In his opinion all successful swimmers were left breathers which I'd already noticed he was too. No matter how hard I tried I coughed and choked.

He was a very patient with me, but I think he had met his match.

One day the Black Shark exploded with arms flailing, and looking heavenward, he yelled, "You're a great little girl, but you'll never amount to anything if you don't change your breathing!!"

I never did change my breathing and moved on to another coach, but Mr. V and I became life long friends. Whenever I swam a race at the CNE he was always greeted me with his big bear hug and never stopped encouraging me.

Our best moment came the day after I swam across Lake Ontario when he hugged me with tears running down his face as he said, "I knew you wouldn't quit!"

Feeling devilish I reminded him of that long ago day when he'd said I'd never amount to anything.

He laughed heartily and roared in his loud Black Shark style, "AND IF YOU'D LISTENED TO ME AND BREATHED ON YOUR LEFT, YOU WOULD HAVE FINISHED SOONER!"

Maybe he was right!