LOCAL AND GLOBAL MERMAIDS:
THE POLITICS OF “PRETTY SWIMMING”

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Abstract

This thesis considers the perceived athleticism of synchronized swimming by looking at the implications of representations of Esther Williams and "pretty swimming" in popular culture, the allocation of space for women's sport in a local public swimming pool, and an inaugural championship event. Focusing on the first British Columbia (BC) synchronized swimming championships, which were held on February 5, 1949 at Crystal Pool in Vancouver, it shows that images of synchronized swimming as "entertainment" facilitated the development of a new arena of competition for BC women, but that this was accompanied, in effect, by a trivialization of the accomplishments of organizers and athletes.

Chapter One examines the construction of a "global" mermaid by analysing Esther Williams' first film, *Bathing Beauty* (1944), as a typical example of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) aquamusical, a genre that produced images of synchronized swimming as frivolous entertainment. Chapter Two considers how these sorts of images affected the allocation of physical space at Crystal Pool, Vancouver's only indoor public swimming pool at the time, for women's sport. Chapter Three introduces two women who were involved in the 1949 BC synchronized swimming championships: May Brown, who at the time was a University of British Columbia (UBC) Physical Education instructor and synchronized swimming judge, and Maureen Bray (Hibberson), a UBC student who won the individual championship event. Their recollections provide an important corrective to the "pretty swimming" stereotype by demonstrating that these women used the cultural and physical space allotted to them to create a new sport for local women. The final chapter also includes episodes from my personal experiences as a synchronized swimmer in BC during the 1980s.
to underscore the complicated and conflicted heritage for synchronized swimmers in BC represented by the legacy of the 1949 championships and the MGM aquamusical.
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Without the women who shared their memories and keepsakes of BC’s first synchronized swimming championship this history would be incomplete. To Mrs. May Brown, Mrs. Maureen Hibberson, Mrs. Diane Black, and Dr. Barbara Schrodt who shared their memories of the 1949 synchronized swimming championships, thank you for your time, encouragement and enthusiasm.

As this thesis was defended on September 11th, 2001, I would like to dedicate it to the victims of terrorist attacks around the world. In particular, I would like to offer my prayers to all who were victims of this day’s attack on America. I pray also for all who are providing care, for national leaders, for families, and for the nation as a whole as many get back to basics and seek answers in this time of crisis.

Fear not, for I am with you;
Be not dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you,
Yes, I will help you,
I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.
Isaiah 41:10
Introduction

What the girls were trying to do was get people to understand what it was and to show them how much fun it could be and how you could build it into an event with the idea of costumes and so forth... I think the fact that they actually did this was quite a step. Others became interested and it became a motivating thing, even though it wasn't [as] sophisticated as what we have now, it was a beginning.

On Saturday, February 5, 1949 at Crystal Pool in the West End of Vancouver, the University of British Columbia (UBC) Women's Swimming Club hosted British Columbia's (BC) first synchronized swimming championships. Twenty-one women swam two strokes and five figures to compete for the individual title. Teams representing UBC, the Vancouver Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) and the YMCA-YWCA of Victoria challenged each other for the group championship. UBC's Maureen Bray (Hibberson) won the individual event and Victoria Y, or "Archie's girls" as they were named for their coach, won team. As May Brown, UBC Physical Education (PE) instructor, executive member of the ornamental section of the BC-Canadian Amateur Swimming Association (BC-CASA), and judge at the meet recalls, the event marked the beginning of competitive synchronized swimming in the province. BC has held annual championships every year since then, and Synchro BC, the current sport governing body for synchronized swimming, has its roots in this competition. As well, several of the organizers and swimmers went on to become leaders in synchronized swimming in BC and across Canada.

In many respects the 1949 championships can be considered a defining moment in the history of synchronized swimming in BC. Before this meet, competition was limited to in-club RLSS "Barnsley Shield" competitions in figures and routine swimming took place mainly for recreational and entertainment purposes at beaches, resorts and public swimming pools. For example, swimming coach Freddie McDermott organized a "demonstration" or "watershow" team that toured BC and Alberta between 1937 and 1945. An RLSS "girls"
team travelled throughout the Pacific Northwest putting on displays during the 1940s. That was the extent of synchronized swimming activities in BC until the championships in 1949.

There is evidence to suggest that the organizers of the championships were keenly aware of the sport’s entertainment heritage. Costumes and use of music for the team event demonstrated this, as did comments from the athletes and organizers themselves. Three days before the meet UBC’s student newspaper reported, “[t]he UBC girls hope that the tournament will not only provide entertainment but also promote interest in the sport.”

Indeed, anyone familiar with synchronized swimming today recognizes the sport’s entertainment component. An examination of the organization, success and legacy of the 1949 championships offers us a particularly interesting opportunity to appraise the perception of synchronized swimming as entertainment in the development of competition more broadly in North America during the 1940s, as well as to appreciate synchronized swimming’s role in providing an important athletic field for women.

There are many ways in which an historian can approach the development of synchronized swimming both as sport and entertainment. Quite often, sport historians have commented on the trivialization of “feminine” type sports in general and have pointed to synchronized swimming as an example of a sport where beauty, glamour and other “showgirl” qualities are emphasized over and above athletic skill. Other scholars have focused upon the history of competitive synchronized swimming without analysing the impact of “pretty swimming” on its development. In this body of literature, watershow swimming is mentioned but not critically evaluated for its influence on the nature of the sport and the development of competition within it.

A useful approach is to examine the history of the first synchronized swimming championships in BC through the lens of popular culture as well as through the experiences
and actions of the women involved. Although the 1949 competition may have occurred at the same time and place without images of entertainment-type synchronized swimming in the media, these shaped the manner in which the meet was conducted, the way events were structured, its success, and legacy. In women’s sport, the importance of popular culture on competitive events cannot be underestimated or overlooked because “ideologies of sporting femininity and images of sexuality are reproduced in the media and act as a material force on women’s participation in sports.”11 Glamorous representations of swimming stars such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s (MGM) Esther Williams (1922-), which appeared in local newspapers, encouraged audiences to expect showgirl entertainment from the sport and its athletes (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Advertisement for Bathing Beauty, MGM’s first aquamusical
Source: Vancouver Sun, 30 August 1944.
Since the popularity of Esther Williams' films and images provided an important impetus to the BC championships, a useful approach to understanding synchronized swimming as sport and entertainment is to analyse the films themselves and their impact on the credibility of the athletes as sportswomen. Williams' movies comprised a substantial component of the media images surrounding synchronized swimming after 1944. Journalists have commented most extensively on Williams and the aquamusical genre yet very little academic writing exists. While journalistic reports are informative, they lack sufficient analysis. Some academic literature in the "sport film" and "women and film" subject areas mention her films, briefly, but her 17 films, 14 of which feature synchronized swimming, her audience and its impact on the development of competitive synchronized swimming are usually beyond the scope of the analysis. While this thesis cannot evaluate all Williams' work, it does begin by taking her films seriously as new and important depictions of synchronized swimmers. This permits a movie like 
*Bathing Beauty* (1944) to be analysed for its affect on the development of competitive synchronized swimming in BC in particular and, one might argue, in other cities where the sport developed alongside the Esther Williams phenomenon.

This thesis illustrates how images of Esther Williams and "pretty swimming" in the popular media propelled an interest in synchronized swimming which shaped and determined the organization, success and legacy of the 1949 BC championships. Chapter One examines the concept, content, and marketing of MGM aquamusicals. A general discussion of the history of watershows and the making of showgirl-swimmers, from Annette Kellerman (1887-1975) to Esther Williams, in the context of competitive synchronized swimming, is followed by a case study of Williams' first film, *Bathing Beauty*. This film was chosen
because, as a successful “first,” it set the formula for those that followed. The background information and in-depth study of one film demonstrates how “global” representations of “pretty swimming” informed “local” sporting culture making it socially acceptable for UBC women to use institutional facilities, such as Crystal Pool, for athletic competition.

Chapter Two investigates the history of Crystal Pool, Vancouver’s only indoor public pool at the time, and considers the place of women’s sport in this facility, and the ways that this site shaped the BC synchronized swimming championships. After describing the history of women’s swimming in Vancouver and female activities at Crystal Pool, the chapter moves to a discussion of the gendered allocation of public space at the pool. The building’s design and attendance records indicate that white, middle-class women were accommodated with near equality to men at the pool. Important traditions in the swimming community made it possible for women to gain access to pool time for aquatic training and competition. This opportunity, in turn, was reinforced by images of “pretty swimming” which, after 1944, made it even more likely that the UBC women would find physical and cultural space for their synchronized swimming championships.

Chapter Three considers the organization, success and legacy of the event from the perspective of two female participants: May Brown one of four UBC PE faculty members who judged the events that day; and, Maureen Bray a UBC PE student who was an all-round varsity athlete and became, in 1949, BC’s first individual synchronized swimming champion. Their stories are told in the context of UBC swimming history to illustrate that these women believed they were organizing a sporting event first and an entertainment event only incidentally. Despite the tendency of the media to depict synchronized swimming as frivolous, the participants believed the meet contributed significantly to BC women’s aquatic sport. This is corroborated by subsequent developments in synchronized swimming in the
province. For all their hopes, however, synchronized swimming in BC was (and is) ultimately critically informed by images of "pretty swimming." This is examined first in samples of post-1950s representations of synchronized swimming in Canadian popular culture and then in the personal history of a contemporary local athlete. I was a competitive synchronized swimmer in BC during the 1980s. A discussion of my personal experiences, particularly moments where I was used by club executives as a "showgirl" rather than an athlete, underscores the complicated and conflicted heritage for synchronized swimmers in BC represented by the legacy of the 1949 championships and the MGM aquamusical.

1 May Brown, interview by author, tape recording, Vancouver, BC, 10 October 2000.
2 Hereafter referred to by her maiden name, Maureen Bray, except in footnotes where interview is cited as Maureen Hibberson.
3 Archie McKinnon was the PE Director of Victoria YMCA for 40 years. Every Canadian Olympic swimming and track and field team had one of his athletes on it from 1928-1960. He coached the Olympic track and field team in 1936 and the swim team in 1948 and 1952.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
9 In 1939, when Billy Rose held a private audition for Esther Williams for the San Francisco Aquacade, he asked her to swim "pretty" not fast like a racer. This became her signature
style and contributed to the aesthetics of synchronized swimming such as the constant smiling and portrayal of effortlessness.


12 The only film that seems to get attention from scholars in either field is the famous 1949 musical starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. In it, Williams’ character, a baseball-savvy, athletic single woman, inherits ownership of a major league baseball team. It is not an aquamusical. There is only one swimming scene where she does a short solo. See for example, Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) or Howard Good’s *Diamonds in the Dark: America, Baseball and the Movies* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997).
Chapter 1 Global Mermaids: “Pretty Swimming” as Popular Culture

To moviegoers and the studio alike, I was a known quantity. Neptune’s Daughter and Duchess of Idaho were “Esther Williams movies,” just like other movies were “Clark Gable movies,” “Judy Garland movies,” and “Tracy and Hepburn movies.” People stood in line to see these movies not because of the title or the plot, but because we were in them....

This chapter demonstrates how the popularity of MGM’s Esther Williams aquamusicals began to shape the development of athletic competition in synchronized swimming after 1944. It begins by demonstrating how entertainment synchronized swimming or “watershows” advanced alongside competition. It then investigates how and why Williams and “pretty swimming” became successful commodities by analysing the concept, content and marketing of her first movie, Bathing Beauty. Analysis of the impact of her films on the staging and evaluation of the 1949 BC championships is based on market research conducted on female audiences and comments made by synchronized swimming coaches at the time. The chapter concludes by describing spectators’ expectations the night of the championships: were they hoping for entertainment or athletic competition, or both?

Synchronized swimming grew out of aquatic displays in Western Europe in the late nineteenth century. In England and Germany, an increasing number of pleasure-seekers spent their leisure time at beaches and public swimming pools. As a result, incidences of drowning increased dramatically creating a need for trained lifeguards. Lifeguard candidates learned tricks and strokes for their examinations and this became part of the origins of synchronized swimming in Canada and the US. In North America, the growth of seaside culture, competitive swimming, lifeguard training, basic aquatics education, and a desire to be entertained by exotic, scantily clad aquatic bodies provided a rich context for the emergence of synchronized swimming as sport and entertainment.
Annette Kellerman was “the person most instrumental in giving impetus to early synchronized swimming activities,” and it is generally accepted that the Australian swimming champion and marathon swimmer turned movie star is the “mother” of modern synchronized swimming even though she herself did not compete in the sport. In 1907, she was paid $5,000 per week to perform skills akin to modern synchronized swimming in a glass tank at the New York Hippodrome. Seven years later, in 1914, the same year that the American Athletic Union (AAU) allowed women to compete in swimming races, Kellerman starred in Fox Film’s A Daughter of the Gods. Between 1916 and 1924 she made three additional films in the fantasy-romance genre that featured her in aquatic roles. These films popularized early synchronized swimming activities and created a demand for training that was answered in varsity and club swimming programs at pools in eastern North American cities.

Swimming coaches, and teachers who were enthusiastic about improving performance in swimming or exploring “less tedious” alternatives for swimming instruction used synchronized swimming skills in their classes. The swimmers in these early programs, however, trained for exhibitions and watershows rather than competition. In 1916, several American colleges and swimming clubs began performing water plays at annual festivals and ceremonies. By the 1920s, swimming clubs in Montreal had incorporated tricks and rhythmic swimming into their annual water galas. At the University of Chicago, Katherine Whitney Curtis coached 30 female swimmers, the Modern Mermaids Club, to perform in the lagoon at the Century of Progress Chicago World’s Fair in 1933. Eventually, the publicity surrounding aquatic entertainment and the increasing number of swimmers capable of synchronized swimming created a call for competition.
In Canada, this demand occurred somewhat earlier than it did in the US. The Canadian Amateur Swimming Association (CASA) adopted the RLSS handbook’s rules for “ornamental and scientific” swimming in 1924. Quebec held its first championships that same year and Canada its first national championships in 1926. The first American meet was held on May 29, 1939, as part of an Annual Teachers’ Day program. It is generally agreed that this competition between Chicago Teacher’s College and Wright Junior College was the first “group” synchronized swimming meet in history. In Canada, the only other country holding competitions, athletes competed individually. In the wake of the Chicago event, the American Central Association of the AAU held competitions in duet and team. The AAU then accepted these events as a competitive sport in 1941 and synchronized swimming as a national sport in 1945. The CASA synchronized swimming committee worked through the 1940s to add routines to the national championships. Coaches at the University of Western Ontario and McGill University were keen to add this new dimension to the Canadian championships. As a result, a solo championship was added in 1948, and duet and team in 1950.

Another notable development in display synchronized swimming, before the introduction of Esther Williams’ aquamusicals in 1944, was the aquacade. These were held on specially designed stages at the New York and San Francisco World’s Fairs in 1939 and 1940 respectively. The New York aquacade starred Olympic swimmers Johnny Weissmuller and Eleanor Holm. The San Francisco show paired Weissmuller with then 18-year-old Esther Williams. This was Williams’ entrée into the world of entertainment through the vehicle of synchronized swimming.

Like Annette Kellerman, Esther Williams was a competitive speed swimmer turned aquatic star whose name and images became central to popular discourses of sport and
womanhood: both women were high profile athletes whose feminine attributes were
harnessed and marketed as symbols of feminine physicality. The World War II Hollywood
movie industry recognized the power of such women to signify appropriate feminine
athleticism and femininity in general – attributes such as beauty, grace, and feminine
muscularity (that is strong enough to represent the physical fitness of motherhood, but not so
strong as to appear manly). The industry recognized male and female moviegoers’
enthusiasm for glitzy water pageants and glamorous scantily clad stars.7

Also, like Kellerman in the 1910s and 1920s, Williams’ image and name was used to
market products such as private swimming pools and swimwear. Both Kellerman’s one-
piece swimsuit, a design she created herself and first wore in public in 1907, and Williams’
beautiful and functional swimwear were created for women who desired practicality, and in
the case of Williams’ suits, glamour. The swimsuit designs popularized by these athletic
celebrities spared women the constraints of feminine accoutrements and modesty such as
large bulky layers of fabric that hung over the legs and arms. But the new swimwear also
demanded that the body hold the appropriate feminine shape on its own, without the aid of
restrictive undergarments.8 Esther Williams embodied this feminine aesthetic and in her
movies, she showed millions of women how to get it. “Pretty swimming” became a well-
advertised beauty technology, a way to get pretty for the beach or the backyard. This
contributed to the unprecedented growth of synchronized swimming during the heyday of the
post-war aquamusical.9

MGM played a significant role in promoting synchronized swimming in North
America by capitalizing on the ability of Technicolor to provide realistic but escapist
entertainment.10 As Williams wrote in her 1999 autobiography, “Technicolor made it [the
water] so invitingly blue...audiences felt as if they were swimming right beside me.”11
MGM put “pretty swimming” and Esther Williams together in five movies between 1944 and 1948 and over 14 times during her career. From her debut as a fresh-faced college girl in a two-piece pink swimsuit opposite Mickey Rooney in *Andy Hardy’s Double Life* (1942), to her starring role in the spectacular biography of Annette Kellerman’s career in *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952), MGM capitalized on the novelty of the wholesome “Hollywood Mermaid.” Despite their “improbable comedy-of-errors plots,” audiences kept coming as long as Williams swam. By the end of the 1940s, Williams “was part of a group of reliable MGM box-office stars whose movies were counted on to make a certain amount of money for the studio.”

Audience research conducted by political opinion pollster, George Gallup, during the 1940s confirms her popularity with the movie going audience. Of particular significance are the audits of marquee values that quantified a screen actor’s power to sell tickets at the box office. These audits were popularity indices and measured “the percentage of movie goers interviewed in an American, nation-wide, cross-section survey who said that the name of a particular player on the front of a theatre would make them want to buy a ticket.” The “audience” for the purpose of these studies was said to reflect the population of potential moviegoers – men and women, rich and poor, young and old – living in cities and towns of all sizes around the US.

Esther Williams appears for the first time in the Fall 1946 report, after starring in four features, three of which had synchronized swimming as a significant part of the plot – *Bathing Beauty* (1944), *Thrill of a Romance* (1945) and *Easy to Wed* (Summer 1946) – and one which did not, *The Hoodlum Saint* (1946). Table 1 summarizes Williams’ marquee value in relation to Ingrid Bergman, Hollywood’s top actress, and Bing Crosby, the actor with the highest marquee value.
Table 1 Marquee Values of Three Stars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audit Date</th>
<th>Esther Williams (Top Female)</th>
<th>Ingrid Bergman (Top Female)</th>
<th>Bing Crosby (Top Male)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946 Fall</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947 Spring</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948 Spring</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949 Summer</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>1 tied*</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


By 1949, nearly half of all regular moviegoers interviewed said that they would buy a ticket based on Esther Williams' name alone, and she was ranked third only to Ingrid Bergman (first) and June Allyson (second, 46%) in box-office draw. By the end of the year, she shared the top spot with June Allyson*. Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner were other actresses who ranked in the top four in 1948-49.

Convincing Esther Williams to sign as a contract player was a deliberate and profitable venture for MGM. This is evident in Williams' recollection of Louis Mayer's desire to have her join the MGM family.

Now Jack Cummings, an MGM musical producer who had produced Broadway Melody of 1937, came to see me as an emissary from his uncle L.B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Unbeknownst to me, Mayer was determined to find a female athlete and turn her into big box office, much as 20th-Century-Fox had done with
Sonja Henie, three-time Olympic gold medallist in figure skating... I was the young female star of the San Francisco Aquacade who fit the bill.\textsuperscript{20} Mayer finally landed the “tall, wholesome, all-American girl”\textsuperscript{21} he saw in five-foot, eight-inch Williams in October of 1941 when she reluctantly signed for 350 dollars per week. Williams quickly proved an excellent investment for MGM. Her first swimming movie, \textit{Bathing Beauty} (1944), grossed more money internationally than any other in its era except \textit{Gone With the Wind}.\textsuperscript{22} This was Hollywood’s first aquamusical, a genre that can be described as romantic musical comedies where Williams finds true love and gets married to the “right” man. \textit{Bathing Beauty} will be used as a case study of the production and consumption of synchronized swimming and female athletes in this particular form.

In \textit{Bathing Beauty} Williams plays Caroline Brooks, a no-nonsense swimming instructor at a private, Eastern women’s college. This comedy-of-errors romance opens with Carlos Ramirez (playing himself) serenading Williams’ character on behalf of her soon to be husband played by Red Skelton. The water is bright blue and family-type spectators surround an outdoor, public pool which has been emptied for Williams’ swim. Without nose plugs and in full make up, with finger nail polish and wearing her hair in a style familiar to synchronized swimmers today – hair pulled back tight on the scalp with braids wrapped around the crown and a hair piece specially designed to match her swimsuit - Williams performs a two minute routine to “Magic is the Moonlight.” She smiles and plays to the camera both above and below the surface. Following a swan dive entry she performs the following skills: front crawl with corkscrew rolls to back crawl to the end of the pool, pushes off the wall in backstroke, full body rolls and pretty arm strokes while flutter kicking, head first dolphin to get underwater, four dolphin leaps using the bottom to push high out of the water, boosts up and onto her back for double arm backstroke, 540-degree tub turn while
kicking feet to make a small splash, backstroke again, then underwater she executes full body rolls and a few kicks toward the underwater camera that provide the audience with a “crotch shot.” She ends with a powerful and athletic sprint the length of the pool using the corkscrew technique to alternate between front crawl and back crawl. The athleticism of this last image is overwhelmed, however, by what has come before, and by the end of the film, is completely diminished.

_Bathing Beauty_ ends with an eight minute finale shot on MGM’s Sound Stage 30 which cost the studio $250,000 and was built specifically for Williams’ movies. It housed a 90 by 90 by 25-foot swimming pool complete with underwater fountains, geysers, fireworks, and a pedestal with a hydraulic lift. An underwater camera “was encased in a specially constructed aquachamber which resembled a telephone booth.” The finale featured Williams and a cast of 150 women dancing and swimming to Xavier Cugat’s Orchestra playing live on the poolside stage. The swimmers were not necessarily drawn from an outside group of active or retired competitors. Williams recalls, “[w]e kept a roster of chorus girls we’d trained who could swim in the production numbers. Most of them doubled as dancers, because we found that it was easier to teach dancers to swim than to teach swimmers to dance.” The “chorus girls” swam to several variations of a jazz number, “One O’Clock Jump,” while Williams swam to variations of the waltz from the operetta, _Die Fledermaus_. The swimmer-dancer-showgirls looked great in their bathing suits. The overall effect came from several directions: the novelty of the spectacle of nearly naked beautiful women, the grandeur of the pattern changes shot from various wide angles and overheads, the underwater cinematography, and Williams grace and easy, yet powerful, style of presentation.
The finale opens with the swimmers dancing to the jazzy music. They line up along the edge of the pool, strip off their blousy short dresses and reveal two-tone one-piece bathing suits that halve their bodies into equal portions of red and green, with matching frilled nightcap type head coverings, and long black lace gloves. Unlike the solo at the beginning of the movie, which contains some athletic stroking, the finale is a sequence of pattern changes executed through the simplest synchronized swimming movements (somersaults, porpoise dives, sailboats, sinking ballet legs, splashy flutter kicks). Williams’ entrance is spectacular. She rises up out of the floor as an Aphrodite figure clad in an ivory swimsuit, gold hair-piece, cape, belt, and short skirt. She removes the latter three items and gives them to her six attendants then dives in and swims a short solo that blends into a sequence where she swims between two lines of 28 swimmers that soon becomes a pyramid with Williams at the apex. The scene changes to an overhead kaleidoscope made up of at least 35 swimmers and giant wheels made of greenery and water lilies. We soon find Williams on deck again and she dives in and swims underwater through two underwater rotating circles of four swimmers each. For the final solo Williams swims past four fountains and three torches, which she activates with a wave of her hand. The finale ends with Williams rising up on a pedestal surrounded by flutter-kicking swimmers lying on their backs in a circle, who are themselves surrounded by fire and fountains.

When the movie went to MGM’s test audiences in Anaheim, Riverside, San Bernardino, Long Beach, and other small cities in Southern California it was titled Mr. Coed. Rather than getting excited about Skelton’s antics as the only male student at a women’s college, however, audiences wrote enthusiastically about the “water carnival musical extravaganza.” As a result, MGM renamed the movie and gave Williams nearly equal billing with Skelton. In their post-production research, the MGM publicity machine
had discovered the key to successfully marketing *Bathing Beauty*. This is apparent in the images and text of the advertising campaign. For example, when *Bathing Beauty* previewed at the Astor Theatre in Times Square, New York on June 27th, 1944 a six-story billboard featuring Williams in a swan dive hovered over the building (see figure 2).

![Figure 2 Six-story marquee on top of the Astor Theatre in Times Square](source: Esther Williams, The Million Dollar Mermaid (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

This emphasis on marketing Williams' body is reflected in the screenplay itself and almost makes the revised title ridiculous in its redundancy. The following dialogue takes place between Williams' husband, Steve Elliot, played by Red Skelton and Elliot's boss who is producing the watershow and contemplating asking William's character to star in his show.

George Adams: How does she look in a bathing suit?

Steve Elliot: How does she look in a bathing suit?! [Looks at camera] Is he kidding?!\(^29\)

The moment of directly addressing the audience is an inside joke because they saw Williams in a swimsuit at the beginning of the movie (and before that in the newspapers and the theatre lobby). For the viewer there is no denying that her athletic physique is the same physical feminine ideal that adorns the fashion pages.
In their study of the New York City movie market in the 1940s, Gallup et al concluded that local newspapers proved to be the most cost-effective form of advertising as measured by “market penetration” (the proportion of people who know about a movie).\textsuperscript{30}

One way to describe the target audience for Williams’ movies, in this case \textit{Bathing Beauty} and understand its effect on the popularity of synchronized swimming is to analyze the contents of advertisements and articles in magazines and newspapers.

Esther Williams appeared on the cover of \textit{Life} three months before \textit{Bathing Beauty} opened at the Astor (see figure 3).

![Figure 3](image)

\textbf{Figure 3} "Hollywood's Prettiest." Esther Williams on the cover of \textit{Life}

Source: \textit{Life}, 17 April 1944.

The accompanying article in the “Movies” section focuses on the new aquatic sound stage and the intricacies of orchestrating the watershow finale. The article consists of several overhead shots of rehearsals and a few close-ups of the female chorus in-costume (see figures 4 and 5).
The author tries to convince moviegoers that *Bathing Beauty* is a must-see for its athletes, technology and overall innovation.
The highlight of Bathing Beauty, a new M-G-M musical in Technicolor, is a water pageant in which girls do more than splash their toes. Each of its 46 performers swam two miles daily during the seven weeks of production....[T]he ballet serves as a frame for the swimming of Esther Williams, Hollywood’s prettiest shown on this week’s cover. As a setting for the ballet, the most ambitious of its kind in the history of the studio, M-G-M built a pool 90 feet square and filled it with almost a million gallons of warm water.\textsuperscript{31}

This “sneak-peek” into the production of the movie was meant to entice audiences to this new kind of musical: a show where strong yet graceful female bodies would merge with the most advanced underwater technology.

*Bathing Beauty* opened at the Astor Theatre following the very successful 14-week run of *See Here, Private Hargrove*. The first advertisement for the movie in the *New York Times* appeared two days before the movie opened and shows a swimsuit-clad Williams’ shaking hands with a fully clothed Private Hargrove (see figure 6).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{First print ad for *Bathing Beauty*}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{31} Source: *New York Times*, 25 June 1944.
An image of Williams wearing a swimsuit and playfully posing on the text dominates every advertisement for *Bathing Beauty* (for example see figure 7).

![Image of Bathing Beauty advertisement](image)

**Figure 7** Print ad for *Bathing Beauty*


While she was never wet in these photographs, the advertisements were sure to let the viewer know that water and scantily clad women would be a significant part of the movie. Many of the advertisements also tried to link the idea of a swimming musical with escaping the summer heat and let audiences know the Astor was literally and figuratively a “cool” place to see this particular movie (see figure 8).
As one reviewer wrote, "As July pants hotly on June’s heels, it is a pleasant refreshment to have at hand." On another level, from Williams’ very sexual pose in figure 8 it seems the moviegoer is being enticed to escape one kind of heat to enjoy another.

Two months later on September 1, *Bathing Beauty* began its one-week run at the Famous Players Orpheum Theatre in Vancouver. Advertisements appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* one day before it opened and the content of the advertisements was virtually identical to that of the *New York Times* (see figure 1). The focus of the campaign was Esther Williams and synchronized swimming. "The picture opens and closes with a somewhat breath-taking display of bathing beauties and swimming in waltz time," said one commentator. In Victoria, when the movie opened on October 26th the *Daily Colonist* carried the same copy as the *Vancouver Sun*. The similarity between the copy despite local differences in their audiences can be attributed to the saleability of Williams’ body in a swimsuit and to the notion amongst audience researchers in the 1940s that the Canadian market was simply an extension of the American. When audience researchers for the movie industry spoke of
Esther Williams' movies, merchandise, and marketing increased the overall popularity of synchronized swimming and projected an image of female athletes that contributed to the stereotyping of synchronized swimming as a "feminine" women's sport. "Onscreen and in related publicity materials, Esther Williams is both "naturally" beautiful and a product of the studio glamour factory; strong as a man and yet quintessentially feminine; an organic, sexual body that is nonetheless wholesome, pure, and germ-free." The resulting construct of synchronized swimming reinforced the notion that synchronized swimmers are Hollywood showgirls.

Gallup's audience research fuelled MGM's desire to sign Williams in 1941 both because of her appeal and because the significance of audience self-identification with the characters had recently been discovered: her movies were thought to capture a young, heterosexual, female audience. From newsreel research Gallup determined, "[t]he best way to attract women is to have women in the advertisement." Results showed that 76 percent of women said they liked to watch beauty contests versus 27 percent of men; and, 73 percent of women liked fashion shows versus 20 percent of men. This overturned the old notion that men like to watch women and vice versa and provided evidence to MGM that Esther Williams was a good investment.

As well, swimming had particularly high appeal amongst audiences. Gallup asked a "representative cross-section" of moviegoers the following question. "Movie theatres often show short pictures dealing with sports. I wonder if you'd mind telling me which of these sports would interest you as subjects for a movie short?" Out of 24 sports, swimming ranked second to football. "Swimming, ice skating, skiing, tennis, horseback riding, roller
skating, bicycling, archery and badminton were found to interest women more than they interested men. As these are not competitive team sports the results supported the notion that “non-competitive” or watershow swimming would indeed capture female audiences.

Note also that horse racing, yachting, and polo had equal votes from both women and men, and that MGM often included these sports in Williams’ movies. Unlike many of the top stars during this period, Williams was equally popular with male and female audiences across all age groups, upper/middle and lower income groups, and rural and urban moviegoers. The research leaves little room to doubt the logic of the economics behind making movies with watershows and a beautiful swimmer. Their popularity with men, as well as with women, was predicted by the market research. The following review of *Bathing Beauty* demonstrates the appeal these films may have had for heterosexual men.

Hundreds of beautiful maidens make themselves conspicuous everywhere. You don’t have to go to the beach to look ‘em over, now that “Bathing Beauty” is on Broadway. Miss Williams’ talents as a swimmer – not to mention her other attributes – make any title the studio wants to put on it okay by us. When she cuts through the crystal blue water in a rosy-red bathing suit or splashes in limpid magnificence in the gaudy water carnival...she’s a bathing beauty for our money, even though dragged in by the heels.

Another reviewer wrote, “Dry and dressed, she suggests Ginger Rogers. Wet and peeled, as she slithers her subaqueous charms before underwater cameras, she suggests a porpoise amused by its own sex appeal.”

In BC, the most favourable reviews appeared in Victoria where *Bathing Beauty* was held over at the Capitol Theatre. While seeming to speak to heterosexual male audiences, the reviews also commented substantially on William’s athletic credentials and her “superior
swimming talent."  

"Miss Williams, Pacific Coast swimming champion during 1938 and 1939, started her movie career in 1940 when an M-G-M talent scout spotted her in the Billy Rose Aquacade."  

Appeals to potential consumers who loved competitive swimming were juxtaposed against appeals to those who loved girls in swimsuits such as, "[h]ere is a movie chockfull of fun, music, beautiful girls and everything else that adds up to the most delectable kind of movie fare."  

The portrayal of Esther Williams as the healthy, wholesome All-American girl on and off the screen, and synchronized swimming as a show rather than competitive sport was evident in the casting and choreography in Bathing Beauty. Few of the swimmers look comfortable in the pool. The lack of extension in the legs and arms, low position of the shoulders in the water, and tense facial expressions, reveal a lack of training in synchronized swimming, a sport which by 1945 consisted of well-developed and specialized skills requiring core strength, balance and appropriate technique. Rather than being selected for their synchronized swimming talent, the performers were chosen because they looked good in swimsuits. The women in the finale of Bathing Beauty share a slender body type, are relatively pale in complexion, and are attractive by Hollywood’s standards in this era.

It does not appear accidental that swimsuit manufacturers such as Cole of California advertised their products in these movies. In fact, it has been argued that the real success story behind Esther Williams and synchronized swimming musicals was the California sportswear industry. The swimmers in her films represented a uniquely fresh look for women. As one reviewer wrote, "[u]nlike most Hollywood actresses, [Williams] uses cosmetics sparingly, [and] owes glowing good looks largely to her fine physical condition." These movies were cast and choreographed to sell wholesome beauty to a female audience;
“selling” competitive synchronized swimming was not part of the project, but this had significant consequences for the sport.

Esther Williams was a talented swimmer with a signature style, but in the context of her physical ability as a competitive speed swimmer and her experience in the Billy Rose aquacade, her accomplishment as a synchronized swimmer is less noteworthy than might be suggested. In particular, the skills such as the corkscrew, head-first dolphin, and tub turn were part of the standard repertoire of competitive synchronized swimming at the time. These were not new moves, and many of the transitions between elements were very basic skills as well. The popularized notion at the time that only “Esther Williams could swim that way” was a fiction that helped boost her to stardom. It ignored the long history of both competitive and watershow synchronized swimming in Canada and the US.

Not surprisingly, Williams herself believes that she was part of something new. Referring to the finale she wrote,

[w]e didn’t know it, but we were about to invent synchronized swimming as it had never been seen before on film; and this finale set an amazing standard for the aquamusicals to follow....The swimming sequences were rehearsed for ten weeks before the number was shot, and many of the moves in the finale are the basis for what we see today in state-of-the-art synchronized swimming at the Olympics and elsewhere.

While indeed this kind of swimming had “never been seen before on film” [emphasis added], her claims about inventing modern synchronized swimming are misinformed. What she and MGM actually accomplished was the popularization of synchronized swimming as a spectacle and an acceptable sport for women. Before 1950, watershow talent (often men would swim with Williams in her films) and competitors in the sport were predominantly but
not exclusively female. The nature and prevalence of the mediated representations of synchronized swimming after World War II, however, significantly changed the face of the sport; it became decreasingly acceptable for men to participate. Her movies thrust watershows into mass culture and feminized competitive synchronized swimming to the extent that by 1954 men’s interest and participation in competition in the US had faded, and by 1955 the AAU rules dropped men’s events altogether.\textsuperscript{50}

However, the portrayal of synchronized swimming in MGM musicals also created a demand for competitive opportunities for women at the local level. In part, synchronized swimming flourished in post-war North America because it became an appropriate physical activity for women, who otherwise had fewer sporting opportunities than the men of their day. Physical educators and swimming enthusiasts, who were clearly affected by representations of synchronized swimming in mass culture, extolled its virtues as a female-appropriate sport. In the US \textit{Official Aquatics Guide} (c. 1945) Helen Starr of the University of Minnesota wrote,

“Bathing Beauty,” the MGM Technicolor movie, has shown the entertainment possibilities of aquatics, through its excellent selection of aquatic artists, the gorgeous settings, the beautiful costumes, and interesting underwater photography.... Opportunities should be provided for girls and women to experience this type of swimming. They enjoy it because of its close association with dance and other rhythmic activities.”\textsuperscript{51}

Films such as \textit{Bathing Beauty}, and their advertising campaigns, introduced female audiences to the spectacle and idea of synchronized swimming. As a result, participation and interest in competitive synchronized swimming grew significantly during the post-war period. Between 1921 and 1945 only five academic studies appeared on topics related to
synchronized swimming including “Effect of Music Upon Motor Coordination” (Master’s Thesis, Springfield College, 1921) and “Study of the Effects of Rhythmic Training in Swimming on the Performance of the Side and Crawl Strokes” (Master’s Thesis, University of Washington, 1935). From 1946 to 1959, at least 25 studies investigated such diverse aspects of synchronized swimming as interest, teaching methods, history, composition, skills and achievement, recording compositions, and water shows.

BC’s first provincial synchronized swimming championship provides a case study of this growth in participation and interest in synchronized swimming during this period. It demonstrates how the construction of an aquatic movie star, a “global” mermaid, indirectly created openings and opportunities for “local” mermaids to hold and compete in the synchronized swimming championships at Crystal Pool. On the evening of Saturday, February 5, 1949, people in Vancouver came to watch the competitive version of what many had seen Esther Williams do on the silver screen. They saw 21 women compete one after another seven times (five figures and two strokes) and then three teams (two from Vancouver and one from Victoria) swim to music. Unfortunately, there were few accolades for their performance. Some spectators were reported being quite bored at the event. Champion Maureen Bray recalls: “There weren’t al lot [of spectators], a parent of every child that was in it. I can remember that my boyfriend was there and he thought it was the most boring thing he had ever watched in his entire life.” Regardless of the various perceptions of the spectators, that night initiated an unbroken legacy of synchronized swimming competitions at Crystal Pool.

1 Neptune’s Daughter was released in 1949 and cast Williams as a champion swimmer turned swimsuit entrepreneur who falls in love with a Latin polo player. Duchess of Idaho was released in 1950 and cast Williams as a swimming star who goes to Idaho where she finds an


3 See Appendix A.


5 Dubrule, 15.

6 Bean, 7.


9 Stoerker, “History of Synchronized Swimming,” 52.

10 Williams first appeared in the mass media in the July/August 1939 issue of *Life* magazine in an article celebrating her competitive swimming achievements. Her transformation into a minor celebrity took place between 1940 and 1944 when she starred in the Treasure Island Aquacade with Johnny Weissmuller (1940), was cast as the “girl in the swimsuit” in *Andy Hardy’s Double Life* (1942), did several Coke ads (1942) and GI tours as a pin-up girl (1943-1944).


12 Synchronized swimming was not included in four of the films she made between 1942 and 1955. It is significant to note as well that such films did not enjoy the same box-office success as her synchronized swimming films. See Appendix B for a complete list of films.


As a black and white drama starring William Powell, *The Hoodlum Saint* was very different from the Esther Williams’ formulaic film and was not received well by audiences.


Williams, *Million Dollar Mermaid*, 57.


The original title, *Mr. Coed*, is more representative of the plot, which features Skelton’s antics as a student in women’s college.


42 “Bathing Beauty,” review of Bathing Beauty (MGM movie), Time, 3 July 1944, 88.


44 Ibid.

45 “Bathing Beauty Held Over At the Capitol Theatre,” review of Bathing Beauty (MGM movie), The Daily Colonist, Victoria, BC, 29 October 1944, 17.


47 “Bathing Beauty,” review, Life, 17 April 1944, 82.


49 Williams, Million Dollar Mermaid, 111.

50 Dawn Pawson Bean, “”, Encyclopædia, 1148.


53 Ibid., 42-45.

54 Between 1944 and February 1949 Williams starred in five aquamusicals, all of which played in Vancouver theatres.

Chapter 2 Crystal Pool: A New Site for Synchronized Swimming

Spectators were upstairs on the balcony, competitors on the benches at the pool deck but could go upstairs when they weren’t competing. The place smelled and it was cold. There were four judges, one on the diving board, one up in the balcony, and one on either side of the pool.

This chapter focuses on physical space, which is in this case an aquatic sporting venue in Vancouver, Crystal Pool. It demonstrates how cultural notions about “pretty swimming” had a considerable impact on how the first BC championships were staged at this facility. It first examines women’s presence in competitive swimming, gender and the facility’s design, gender and pool advertising, and female attendance. It then considers the media’s ambivalence towards women’s athleticism in the pool, beginning with a general discussion of women’s swimming and moving to the synchronized swimming championship. Vancouver women had been a strong presence in the swimming world since the turn of the century. Female participation in even the most gruelling competitions was accepted and appreciated by local swimming fans. This is evident in editorial comments in the sports section of local newspapers. In August 1916, six women and fifteen men representing five clubs, or swimming “unattached,” entered the chilly waters of James Bay to cross to Victoria. While men comprised over 70 percent of the field, a journalist noted that “five of the swimmers finished the course, three of the five being ladies.” Audrey Griffin of the mixed Vancouver Amateur Swimming Club (VASC) beat the second place finisher, Gordon Young of the YMCA, by a full 15 minutes.

The end of World War I saw women established in aquatic sport clubs such as VASC, as Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) swimming instructors, and varsity swimming at UBC. During the interwar years, their presence and success continued to grow. The UBC club had a women’s contingent since the school opened in 1915 and their achievements were regularly reported in the UBC student paper. In 1929, the first racing season at Crystal Pool, UBC
hosted the Lower Mainland Swimming League competition. Headlines such as “Varsity Women Star in Swimming Gala” celebrated their victories. One UBC student journalist wrote: “The Varsity girls were well able to hold their own with the Crescent [Beach Swimming Club, White Rock] girls, but the men’s teams were very weak....” With a history of strong women’s competition in the Greater Vancouver area, it was important that they, as much as the men, had a training facility that met their needs. The internal allocation of gender-segregated space at Crystal Pool reflects this.

Construction began in 1927. The site was 1490 Beach Avenue at Nicola Street in Vancouver’s West End, a beachfront property within walking distance of the municipal transit system. The 153 by 72 foot facility was built in “modern Mission style” with the intention of fitting into a leisure centre that would include a winter garden and concert hall (see figure 9).

The building contained nine tub baths and a 40 by 100 foot heated, salt-water swimming pool estimated to hold 170 swimmers. On the lower floor, the men’s dressing room was built along the 100-foot length of the pool while the women’s dressing room ran the width of the
shallow end (see figure 10). Upstairs, men and women’s tub baths both occupied the length of the pool but the men’s area was larger and contained an extra tub (see figure 11).

Figure 10 Floor Plan, swimming pool with dressing areas

Figure 11 Floor plan, balcony and tub baths
Considering the allocation of space to each gender for dressing and bathing, approximately 40 percent was designated for female patrons. An advertisement from the 1929 opening season provides visual confirmation that the pool was intended to serve the needs of both men and women with near equality (see figure 12).

![Advertisement for Crystal Pool c. 1929](image)

Figure 12 Advertisement for Crystal Pool c. 1929


Despite its popularity with men and women, individual and club patrons, the pool was forced to close in October 1939 due to the rising cost of maintenance. The Park Board, however, soon purchased the pool from the original company, made the necessary renovations and re-opened the pool on Monday, March 31, 1941. Throughout the 1940s, the pool continued to welcome both male and female patrons, and even hired female staff. When the pool reopened, the *Vancouver Province* reported, “a happy crowd of boys and girls stormed the entrance.”

Gordon Ross of Ocean Falls (a centre for elite swimming in
British Columbia\textsuperscript{13}) was the on-site manager while June McMartin ran the new lunch counter. According to attendance records, women attended public swimming sessions in approximately the same proportion that had been anticipated by the original designers (see table 2).

### Table 2 Gender and Adult Patrons at Crystal Pool\textsuperscript{14}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Patrons</th>
<th>Percent Men</th>
<th>Percent Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>49,217</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>49,984</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>58,804</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>48,663</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>54,370</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>48,443</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus from the records we can see that white, middle-class women in Vancouver were afforded space for their sporting activities. Opportunities to participate in competitive synchronized swimming in 1949 developed in this context, though it must be pointed out that from the mid-1940s onward, ambivalence about female swimmers existed in the public’s mind. In part, “space” (in its broadest theoretical sense) for women’s championships was created less by an appetite for competitive swimming and more by images of female athletes as entertainers. This is evident in media coverage of women’s events.

In July 1944, Crystal Pool was the venue for the national (speed) swimming championships. Coverage of the women’s events appeared in the \textit{Vancouver Sun} sports section. In this article, the VASC’s top female competitors were posed poolside (see figure 13).
They are depicted smiling, splashing and showing off their swimwear. This is a stereotypical representation of serious athletes as child-like showgirls. By contrast, photographs of any sort rarely accompanied newspaper reports of male swimmers, rather the results – placing and times – were provided along with brief biographical summaries. The 1948 UBC varsity men’s and women’s swimming teams were represented manner that reflects this dichotomy (see figure 14).
Here the female athletes look like beauty pageant contestants, particularly when juxtaposed with the image of their male counterparts. To reinforce the swimmers’ “appropriate” gender roles, the caption for the women’s photograph is a list of names while that for the men describes sport-specific action: “Five members of swimming team paused momentarily on edge of pool, waiting for final gun to send them plunging into the water [sic].”

Media coverage of the 1949 synchronized swimming championships illustrates how the site, and popular representations of female swimmers in the media, shaped the event. Women are described as serious competitors on the one hand, which speaks to the historical acceptance of women at the pool. On the other, they are depicted as “bathing beauties,” which in turn helped make their competitiveness tolerable during the post-war period, a time characterized by a backlash against women’s participation in serious physical pursuits.

Editors and writers, however, differed in the degree to which they “feminized” the athletes. *Vancouver Sun* sports editor, Don Carlson, relayed the facts without characterizing Bray or the team champions as “mermaids” or “bathing beauties.” He described the event as an athletic exercise using a tone identical to that in the articles covering men’s sports. As well, amidst four photographs of male athletes, advertisements for men’s products, and reporting on men’s activities in basketball, hockey, skiing, baseball, bowling, cross country running, horseracing, golf, wrestling, boxing, badminton, and speed skating, synchronized swimming was the only women’s athletic event mentioned in this section that day. The article reads:

The first British Columbia women’s Ornamental swimming championship was held at Crystal Pool Saturday night. The championships sponsored by the University of British Columbia girls’ swimming club was a big success and officials hope to make it an annual affair. Maureen Bray of UBC won the women’s individual championship.
defeating Dorothy Aetzel and Ruth Brett of the Vancouver Amateur Swimming Club.

Group championship went to Victoria YMCA with UBC second. The Victoria club was presented with a trophy donated by the Hudson Bay Company.¹⁷

This short article captures the spirit of the organizers who were hoping the championship would be the first of many and emphasizes its significance as a sporting first, not its entertainment value.

The fact that synchronized swimming was the only women’s sport reported on that particular Monday, suggests that perhaps it was printed because it was a feminine sport in which women did not threaten masculine notions of sport and play. However, it is also important to notice that Bray was described as “defeating” her opponents, the language associated with competitive sports and the notion of “champion.” Notice also that the headline refers generically to “swimming” not ornamental swimming. What may have been of genuine interest was the foundational aspect of this event. It was a new arena of championship competition for British Columbians.

The Victoria press played up the “feminine” angle more than that of the larger city across the straight. While there is slightly more description of the results, the competitive and sporting nature of synchronized swimming was trivialized when the winning team was called the “YMCA water ballet troupe” – describing them as travelling actors or performers.¹⁸ That day the sports section was three pages long and contained six photographs of athletes: five of men, and one of the Victoria Y women’s synchronized swimming team. Four of the men’s photographs show athletes in action – three show boxers in the ring and another a fistfight between two players during a hockey game. One of the “men’s” photographs shows a father and his two sons and daughter posing with their tennis rackets in their country club uniforms. As you can see in figure 15, the photographer chose
to represent the synchronized swimmers as beauty pageant contestants, a theme which is reinforced by the flower in each competitor’s hand.

Figure 15 Victoria "Y" synchronized swimming team, 1949 provincial champions

The UBC student newspaper did more justice to the organizational efforts and athletic achievements of the women involved in the event. Coverage before the event focused on advertising and the hope that the meet would “not only provide entertainment but also promote the sport.” By making a distinction between entertainment and sport, the author of this article was encouraging the reader to consider the female body in water as athletic and competitive rather than as simply feminine display.

The most inaccurate and disrespectful coverage of the event also came from UBC. At the time of the BC championships, women’s sports on campus were suffering to such a degree that female athletes spoke out against the lack of opportunity and support, and the rise of the cult of the beauty contest. It is not surprising then that the varsity-swimming page in the 1948-9 *Totem* (UBC Annual) focused almost entirely on the male members of the swim club (who only outnumbered the women by about 2:1) and completely downplayed the athleticism and accomplishments of its female members. The women were referred to as the
“glamour members of UBC’s swimming club [who] took several meets, including [the] ornamental championships from Victoria Y” and the men as the “not-so-glamorous swimming team [which] relied on speed, not beauty, to garner many titles against stiff outside competition.”21 A year of successes in swimming and synchronized swimming is summarized with a snigger as follows: “The femmes put in a little extra time on their displays when they brightened up the UBC Championships with an eye-catching water ballet during intermission.”22

Here is synchronized swimming epitomized as spectacle, separate from and less valuable than other aquatic sports. From this perspective, synchronized swimming is never an arena for determining any kind of legitimate provincial champion. However, despite the Totem author’s ignorance of the athletic and organizational achievements of students like Maureen Bray, and faculty like May Brown, the championships were a success. Synchronized swimming’s organization and popularity increased and UBC a significant contributor to the sport in BC and beyond.
Crystal Pool interior, northwest view, 1929. Source: City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA), photo by Stuart Thomson, CVA 99-2215.

Maureen Hibberson, interview.

The history of women's competition in swimming in Vancouver is congruent with the broader history of women's swimming during the first half of the twentieth century. As the tables show, women's participation in aquatic sports at the Olympics was significantly higher than women's participation in all events combined.

Percentage of Female Competitors in the Summer Olympics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Aquatic Events</th>
<th>All Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920 Antwerp</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924 Paris</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928 Amsterdam</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932 Los Angeles</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936 Berlin</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948 London</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952 Helsinki</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Jennifer Hargreaves argues that women, at least those who were white and middle-class, gained ground in British aquatics during the interwar years for the following reasons: they demanded equity; they could afford access to public facilities; there were more swimming clubs; there was pressure for “mixed” swimming; and, there were a growing number of mixed swimming galas. Before the First World War, she argues, men dominated swimming. They had more leisure time and strictly controlled the administration of swimming pools and clubs, so allocated themselves more time in the water. Source: Jennifer Hargreaves, Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women’s Sports (New York: Routledge, 1997), 126.

“Varsity Women Star in Swimming Gala,” The Ubyssey, 8 November 1929, 16.

CVA, Director of Finance’s Records, Loc. 94-A-1, File 7, “Proposed Salt Water Natatorium.” Throughout the pool’s history, the Park Board commissioners seemed determined to make Crystal Pool part of a larger scheme. The plans kept changing but the underlying goal was to figure out how to make the beaches and waterfront property between the Burrard Bridge and the entrance to Stanley Park work to the city’s fiscal benefit, by hosting sporting events and attracting more tourists. As late as 1938, there were Park Board memos arguing that the vacant 60-foot strip of land behind the building could be used for an outdoor pool or an open-air sports facility. But by 1972, the year City Council approved the plan to replace Crystal Pool with a new aquatic centre, additional leisure facilities remained a dream. Today the stretch of beach from the Burrard Bridge to the Stanley Park entrance remains an unbroken park and shoreline.

The text reads: “The timid bather learns swimming quickly at the Crystal Pool. The clear filtered salt water is calm and uncrowded [sic]. You stand on an even tiled floor in water which shoals gradually from 10 feet to 30 inches. Here you can’t be caught in a treacherous undertow or get suddenly beyond your depth. You are safe...absolutely safe. And it’s more healthful swimming at the Crystal Pool. The tangy salt water is purified and clear...filtered,
circulated and changed every two hours. You feel a new exhilaration as this clean, warm
tropic sea closes about you. You breathe fresh circulating sea air. The Crystal Pool is
beautiful, comfortable and spotlessly clean. It gives to sport lovers of Vancouver a new
healthful recreation centre.”

10 In 1938, Crystal Pool Limited (formerly Vancouver City Natatorium Limited) entered into
discussions with the Park Board over the future of the pool. In November, the Park Board
requested a by-law for purchasing the pool for $36,000. However, the City building
inspector reported to a special committee of council members that the pool would require
$15,000 in repairs if acquired. The committee recommended against the by-law. Despite
aggressive lobbying by the RLSS and VASC, the city was not ready to support such a
venture despite evidence of public support and the desire to create the park. As a result, the
pool closed in October 1939.

Throughout 1939, discussion continued about the value of the pool to the citizens of
Vancouver and their sports clubs. In December, a by-law was finally submitted and the
people of Vancouver voted in favour of purchasing the pool. As the Vancouver News Herald
reported days before the vote, the pool was considered a good deal for the city and,
apparently, it had funds set aside for it. “Intelligent and far-seeing ratepayers will vote an
emphatic “yes” for the Crystal Pool plebiscite. This is no time for wasting money. But
neither is it a time for allowing money to lie fallow in banks.” Source: “Crystal Pool
Plebiscite,” Vancouver News Herald, 9 December 1939, 4. The City completed the purchase
of the pool on March 14, 1940 and immediately turned operations over to the Park Board.
The City paid $26,712.36 and the Park Board $3,287.64 for a total cost of $30,000. The Park
Board paid the City back at $2,000 per year, interest-free.

Total cost of repairs was $16,200 and included: a new heating and ventilation system; the
men’s locker room was adjusted so individual lockers were available; a high-circulating
pump was added to the filtration system; it was painted inside and out; and, a lunch counter
was added.

11 “New Swimming Hole, Youngsters Enjoy First Dip in Redecorated Crystal Pool,” The
Vancouver Province, 1 April 1941, 6.

12 While boys and girls, men and women were welcomed back, there was an issue about
“black” bodies in and around the rejuvenated facility. A note in the personal files of Major
James Skitt Matthews mentions the following incident which occurred less than one month
after the grand opening.

In a conversation, May 2nd, with a Park Board office official, the fact that the colored
[sic] lady had been refused admission ON ACCOUNT OF HER COLOR [sic] was
admitted. It was stated that the reason was that certain persons objected to swimming
in the same waters as a person whose skin was black; why was not stated. It was
assumed that they “just didn’t like it”. Source: CVA, James Skitt Matthews, Add.Mss

44
The details of this incident are not clear from the primary sources available, nor is it clear whether or not this was an isolated incident in the history of the pool. A brief editorial by James Butterfield in the *Vancouver Province* newspaper also accused the Park Board of having poor judgement and called this incident an “extraordinary” case. However, as “extraordinary” as this incident may have appeared to Skitt and Butterfield, people of colour were not allowed to enter the pool at the same time as “white skinned people”; “they” had their own swimming times. Park Board records indicate that in November 1945 the Association of Secondary School Principals attacked the Board for segregation at Crystal Pool. As a result, the Board decided to allow everyone, “regardless of race, colour or creed,” to swim during public sessions. Source: Richard (Mike) Steele, *The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation: The First 100 Years* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 1988), 125.

13 Ocean Falls is a BC mill town that produced an unusual number of excellent swimmers between 1948 and 1976. A swimmer from the Ocean Falls Club was on every Olympic team between 1948 and 1976. As well, between 1960 and 1965 the club won every Canadian championship except one. Their coach was George Gate and the mill built their home pool in 1920.

14 The information in table 4 was found in Park Board annual reports and provides evidence that children under 12 were the dominant user group until 1944 when more tickets for public swimming sessions were sold to adults. This may in part be the result of organizations and clubs absorbing some of the attendance numbers during their rental periods. There are only two years in which the annual reports contain data about the total rental periods to clubs – in 1942 there were 109 rental periods, and in 1943, 172 – but it may be inferred that many of these amateur clubs and swimming programs were designed for school children and not adults. According to 1958 pool schedules, some of the regular users were the West Vancouver Swim Club, RLSS, Crescent Beach Swim Club, Dolphin Swim Club, VASC, UBC Swim Club, Tyee Swim Club, Diving Club, and the CASA Training Program.


17 Don Carlson, “Bray Wins B.C. Women’s Swim Title,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 7 February 1949, 10.


20 Lee Stewart, “It’s Up to You”: *Women at UBC in the Early Years* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), 120.

22 Ibid.
Chapter 3 Local Mermaids: Creating a Legacy

The UBC girls were the most knowledgeable. They were the ones that were the driving force behind getting it established and getting it accepted and expanding it and getting others to join. So they got the notion of having an event because they thought that would get people interested and publicize it and try to give it some profile and that’s why they got working on this event in ’49 at Crystal Pool.¹

As we have seen so far, synchronized swimming in North America has its origins in entertainment as well as sport. This was especially true with the popularization of Esther Williams movies such as Bathing Beauty after 1944. We have also seen that Crystal Pool was a sports facility that accommodated female athletes, but that during the post-war period there was also an attitude of ambivalence toward physically active females that trivialized, in some cases, and celebrated, in others, the physically fit and “heterosexually pleasing” synchronized swimmer. This chapter begins by examining the history of women’s aquatics at UBC and the organization of the 1949 BC championships through the memories and perspectives of two participants: judge and UBC Physical Education Faculty member, May Brown, and athlete and UBC student, Maureen Bray. After exploring how the meet became a catalyst for the growth of synchronized swimming in BC, I provide a broader analysis of how Esther Williams and representations of “pretty swimming” in popular culture continue to reinforce the sport-entertainment tension. I then discuss my own experiences as a synchronized swimmer with the Vancouver Aquasonics during the 1980s to illustrate how this tension continues to affect athletes.

With the exception of five years between 1939 and 1946, where wartime exigencies and priorities closed the club,² swimming was part of athletic life at UBC since it opened in 1915. Over the years, the swimming program evolved from gender-segregation to mixed teams, and from “club” to varsity teams, but female students have participated in one form or another since the beginning. In 1915-1916, the women’s club rented the indoor pool at
Chalmer’s Church one hour each week where they practiced for RLSS examinations, which would have included basic synchronized swimming skills. However, as interest in swimming grew, the UBC club exclusively focused on speed events. They participated in inter-class play-days (i.e., Seniors versus Freshmen), local meets against Vancouver, Victoria and Washington clubs and in inter-collegiate competitions. Synchronized swimming, as a specific activity, did not begin at UBC until 1947.

Women were a significant force in the early history of the UBC swimming club both in numbers and in leadership. By the 1929-1930 season, the same year that Crystal Pool opened in Vancouver, the club was mixed, with women outnumbering men by 13:5. In 1933-1934, when the club began training at Crystal Pool, there were 50 swimmers and the president was Florence Jackson. Closed during the war years, the club resumed operation in 1945, a year after the introduction of Esther Williams aquamusical. Respect for female team members’ athletic accomplishments had clearly faltered. The women were “UBC’s school of mermaids” while their male teammates referred to as “Leading varsity splashers.” The next year little had changed. The female team members were “Four lovely aquabelles,” one of whom was Irene Strong holder of 15 Canadian records. This dichotomous presentation signals the politics of space at UBC, an institution with its own long history of putting women in their place, academically and otherwise. Synchronized swimming emerged as an acceptable sporting activity in this context.

Female students who were involved in the new Physical Education instructional program and the local RLSS swimming team began experimenting with synchronized swimming in 1947. They started with RLSS strokes and figures and soon were choreographing routines to music which they presented at various aquatic events. By 1948,
there was sufficient interest for a competition. However, knowledge about the techniques and rules of competitive synchronized swimming as they had developed in north-easter North America was a scarce resource in BC. The few available resources were, however, sought out and used effectively by student organizers such as Joan Robinson (Nelson). May Brown turned out to be a key contributor to the organization of the event.

May Brown served the UBC community as a faculty member and coach for many years. Upon completing her Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education at McGill in 1947, she came home to teach in UBC’s School of Physical Education and coach women’s varsity field hockey. According to her players, she was a popular and successful coach who encouraged sportsmanship and participation and knew how to inspire her athletes to victory. She also understood that sportswomen needed time, space, and financial support in order to compete. Some of Brown’s players were also on the varsity swim team and she became instrumental in helping them form a synchronized swimming club. She recalls:

I used to be the UBC representative [to the BC section of the Canadian Amateur Swimming Association (BC-CASA)] and I went to all the meetings just to get information on what was happening in swimming; we were just a small little ornamental section but the bigger clubs were supportive and helped us get going. They may have helped us with the rental on that first meet.

Thus Brown attended executive meetings to keep informed about developments and issues in the provincial swimming organization and her attendance at BC-CASA gave a face and voice to the province’s newest aquatic sport.
Aside from securing support for the event from BC-CASA, who in the end paid for the pool rental for the championship, Brown provided literature from Quebec and Ontario clubs to assist both the swimmers and the judges\textsuperscript{16}.

I was asked to be a judge and I personally have not done synchronized swimming but from the time I went to UBC and started working with the club I started studying it and getting my hands on anything I could. And then we were introducing it into our teaching, just as a teaching method, like [when] you are floating and can you do this and can you do that and because our classes were starting to gear toward life saving we were using a duck dive or a surface dive. We were trying to use some of the elements of it. So those of us that were judging had to do a lot by reading. We had to learn it from the literature that we could get our hands on. By then I was just helping the girls organize but on the day of the event I was one of the judges. So we [judges] worked quite hard to try to be as uniform as we could when we went to judge with what knowledge we had.

She summed up her experience of the championships with the following comment, which provides some insight into the effort required to establish a new sport:

Usually if people turned out for a sport, they came to participate and they came out and played. But, in this case, the same core group had to do everything, there was no structure and they had to practice and participate but also do all the administration because there really wasn’t any administration there. So I kept fairly involved and I was willing to go to the evening meetings [at BC-CASA]. That was one of the things that I did conscientiously for a number of years; it saved them from going to meetings at night...I stayed with them even after I left UBC. I did quite a bit of judging\textsuperscript{17}. 

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Without skilled and dedicated women like May Brown, who were willing to take on sometimes tedious administrative responsibilities, it is possible that women such as Maureen Bray would never have become provincial champions in synchronized swimming.

Maureen Bray earned her Bachelor of Physical Education degree from UBC in 1951. During her four years as an undergraduate, she was an all-round athlete excelling in swimming, badminton and field hockey. She was also president of the UBC Women’s Big Block Club and the representative for swimming on the Women’s Athletic Directorate during the 1950-1 season. Bray’s athletic career began early, she recalls:

I was born in Victoria and I learned to swim at four years of age under Archie McKinnon, which is a very familiar name; the [University of Victoria] gymnasium is named after him... I competed at the grade school level here and then I moved to Vancouver and didn’t swim during High School. We lived closed to Spanish Banks and I swam a lot there. I went to UBC where swimming was required in Physical Education at that time. I got my bronze, silver and instructors certificate from the Royal Life Saving Society and I got my Red Cross instructor’s certificate. I competed on the UBC competitive team. Doug Whittle [was the head coach] and Helen O’Brien was the token female coach. She didn’t actually coach us but the regulation was that a faculty member always had to travel with the team and a male faculty member couldn’t travel with the women’s team so she did. I lifeguarded at Bowen Island for four years on weekends with my assistant as Bim Schrodt. In those days all guards lost their amateur standing for two months following your last day of guarding and if you taught swimming for money you lost your amateur standing forever. I took ballet lessons from the age of six to twelve, which I think was
extremely useful. I also took piano lessons and I had the use of Ronald Graham’s indoor pool, which was just down the street from where I lived. My Dad used to come down and sit there and make sure I didn’t drown while I did my practicing and Graham’s loaned us their pool to teach the students of University Hill School. As a leader, an aquatics teacher, a resource finder and a dedicated athlete who eager to try new sports, Bray supplied a positive role model for synchronized swimmers. Her experience countered the entertainment legacy that was otherwise so dominant.

The meet was held at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, February 5, 1949 at Crystal Pool. Tickets were 25 cents and were sold personally by the UBC team members. Twenty-one swimmers from three clubs participated in individual and team events; the competitors ranged from high school to undergraduate age. In the individual event, swimmers performed two strokes (back crawl and crawl) and five figures (sculling, back somersaults, porpoise, revolving on the surface, and pendulum). The following narrative from Maureen Bray captures the atmosphere of the evening:

We swam one length of each stroke and I have a strong memory that I got a 10 in the breast stroke because I had a good frog kick. Then one figure was selected from each of five groups with a set degree of difficulty. Team competition was the last on the program. Presentations were made at the end and they were over at the side, which was underneath where the people were looking. A cup and a keeper cup [for the individual championship] were donated by the University Hill Man’s Forum (an informal group of gentlemen that lived on the university hill and meet once a month). My father was involved in the group.
Victoria “Y” placed first in the team competition (a 10-minute routine set to music) and won a trophy donated by the Hudson’s Bay Company. The UBC team placed second and Vancouver RLSS third. Local synchronized swimming historian and participant, Diane Black, recalls the following details of the team competition: “The team routine winners were the girls from the Victoria “Y”, (Archie’s Girls) and their team number to “Jealousy” was most colourful when the dyed-to-match bathing suits “ran” in the water.”

While the spectators were mostly comprised of family and friends, the meet raised the profile of synchronized swimming in BC and helped ensure championships would be held every year thereafter. As Brown recalls: “It wasn’t sort of a sophisticated, big extravaganza or anything. It was sort of a beginning. But in terms of a beginning, it was significant.”

May Brown proved instrumental in developing and disseminating information about synchronized swimming in BC. She and Donalda Smith spent several years and one hundred dollars each to compile, edit, and publish the first Star Manual, a guide for teaching basic recreational synchronized swimming skills that has become the central manual and program for introductory programs. The Star Program is a system of badges and star pins for which each candidate must demonstrate competency in a group of skills that increase with difficulty as the badge level increases. For example, the Star 1 test involves sculling and basic body positions, while Star 5 includes whole figures which combine many of these basic elements into a Federation Internationale Natation Amateur or “FINA”-sanctioned, competitive figure, as well a short routine. With the publication and distribution of this manual in the 1950s, synchronized swimming advanced very quickly throughout the province so that specialists were soon needed in each area of the sport – coaching, administration, etc. – and it was no longer standard practice for a coach to swim with her
In 1960, May Brown was BC’s chief judge at the Canadian Championships. Her assistance was made possible the provincial and municipal grants given to the BC-Amateur Synchronized Swimming Association (BC-ASSA) for the first time in 1960.26

Maureen Bray went on to become a leader in the sport in Victoria. She ensured that when the Archie McKinnon Memorial Gymnasium and Pool were built at the University of Victoria that the pool had underwater lighting, underwater speakers, and a deeper shallow end for the synchronized swimmers.27 She also spent several years teaching swimming at Crystal Gardens in Victoria and her enthusiasm for synchronized swimming ensured new swimmers would learn its foundational skills. When asked what she thought the championships contributed to the development of synchronized swimming in BC she replied, Look at all the clubs that developed in the province and all the opportunities that girls had to do this. I started a synchronized swim club at UVIC [University of Victoria], somebody else coached it and it went on their recreational program and they got quite a few people that enjoyed doing it. If you don’t like to speed swim, synchronized swimming is a wonderful, wonderful sport.28

By every measure Maureen Bray and May Brown stood at the heart of this significant moment in BC synchronized swimming history.

The UBC women and the 1949 championships they participated in contributed substantially to the development of synchronized swimming as an important field of aquatics for women to compete in BC and beyond. UBC went on to host the annual meet until 1952 when the BC- Amateur Synchronized Swimming Association (BC-ASSA) was formed and assumed responsibility for conducting provincial competitions. Competitors from the 1949 championships were also instrumental in this new organization. Diane Johnson (Black) of
the UBC club became President. Sybil Berry of the RLSS team was Treasurer. In 1952, BC sent two swimmers, one of whom was Maureen Bray, to the Canadian nationals in Montreal. Bray placed 12th. In 1953, the BC-ASSA put in a bid to host the 1954 Canadians at Crystal Pool. There was some concern about the potential problems presented by the buoyancy of the salt-water at the pool, but the Canadian ASSA executive eventually accepted the bid.

As this 1949 moment demonstrate, the simultaneous development of competitive synchronized swimming and aquamusicals has deeply shaped the public’s conceptions of synchronized swimmers – are they athletes, entertainers, or both? In truth, they are both. On the positive side, representations of “pretty swimming” in the past increased the sport’s profile and attracted new athletes, but they also hindered its acceptance as a legitimate competitive women’s sport. Synchronized swimmers’ precision, strength and cardiovascular stamina continue to be trivialized or ignored. A preoccupation with smiles, slenderness, grace, and effortlessness largely determine criteria by which outsiders view their achievements. Such reception effectively denies synchronized swimming significance as a display of strength, endurance and skill. Popular representations of synchronized swimming after 1950 and episodes from my own experience as a synchronized swimmer demonstrate the persistence of the Esther Williams’ image and its effects on individual athletes.

Rather than focus on athletic performance in competition, contemporary journalists often tend to focus on the beauty, sensuality and emotionality of the athletes. In 1969, for example a reporter simpered that: “Vancouver Island senior champion Diana McLean swam The Japanese Princess with sylphlike ease [emphasis added].” In 1988 the tone is the same: “The day before, Waldo, 23, dripping but still resplendent in a sequined pink swimsuit, had
covered her face to hide the tears welling out of control at the announcement of her first-place finish [emphasis added]." Such narratives reinforce the belief that synchronized swimmers always conform to contemporary standards of idealized femininity.

As sport scholar Jennifer Hargreaves writes, "‘feminine appropriate’ sports like gymnastics, ice-skating and synchronized swimming, which emphasize balance, coordination, flexibility and grace, idealize popular images of femininity." Female athletes in a wide range of sports are regularly disciplined to move and hold themselves with constriction, grace and a controlled eroticism: stomach in, shoulders back and chest out. In synchronized swimming, these “constrictions” by necessity form the basis of many basic body positions enhancing the sensuality of the athletes. Make-up is another complicated aspect of the sport that expresses a level of conformity with dominant beauty standards.

In a Vancouver Sun article featuring the Canadian duet that won gold at the 1990 Commonwealth Games the writer draws the reader’s attention to their physical appearance. “Glen [one of the athletes], still caked in make-up and hair grease from the competition fought back tears when asked about her father’s death.” This particular characterization is remarkable because the reporter brings to our attention the fact that this particular athlete is not attractive with caked-on make-up. In the early Nineties, the natural look in make-up was dominating the beauty industry. In a Maclean’s article, for example, national solo champion and 1992 Olympic gold medallist, Sylvie Frechette, was described as “a perfectionist and an individualist – she has dispensed with the heavy make-up that has long been a synchro trademark.” She is quoted as saying “I want to create my own style a natural look...Synchro used to be all smiles, makeup and nose clips, I want the crowd to know what I’m feeling, to show them my hands, legs and body movements as well.” Frechette used
her five-foot, 10-inch, 145-pound body to promote many commercial products. The natural look she promoted was popular in the fashion industry for most of the 1990s. Her claim to individuality did not, however, undermine or subvert the dominant image of the synchronized swimmer though. In fact, she was actually conforming to a contemporary notion of beauty. As well, she provided an ironic echo of Esther Williams who was also celebrated for her “natural” all-American, wholesome look.

In popular culture, sportswomen in general tend to be misrepresented, underrepresented, heterosexually objectified, trivialized, and construed as unnatural women. The cultural tension between the reality of being strong, sweating, muscular athletic women and cultural definitions of femininity discourage journalists from featuring them as serious competitors. Synchronized swimmers’ muscular strength and tremendous endurance, qualities they share with many athletes (aquatic and otherwise), are often overlooked in the media in favour of a popular stereotype that focuses on their appearance and reduces them to objects of heterosexual desire. While the inclusion of exclusively female sports such as synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics in the 1984 Olympics, and 1986 Commonwealth Games, has been greeted as a victory, it has only confirmed “gender-based associations.” That synchronized swimmers are legitimate sportswomen in their own right is obscured by their reception as too feminine, beautiful or sexual to be real jocks. As earlier chapters have shown, Esther Williams’ movies helped popularize synchronized swimming by projecting an image of female athletes that reproduced rather than disrupted dominant notions of womanhood during the 1940s. Even the commitment of such extraordinary people as May Brown and Maureen Bray could not separate synchronized swimming from its “pretty swimming” heritage.
The deepest trauma I continually re-live as an athlete in a feminized sport emerged from the conflation of the athletic body with impossible slenderness, the conflation of the fashion model or showgirl’s body with strength and skill in the pool by people both inside and outside the sport. I share the sentiments of Sylvie Frechette when she courageously recalled in her 1992 autobiography:

I had left adolescence behind and been an integral part of the Canadian team for some time when I received a note from a Canadian judge. At every competition, the judges sent participants a note with their remarks, criticisms, and suggestions. That year, I was wearing a yellow swimsuit with two black stripes on each side to make me look a little slimmer. I must admit, I did have a little extra flesh there. The note had none of the usual comments; just two messages: the score, as usual, and these four words: “To the yellow elephant.” How I cried.41

While I was not national team material, I was Frechette’s contemporary during my amateur years, and every September I struggled to shed the unwanted pounds I had gained in the off-season. This was “a little extra flesh” I had gained just by being a regular person and not a synchronized swimmer. That it was and is too much, even though a little fat helps you float, is ironic and worth lamenting. How did we train upward of 18 hours per week on less than 1,500 and sometimes 1,000 carefully counted calories a day? When I entered the sport in the 1980s, the decade of Jane Fonda, aerobics and the slim, multitasking, superwoman, I experienced first-hand problem of the “bathing beauty” legacy. This was played out in moments when the self-contained safety of my sporting world (training and competitions) was penetrated by the fickle and damaging demands of popular culture.
Our club, one heir of the legacy I have described, often volunteered us to model bathing suits at hotels, at swim meets, and in print. These were fundraisers for the club and were often attached to watershows that were completely unlike our competitive training. We usually performed a ridiculously simple routine to "Hello Dolly." Most of us did not care to remember the choreography because it was beneath our capability and we despised the music. Perhaps this was a way of acknowledging and resisting our ancestral "pretty swimming" label. We laughed aloud, despite the audience and despite ourselves, when we jumped off the bottom between elements and floating patterns. Normally, we trained in the deep end and it was against the rules of our sport to touch the pool itself once leaving the deck. Being encouraged to stand on the bottom for performances denied us the opportunity to really demonstrate our strength and expertise.

In 1985, our team was volunteered for unique fundraiser for the club. We did a bathing suit layout for Western Living Magazine. Next to the photograph in figure 16, the fashion editor wrote, "Comfortable and practical enough for our synchronized swimmer models to wear in practice and competition, today's one-piece bathing suits are sexily revealing." I am second in line wearing a bikini, which sexy or not, I could not wear in practice or competition. Huge earrings and a poorly secured headpiece too were not part of my usual equipment.
I remember our discomfort during this particular photo session. Going under water several
times without nose clips or goggles, our eyes were seared by the chlorine and our sinuses
were filled with water. It proved quite a workout! However, compared to our three
teammates who were not selected for the photo session, we were regarded as faring relatively
well. Sadly, two of our best athletes (ranked 1 and 2 in the province) did not make the
“beauty” grade; one, however, had the great consolation of going on to swim on the Olympic
team in Atlanta. At the time I did not realize the significance of these distinctions and
allowed myself to bask in the glory of being “chosen.” Of the three who were not selected,
two had what we call “hard” athletic bodies – no fat, broad shoulders, narrow hips, small
breasts, and lots of muscle. The five of us who were featured in the article were, by
contemporary beauty standards, the most “feminine” looking members of our eight-person
team.
In the end, six photographs appeared in the issue – one on the cover and five inside. Each photo featured the same swimmer who appears at the front of the line figure 16. When not alone (as she was on the cover) she appeared with one or both of the two swimmers to my left. I remember at the time that my jubilation at having been “chosen” was tempered by the reality that I had not made the next “cut.” I blamed it on my “chubby” thighs and hips. This sensibility may have been informed by an internalized expectation that my body should conform to Hollywood standards of white, middle-class femininity.

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1 May Brown, interview.

2 The 1938-1939 swimming season was poorly attended. Coach Percy Norman had seven athletes, five men and two women. They rented space twice a week at Crystal Pool. The cost of the rental, given the lack of interest among students, led to the end of the swimming club until 1945.

3 *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1915-1916, 70.

4 *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1929-1930, 151.

5 *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1933-1934, 105.

6 Both of these descriptions appeared next to photographs of swimmers on the same page of the UBC annual. Source: *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1945-1946, 225.

7 *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1946-1947, 149.

8 See: Stewart, “It’s Up to You.”

9 In 1946 the Physical Education program split into three divisions: the Physical Education Activity Program, Intramural sports and recreation and professional education in teacher training and recreational leadership. The UBC women involved in synchronized swimming were students in the teacher education program. In the 1948-49 academic year there were only 35 women out of a total of 143 enrolled in the degree granting program. Source: *UBC Calendar*, 1948-1949.

10 Black, “Synchronized Swimming: It’s History in British Columbia,” 44.

11 *Totem* (UBC Annual), 1947-1948, 126.

12 For a detailed list of participants see Appendix C.
13 Fred Hume, “May Brown.”

14 Ibid.

15 May Brown, interview.

16 Judges that day were all UBC PE Faculty: Brown who was just learning about synchronized swimming at the time; Jean Carmichael who did her Master’s in New York and came to UBC from Ontario and had seen synchronized swimming before this meet; Pat Broome who had done a lot of swimming and knew about synchronized swimming; and, Marion Henderson.

17 Ibid.

18 Fred Hume, “Maureen Bray.”

19 Maureen Hibberson, interview.

20 See Appendix D for a complete description of the figures taken from an itemized list provided by Diane Black. This was the figure list they used to prepare for the meet.

21 Maureen Hibberson, interview.


23 May Brown, interview.

24 Donalda Smith, a resident of BC, was a well-known coach and judge in the Canadian and international synchronized swimming community for over four decades. Her contributions to synchronized swimming are legendary: she received the Order of Canada and is a member of the BC Sports Hall of Fame and the Canadian Aquatics Hall of Fame. She passed away in 1998 at the age of 92.

25 May Brown, interview.


27 Maureen Hibberson, interview.

28 Ibid.


30 Ibid., 46.

31 Ibid., 46.

33 Chris Wood and Hall Quinn, “A Golden End to the Games: The Synchronized Swimmers Excel,” Maclean's, 10 October 1988, 57.


38 Ibid., 54.


41 Sylvie Frechette with Lilianne Lacriox, Gold at Last (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994), 39.

42 The tradition of fundraising through watershows is as old as organized swimming. When the BC-ASSA hosted Canadians in 1954 they held a watershow days before to raise money for the event. Source: Black, “Synchronized Swimming: Its History in British Columbia,” 46.
Conclusion

When I began research for this thesis, I suspected that images of watershow swimming in popular culture had a significant impact on the development of competition in synchronized swimming. In particular, years of involvement in the sport had convinced me that Esther Williams films contributed to its trivialization. How they did this was not, however, clear, nor was it evident what, if any, positive influences these representations may have had on the sport’s evolution.

This thesis has begun to answer this question by considering the implications of representations of Esther Williams and “pretty swimming” in popular culture on the perceived athleticism of synchronized swimming. As an historical case study, it examined this larger issue in a local context. Focusing on the inaugural BC synchronized swimming championships, which were held on February 5, 1949 at Crystal Pool in Vancouver, it demonstrated that images of synchronized swimming as “entertainment” facilitated the development of a new arena of competition for BC women, but did so by trivializing the accomplishments and athleticism of organizers and athletes.

This thesis analysed the construction of a “global” mermaid by analysing Williams’ first film, *Bathing Beauty* (1944), as a typical example of the MGM aquamusical, a genre that produced images of synchronized swimming as frivolous entertainment. It also considered how these images reinforced an equitable allocation of physical space at Crystal Pool for men’s and women’s athletic activities. Finally, it examined the organization, success and legacy of the first BC synchronized swimming championships. Interviews with two women who were involved in the event provided much of the evidence: May Brown, who at the time was a UBC Physical Education instructor and synchronized swimming judge, and Maureen
Bray, a UBC student who won the competition. Their recollections provide an important corrective to the “pretty swimming” stereotype by demonstrating that women used the cultural and physical space allotted to them to create a new sport for themselves. They believed they were organizing a sporting event first and an entertainment event only incidentally. The final chapter also included episodes from my personal experiences as a synchronized swimmer in BC during the 1980s to underscore the complicated and conflicted heritage for synchronized swimmers in BC represented by the legacy of the 1949 championships and the MGM aquamusical.

This thesis contributes to a number of fields of critical inquiry, notably to knowledge about the relationship between popular representations of athletes in “feminine” sports, of which synchronized swimming is one among others such as rhythmic gymnastics and figure skating. The detailed inquiry into the conceptualization, production and marketing of an aquatic movie star like Esther Williams helps us understand the power of post-war film to complicate real women’s contributions to sport. As we saw, media coverage around the 1949 championships was ambivalent, some like the Vancouver Sun told a straightforward story of a sports competition. Others, like the Victoria papers, reproduced the “bathing beauty” image and downplayed the winning team’s strength and skill.

The analysis of gender and space at Crystal Pool contributes to knowledge about the gendered politics of sporting facilities. Literature in this field has often focused on traditionally male-dominated venues such as football fields and hockey arenas. However, as evidence presented here about women’s strong presence in aquatics and the accommodation of female bodies at Crystal Pool suggests, perhaps pools have a more impressive history of gender equity than most facilities and warrant further research. Recall the BC section of the
Canadian Amateur Swimming Association supported the 1949 championships by paying for the pool rental.

The discussion of the 1949 championships builds on details provided by Diane Black in her contribution to *The History of Synchronized Swimming in Canada*. However, the research here goes beyond the foundational significance of the meet for synchronized swimming in BC to broader issues of femininity and athleticism. The success of the meet, as perceived by the participants, is discussed alongside contemporary developments in entertainment-type synchronized swimming. There was, for example, the UBC *Totem*, dichotomizing the “glamorous” and the “not-so-glamorous” members of the 1948-9 varsity swimming team. As was discussed in the context of my personal experiences, the sport continues to be detrimentally affected by the Esther Williams and “pretty swimming” phenomenon.
Sources

Manuscript Collections

Vancouver City Archives
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Newspapers

New York Times
Ubyssey (University of British Columbia Student Newspaper)
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Vancouver Sun
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Victoria Daily Times

Magazines

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Western Living

Reports


Interviews

Maureen (Bray) Hibberson. Tape recorded conversation with author Victoria, BC, 14 October 2000.

Annuals

UBC Totem 1915-16 to 1948-1949
UBC Calendar
Books and Articles


------. "Where's the Virtue? Where's the Grace? A Discussion of the Social Production


1933.


## Appendix A

### Hollywood Films Staring Annette Kellerman (1887-1975)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Kellerman’s Role</th>
<th>Studio</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Release Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Venus of the South Seas</em></td>
<td>Shona Royal: Inherits South Seas pearl business. Falls in love. Fights to save her fortune from a greedy ship captain.</td>
<td>Lee-Bradford</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What Women Love</em></td>
<td>Annabel Cotton</td>
<td>Sol Lesser</td>
<td>Comedy Drama</td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Art of Diving</em></td>
<td>Herself</td>
<td>Kellerman</td>
<td>Instructional</td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Queen of the Sea</em></td>
<td>Merrilla, Queen of the Sea</td>
<td>Fox Film</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>1 Sept 1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Daughter of the Gods</em></td>
<td>Anita, Daughter of the Gods</td>
<td>Fox Film</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>17 Oct 1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Neptune’s Daughter</em></td>
<td>Annette, daughter of King Neptune who falls in love with King who she swore vengeance on for killing her sister in fishing net.</td>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>24 Apr 1914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Gift of Youth</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vitagraph</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jephtah’s Daughter: A Biblical Tragedy</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vitagraph</td>
<td></td>
<td>1909</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B

**MGM Films with Esther Williams (1922- )**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Esther Williams’ Role</th>
<th>Significant Water Scenes</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Release Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Jupiter’s Darling</em></td>
<td>Amytis: Greek vestal virgin betrothed to Fabius Maximus but falls in love with Hannibal (Howard Keel).</td>
<td>Swimming statues</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Easy to Love</em></td>
<td>Julie Hallerton: Secretary and star of aquatic show, secretly in love with her boss (Van Johnson). Tries to make him jealous.</td>
<td>Waterskiing Pool shaped like FLA</td>
<td>Comedy Romance</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dangerous When Wet</em></td>
<td>Katy Higgins: American country girl who wins a $50,000 purse swimming the English Channel. Falls in love with French vintner (Fernando Lamas).</td>
<td>Tom &amp; Jerry Cartoon</td>
<td>Comedy Musical Romance</td>
<td>1953 Nov Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Million Dollar Mermaid</em></td>
<td>Annette Kellerman: Turn of the century swimming star of New York Hippodrome, of one-piece bathing suit fame. Falls in love with carnival operator (Victor Mature).</td>
<td>Recreation of Hippodrome shows</td>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>5 Dec 1952 NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Skirts Ahoy!</em></td>
<td>Whitney Young: American socialite is one of three female friends to join the navy. Falls in love with navy</td>
<td>New navy issue swimsuit for women</td>
<td>Comedy Musical</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
physician (Barry Sullivan).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Cast</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Release Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas Carnival</td>
<td>Debbie Telford: Assistant to carnival dunk-tank performer who impersonates wealthy oil baron (Howard Keel).</td>
<td>Williams swims into underwater bedroom (&quot;wet&quot; dream)</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>5 Oct 1951 USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagan Love Song</td>
<td>Mimi Bennett: Caucasian-Native girl who falls in love with a Midwestern schoolteacher who inherited a plantation in Tahiti (Howard Keel).</td>
<td>Dream sequence Group swimming</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duchess of Idaho</td>
<td>Christine Duncan: Swimming star in a nightclub who goes to Idaho to help her friend find romance. Falls in love with bandleader (Van Johnson) on the way.</td>
<td>Duet with Johnson</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>14 July 1950 USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Me Out to the Ballgame</td>
<td>K.C. Higgins: Athletic single woman inherits ball club. Falls in love with player (Gene Kelly).</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>9 March 1949 NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13 April LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On an Island with You</td>
<td>Rosalind Reynolds: A swimming</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>3 May 1948 USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Release Date</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>movie star goes to Hawaii with her fiancé to make a movie. Falls in love with another man (Peter Lawford).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>This Time for Keeps</em></td>
<td>Nora Cambaretti: Has misunderstanding with her true love (Johnnie Johnston).</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>17 October 1947 USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fiesta</em></td>
<td>Maria Morales: A young woman who wants to become a bullfighter. Covertly takes her twin brother’s place in the ring. Has a love interest (Johnny Carroll).</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
<td>12 June 1947 USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Easy to Wed</em></td>
<td>Connie Allenbury: Richest girl in the world who sues a newspaper for defamation. Falls in love with man hired by paper to convince her to drop suit (Van Johnson).</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>11 July 1946 NY</td>
<td>25 July 1946 USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Hoodlum Saint</em></td>
<td>May Lorrison: Newswoman lover to journalist turned wheeler-dealer (William Powell).</td>
<td>No Swimming</td>
<td>Drama B&amp;W</td>
<td>1946 black &amp; white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Thrill of a Romance</em></td>
<td>Cynthia Glenn: Married swimming instructor finds true love with war hero recovering from his wounds while on her honeymoon (Van Johnson).</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>24 May 1945 NY</td>
<td>July USA 2 July LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bathing Beauty</em></td>
<td>Caroline Brooks: Married swimming teacher at eastern girls’ college becomes swimming star and reconciles with song-writer husband (Red Skelton).</td>
<td>First watershow spectacular on film</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>27 June 1944 NY July USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Andy Hardy's Double Life</em></td>
<td>Sheila Brooks: College girl who is Andy’s ever-faithful sweetheart, Polly. Andy’s temporary love interest. (Mickey Rooney)</td>
<td>The girl in the two-piece swimsuit</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>1942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

British Columbia Women’s Ornamental Swimming Championships
5 February 1949
Participants and Supporters

Competitors: 3 Teams/21 Competitors

Maureen Bray (Hibberson) UBC. See chapter 4 for details.
Helen Chadwick (Duff) UBC student and organizer.
Marg Cross (Hunter) UBC student and organizer and president of the women’s swim team.
Diane Johnson (Black) UBC student.
Bim (Barbara) Schrodt UBC Physical Education student and manager of the women’s swim team.
Diane Bancroft UBC student.
Marie Harrison UBC student.
Sybil Berry RLSS team. Well known in RLSS circles at this time. According to Bray she was a very tall, slender, graceful competitor and she may have been coaching as well as competing.
Dorothy Aetzel RLSS. Placed second. Swam with VASC.
Ruth Brett RLSS. Placed third. Swam with VASC.
Marilyn Ivings Victoria Y. This team had seven swimmers.
Joan Morgan Victoria Y. Coach.
Pat Wright Victoria Y
Rita Norbury Victoria Y
Isabel Henley Victoria Y
Norma Stewart Victoria Y
Jean Mills Victoria Y
Eileen Sammons Victoria Y
Judges

May Brown
See chapter 4 for details.

Jean Carmichael
UBC Physical Education faculty. Did her Master's in New York and came to UBC from Ontario. She had seen synchronized swimming.

Pat Broome
Had done a lot of swimming and knew about synchronized swimming. Trained at Margaret Eaton, from Ontario, and did some teaching at Crystal Pool.

Marion Henderson (Penney)
UBC Physical Education faculty.

Coaches

Joan Robinson (Nelson)
UBC student and team coach. She and her sister picked out the music, choreographed and taught the routine to the swimmers.

Vi Mellish (Roberts)
Active with the RLSS in the late Forties, she was probably the coach for this team at the championships.

Archie McKinnon
Head coach of Victoria YMCA Swimming Club. It is not clear that he actually coached the winning synchronized swimming team, but these women would have also been training under his direction in speed swimming. Maureen Bray learned to swim under Archie in Victoria. The “Archie McKinnon Gymnasium” at the University of Victoria is named for him.

Joan Morgan
Coached the Victoria synchro team that won. Also a competitor.

Doug Whittle
UBC’s head swimming coach was not directly involved with the championship. Was also involved in Red Cross instructor training.

Helen O’Brien
Token female swimming coach for UBC. She was actually a travel chaperone for the women on the team.

Other

Noel (Oxenbury) Morrow
She helped the UBC swimmers by attending synchro-related events and reporting to them. She was not a student and did not
have a job aside from raising her daughter; she had the means and opportunity to travel and took advantage of it to be very involved in aquatics. As a competitor in speed swimming she traveled to eastern Canada and had seen synchronized swimming competitions. She was the President of the Crescent Beach Swim Club and was an executive member of the BC-CASA. She was one of the original committee members of the Ornamental Section of the BC-CASA. She coached synchronized swimming for Crescent Beach. She attended clinics and then came back to hold clinics in the Lower Mainland. Her daughter swam as well. She had been a competitive diver.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack Kelly</td>
<td>Well-know executive member of the BC-CASA and executive member of Ornamental Section of BC-CASA. Very supportive of this new sport. The BC-CASA helped with the rental of Crystal Pool for the event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Lugrin</td>
<td>Secretary of the RLSS, BC branch. Acted as chief recorder for the championship and mailed a letter to each competitor with their scores in the individual events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Reed</td>
<td>The Rosemary Reed Bathing Suit Company gave the UBC team a special deal on swimsuits. Her company later moved to Los Angeles and became highly successful. According to Maureen Hibberson, Reed’s swimwear was quite conservative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

British Columbia Women's Ornamental Swimming Championships
5 February 1949
Individual Competition in 2 Strokes and 5 Ornamental Swimming Figures

Elements

Back Crawl
Crawl
Sculling, 30 Feet
Back Somersaults with tuck, 3 revolutions
Porpoise, 3 times
Revolving on the surface, 8 revolutions
Pendulum floating, 2 times

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Degree of Difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group A, No. 1: Sculling, 30 Feet (1.1)
Assume a position lying on the back with toes pointed, legs together and body perfectly horizontal without being stiff or rigid. The arms are placed along and close to the sides of the body with the hands extended and the fingers and thumbs closed. With the palms down, the hands are moved in a semi-circular motion from the wrists so as to drive the water towards the foot. This will effect [sic] a movement head foremost. The scull feet foremost, position of arms and hands remain the same, except that the motion of the hands is reversed. The elbows must not be bent and should be fairly close to the sides.

Group B, No. 1: Backward Somersaults with Tuck (1.3)
Assume a horizontal floating position. The legs are drawn up to the body, knees close to the chest with toes pointed and feet together, as in correct diving position, not crossed. For the backward somersaults the head is bent backwards and the arms swung out right and left, but with the hands nearly in line with the shoulders. Then a stroke is taken with both hands simultaneously from back to front, from below upwards, the hands making a semi-circular movement, bringing the palms upwards. This will bring the feet upwards and cause the body to roll over backwards. Note: if the pull is not equal with both arms and hands the body will roll over sideways – this is to be avoided. The hands and arms should not break the surface of the water. Two complete somersaults.

Group C, No. 1: Porpoise, 3 times (1.5)
Start in the breast stroke [sic] position. Take a deep breath and make a surface dive. Then after 2 or 3 good underwater breast strokes [sic], turn the head upwards, at the same time forcing the hands down to the hips. By this means the body will rise to the surface; let the head break the surface only momentarily then repeat the action with the legs closed and straight. Continue these motions. If the breathing be properly regulated a fresh supply of air can be obtained each time the head comes above the surface and so movement can be maintained over a considerable distance, but the intake of air must be done quickly. In no case must the bottom of the pool be used in order to rise to surface.
Group D, No. 2: Revolving on the Surface, 8 revolutions (1.6)
The body is first placed in the floating position face upwards, logs closed, toes pointed, arms extended beyond head and thumbs locked together. When in this position and the whole body is quite steady, the revolutions are started by slight muscular effort along the side of the body in the direction in which it is desired to revolve. If this action is correctly continued the body should travel in a circle with the feet towards the centre. The swimmer should always finish this feat face upwards and remain a few seconds in a floating position.

Group E, No. 4: Pendulum Floating, 2 times (2.0)
This is started from the horizontal floating position and slowly brings the straight arms in line with the shoulders, at right angles to the body, while inclining the head forwards causing the feet to sink. As soon as they pass the vertical position the arms are steadily carried forward with the head finally face downwards between them while the legs rise behind, till the swimmer is in the “Plunging” position. When the heels have broken the surface the arms are slowly moved outwards and the head carried back, causing the legs to swing down and under. As they pass the vertical the arms are moved further back until the floating position is resumed. The legs should be kept straight, toes pointed and any bending at the hips avoided. Note – knees should not be bent as judges will penalize for this. The finish shall be when swimmer regains horizontal floating position from which start was made, with body in relatively the same position in the pool as at the start.

1 Provided by Diane Black, Vancouver, BC, October 2000.