

● SYBIL
BAUER—I

can see her as if it were last week instead of eight years ago at the Olympic Stadium in Paris. The tight black cap that covered her brown hair, the dripping black silk racing suit which clung to her long-limbed figure. She was hanging onto the rails with one hand, and with the other she was urging me to come ahead. With all the breath she had left—Sybil herself had just won that hundred meter race—she was shouting at me to win—win points for America.

Sybil was like that. She never thought of herself. She won easily and graciously. Without apparently trying, she excelled at everything: golf, hockey, basketball, student activities, in her studies at Northwestern University and most particularly in swimming. She was the first and perhaps only woman backstroke champion to break a man's quarter-mile record—the record which had been set by Harold Kruger of Honolulu—and she held it until her death in 1926.

However, with the rest of us on the team she was not lenient. She made us practice. She gave us *fight talks*. She supplied courage and enthusiasm when ours gave out. She was determined that we win.

She did more than that. She actually mothered us. At swimming meets it was always Sybil who had a needle and thread or a cure for sunburn; Sybil who was ready to lend you a blouse or a hat, or give you advice about a broken date or a broken heart.

She was older than we were, with a *savoir faire* which must have been natural because she could never have acquired it at twenty, and a sense of humor which no unexpected calamity could shake. When we went to Chicago for a swimming meet, Sybil would see that all seventeen or eighteen of us on the team went to parties, the right parties where we would meet the right men. And the right men flocked around Sybil. Every fraternity at Northwestern was glad to entertain all or any of us at Sybil's request.

Long before I had met Sybil Bauer I had heard about her. So had all of us at the Women's Swimming Association in New York. We knew that she was the backstroke champion whom William Bach-

rach had discovered and coached. She and Johnny Weismuller, her swimming partner—a national champion—were headliners for the Illinois Athletic Club.

And then I met her. It was at the old Selburn Hotel in Brighton Beach—in those days Brighton Beach was still one of the nicer Long Island resorts. When we came into the lobby we heard a tall girl with brown hair telling the clerk that she must have a lakeside room. I am afraid we giggled. It was true that strangers in New York sometimes bought the City Hall or the subway, but we had

never heard of one who described Long Island Sound as a lake.

The tall girl turned around and looked at us out of the bluest eyes I have ever seen. Afterward, in Florida, I realized that they were the exact color of the Gulf Stream. The blue eyes and pink and white skin, inherited from a long line of Norwegian ancestors, were curiously combined with brown hair and very dark, well defined eyebrows.

Those eyebrows flew up like two slim gull's wings. The corners of her mouth went up at the same time. She laughed, "I thought I was still in Chicago."

Sybil was not the least embarrassed. She never was.

It happened that she and I shared a room at Brighton that time, as we often did afterward. The room certainly did not face a lake. It was not large. It was not cool—no place was that July. It was, moreover, the happy hunting ground for one of the more active tribes of mosquitoes. But neither the heat nor the mosquitoes could lessen my pleasure and excitement.

I was seventeen then and impressionable. Consciously or unconsciously, I copied Sybil Bauer. I tried to imitate her deep-throated laugh. I tried to imitate the way she walked, and that must have been amusing as I was small.

Sybil was nearly five inches taller than I, and slim, with muscles lengthened by years of swimming—muscles which seemed relaxed even when she was exercising.

Before the contest I suspected that every other girl on the team was imitating Sybil—in and out of water. Every day we watched her practice. We watched the way she held her head, slightly lifted out of water.

We hoped we would be able to achieve



YOUNG *Immortals*

by
Aileen
Riggin

those same quick turns, those long strokes, the easy movement of arms above the head, not short, not tense and wider than the ones we were accustomed to using. Afterward, in the N. Y. W. S. A. we adopted this arm technique which was natural to Sybil Bauer and which William Bachrach had perfected.

Brighton was to decide the National Championship, and from the first time that we saw Sybil shoot down the pool we knew that she would be the new national backstroke champion. But not one of us was envious of her. You couldn't envy a girl who would share anything from her newest pocket handkerchief to her oldest admirer.

That fall Sybil, who was twenty-two, entered Northwestern University. We heard rumors that she was going in for hockey and golf, the student and dramatic council, and that she was also studying very hard. Incidentally, her achievements as listed now in the *Syllabus*, the Northwestern year book, read like the records college presidents are always trying to find, but never do: Gamma Phi Beta; President of Woman's Athletic Association; Member of Student Council; Member of Daughters of Neptune; Publication Committee of the Y. W. C. A.; Captain of Freshman Swimming Team; Manager, Sophomore Year; Junior Worker's Committee; Thalian Dramatic Club; Speech *Syllabus* Board; Captain Junior Hockey Team; Captain of Varsity Hockey Team Senior Year; Member Basketball Team Junior Year; Member of the Mortar Board, etc.

You can well imagine that when the news of her activities reached us, we did not expect to find the woman's backstroke champion at the various swimming contests. There is a circuit of these. From February to April, outdoor contests in St. Augustine and Miami. In the fall, Chicago and Detroit, the west coast or even as far away as Honolulu for in-door swimming. Then in December, Buffalo.

But when we arrived in Buffalo for Christmas, there was Sybil. She met us at the train. She greeted us with: "Listen here, children, get yourselves over to the hotel and into old knickers. Then we'll go sliding!"

She had discovered that the long slope of frozen spray below Niagara Falls made a glorious slide. The rest of the crowd were not so enthusiastic, but between exhibitions Sybil and I spent most of our spare time, and I might add, increased the knicker budget, hurtling down the Niagara ice mounds.

Two months later, when we were in St. Augustine, she

joined us again. We all went on to Miami and then to Bermuda. At that time I was metropolitan champion, so in contests Sybil and I were always matched against one another. In a sense we were rivals, but ever since Brighton we had been good friends. In Bermuda our friendship was cemented—by a bicycle.

My education had been neglected as far as bicycles were concerned. Other children had owned them—and fallen off them—had finally learned to go paddling along on two wheels. I never had—and just try to learn to ride a bicycle after you are fifteen—but the whole team had carried me on their handle-bars, until I thought it might be a good idea to propel myself around Bermuda.

Of course it was Sybil who offered to teach me. She did her best to show me that pedals were not strange rubberized animals which leapt into space of their own accord. She plucked me out of the white Bermuda dust and bandaged my various minor wounds. But after a week, it became obvious even to my persistent tutor that I would never become a cyclist.

Those weeks in Bermuda were the happiest and most carefree that I have ever known. One lazy day some one discovered a water-polo ball and organized two teams. Gertrude Ederle was captain of one team and Sybil of ours. The games developed into pitched battles. We might have been trying for another National Championship. The Ederles may not have approved of the Bauers—but the Bauers won the All-Bermuda Cup.

Everybody on the Island entertained us and the governor lent us a tallyho. We went driving through Bermuda in high state, horns blowing, uniformed footmen shouting and Sybil on the box.

After her swimming triumphs all over America, there was little doubt that the 1924 Olympics would see Sybil Bauer as world's backstroke champion. Months before we had planned to share a cabin going over and to see Paris together. Aboard ship there were three hundred and fifty Americans and only twenty of us were girls. In Paris Prince Murat turned his chateau over to us.

It sounds like a tremendous athletic holiday. Aboard ship it was, but in Paris we were in training. No late evenings—much less late nights—and at five every morning we had to get up and practice. Perhaps I had better explain that there were so many entries in the Olympics that year that the final contestants [Continued on page 97]



Aileen Riggan (L) with Sybil Bauer at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris.



Sybil's fiancé, Ed Sullivan, later became the star of the Ed Sullivan Show.



Sybil's death made front page headlines around the nation.

had to go through preliminary heats or trials. The stadium, naturally, was so crowded with the five hundred Allied representatives, trying out for their own events, that there was no other hour in the day when we would be uninterrupted.

The afternoons, at least, were ours, and although it was July, Paris was Paris. Sybil and I went to matinee performances of the opera. We went tea dancing at the *Château Madrid*, and some of those other charming cafés in the *Bois*, where the afternoon sun scarcely penetrated the green forest roof overhead. We tangoed to tunes which never seem to have the same magic anywhere else in Paris.

With the records Sybil held there was nothing for her to worry about. Incidentally, it has not been until the last few months that any of these records have been broken, by Eleanor Holm. Sybil could easily make the hundred meters in a minute and twenty-two seconds. Phyllis Harding, the English girl whose standing was next, had never approached that time either in her own country or abroad.

Meantime, I not only had to defend my diving championship—I was going into the swimming finals. Naturally there was no hope of my defeating Sybil Bauer, but there was every chance for me to come in third—or even second, ahead of Phyllis Harding—and win points for America. And Sybil was determined that I be second. Every day she went over the same arguments.

"Of course you can do it. Keep at it! Phyllis Harding may be good, but you and I have been swimming against one another for years. Nobody else has ever beaten you. I can't help it if my arms and legs are so long that they get me down a pool in a hurry. All you need is practice—more practice. You've got to win those points for America, Aileen!"

Practice—when I put in hours diving every day, and then I'd try out the backstroke! But after one of her friendly lashings I'd always dive back into the water. Sybil and I would match strokes. My form was nearly up to hers. That was something, but my shorter arms and legs simply would not cover the same distance in the same time. I had not been born a Sybil Bauer.

The day of the race! That oblong arena filled with ten thousand cheering people. Sybil ahead of Phyllis Harding and me by at least four lengths. Then Sybil grasping the rails, waving her free arm, trying to give me courage with her eyes and her lips. I couldn't hear her above the shouts of the crowd, but I knew what she was trying to tell me: "You can make it, Aileen!"

The fall after Sybil won the world's championship, she went in more enthusiastically than before for college activities. She wrote me that she had been made captain of both the basketball and hockey teams. Also she had been elected a member of the Mortar Board.

I wired my congratulations, and I remember she wrote me: "Why not? Occasionally I ought to use my brains as well as the long legs. But wait a minute—if you're an athlete you're not supposed to have brains, are you? Well, then, maybe it was luck. But whatever it was, thanks for the telegram."

That was characteristic of Sybil, refusing to take her own accomplishments seriously.

IT was February of the same winter that thirty of us toured Florida in a bus. Imagine us, thirty girls and a patient driver who pointed out the sights. We had a glorious time—until the bus broke down. At first even that seemed part of the adventure.

A touring car rescued us, and we scrambled in. There wasn't room for all of us, so Sybil clung to the running-board. The car was old, with worn-out springs, and the road was rough. Suddenly we hit a rut. All of us were knocked forward, and Sybil was thrown off. She didn't shriek or scream as any other girl would have. She didn't lose her head. She simply said she thought she better be taken to a doctor, and would the driver please go slowly because her arms hurt. We had no idea that both her arms were broken above the wrists.

It was nearly a year before any of us suspected how the shock of that accident would affect her nor what the result of her internal injuries would be.

At first the fractures did not knit as well as they should have, but by spring Sybil Bauer was again entered in the usual swimming meets. Her technique was as perfect as before—the same long arm strokes which we had admired for the first time at Brighton and which we might adopt but which we could never equal. We decided that Sybil Bauer was accident-proof, defeat-proof. And then we heard that she was in the hospital again.

That was after Gertrude Ederle had startled the world by swimming the English Channel. She was triumphantly touring America. From Portland to Buffalo and back again to Los Angeles, Rotary Clubs and the press, school children and society matrons entertained her and begged for her autograph. Helen Wainwright and I were along with Gertrude on this triumphant tour, but when we arrived in Chicago the pleasure in our successes was gone. Sybil Bauer was very ill.

Some of the boys we had known in the happy summers, when Sybil was our unofficial hostess, came to take us out to see her. It was a decided tribute to Sybil's charm that not one of the men who had rushed her, when she was a champion as well as the most popular girl in the Middle West, neglected her during the long months of her illness.

When we arrived at the hospital I couldn't believe at first that the girl in bed was Sybil Bauer, the Sybil who had driven a tallyho across Bermuda, who had danced joyously at little cafés in the *Bois*, the girl we had known and loved and competed against for four years. Her eyes were just as blue, but they were too bright from fever. Her high cheek bones stood out from her emaciated face, and her brown hair, which had always been so soft and shining, was lusterless.

But Sybil was still holding court. She was still the hostess. She told us that she was to be married at the end of the term, as soon as she had graduated. She showed us the hopechest full of monogrammed linen and delicate lingerie, which her Gamma Phi Beta sisters had sent her for Christmas.

"Weren't they darlings? I couldn't do anything about a *trousseau*, so they gave me this chest ready made. Think what a catch I am for any man now—with a dowry like this!"

She refused to talk about her illness, and as usual her courage was contagious. By the time we were ready to leave I began to believe that Sybil would get well. Outside the door I asked the nurse how long it would take for her patient to recover. She said she didn't know—exactly. She was efficient and cheerful, and middle aged—certainly not an emotional woman—but when she answered me she brushed her white starched sleeve across her eyes to keep me from seeing the tears.

The next month, in Toronto, the telegram came. Sybil Bauer was dead.

About the author: Aileen Riggin

Born in Newport, R.I., Riggin learned to swim at age 6 in the Philippines, where her father, a Navy officer, was stationed. At 11, she joined the newly formed Women's Swimming Association of New York. L. de B. Handley, the volunteer coach of the small group, introduced her to the American crawl, which he had perfected. Riggin progressed rapidly. However, weighing only 65 pounds, she was not yet strong enough to compete against the top swimming stars. Having studied ballet at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, she saw much the same discipline in diving and began moving in that direction.

At the Olympic tryouts in 1920, 65 pound 14-year-old placed second in platform diving and third in springboard diving.

"As it turned out, the girl who won the springboard, Helen Wainwright, was also 14, and the girl who won the high dive was 15," she said. "The officials said they would take women, reluctantly, but they wouldn't take children and they wouldn't be responsible for them. That started a hoopla in the New York papers. We had our trunks all packed. We unpacked them and we cried. Then some of the women got really annoyed and they descended on the U.S. Olympic Committee and said, 'These kids won fairly and deserve to go, and we will be personally responsible for them.' In those days, we were really kids, not as sophisticated as the young girls today. They finally agreed to let us go."

Riggin went on to capture the gold medal in springboard diving at 1920 Antwerp Olympics, the first Olympics in which women officially competed. Four years later, at the Paris Olympics, she became the first and still the only woman to win medals in swimming (bronze) and diving (silver) in the same Olympics.

In 1926, after establishing herself as one of the first world-class women athletes, Riggin turned professional, giving swimming and diving exhibitions worldwide and became one of America's first female sports journalists. Riggin also appeared in several Hollywood films, including "Roman Scandals" (1933) and "One in a Million" (1936). In 1939 she joined the Billy Rose Aquacade and served as Rose's choreographer and "Aqua-maid" instructor. Her athletic career did not end in her youth. She set an age-class record in the 1976 Waikiki Roughwater Swim and set numerous world age-class records in pool swimming well into her 90s.

Aileen Riggin Soule was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in 1967 and served as Grande Dame of the Hall during 1988. She passed away in 2002. A photo exhibit of Aileen Riggin's "Wet and Wonderful Life" is now on display at ISHOF.