

Rose Pitonof

“Girl Succeeds Where Men Experts Failed.”

- *The Boston Globe*, 1909

Pint-Sized Powerhouse



Rose Pitonof is proof positive that good things come in small packages. The plucky, pint-sized powerhouse from Boston, Massachusetts, never stood much taller than four-foot-10-inches but was a fearless and dominant swimmer in the early 1900s. Rose began her open water journey at the ripe old age of 10, when she swam a mile-and-a-half across an inlet of Boston Harbor. Her swim took just 33 minutes, a record that gained her international newspaper attention. Thirty-three minutes was, and still is, fast... even for an adult in a modern swimsuit. Though it was shockingly form-fitting for the day, Rose's suit was made of heavy wool!

In just over half an hour, Rose announced her arrival in the open water scene. Interest in long-distance swimming was growing, but like all athletics, it was dominated by men. Many people believed that it was unbecoming for the "weaker sex" to participate in sports, and that girls and women were too frail. As if. Fortunately, young Rose was not deterred.

One particularly attractive open water swimming gem is the Boston Light Swim, the oldest marathon swim still running in America today. Beginning in 1890, a number of male swimmers attempted to cross swim from the Warren Bridge over the Charles River to the Boston Lighthouse some 12 miles out to sea. Erected in 1716, the Boston Light was the first in America and sits atop Little Brewster Island, one of 13 rocky islands dotting the water near the bustling port town of Boston, Massachusetts.

Two years after Rose's first record-breaking swim, the L Street Swimming Club organized the first official race to the lighthouse. Twenty-seven swimmers entered the water. None finished. The following year, several prominent swimmers made an attempt, including Australian swimming star and women's rights activist Annette Kellerman. On that day Kellerman became the person to swim closest to the Light, but ultimately fell short of her goal.

Rose followed these swims with interest, and the following summer was set to make her mark. In her first attempt on August 1, 1910, she was thwarted by a changing tide four and a half hours into the swim. More determined than ever, she dove into the waves six days later alongside 20 other swimmers in the official Boston Light Swim race. The water was bone-chillingly cold that day, ranging from 49 to 54 degrees—cold enough to give you brain freeze as soon as your head is submerged. All twenty swimmers quit before reaching Long Island, some four miles shy of the Light, but not Rose. She stroked on, making landfall at 6:13 p.m. after 6 hours and 50 minutes in the water.

Her success electrified the world. "When the news got back that I had accomplished this, well, there were about 1,000 people gathered around my house to welcome me home. All of a sudden I became very famous," reported young Rose. A fifteen-year-old girl had proven that women did have a place at the forefront of marathon swimming. Um...duh!



Boston Lighthouse with downtown Boston in the background.

Rose's fame was just beginning. The following week she was offered a position with a traveling vaudeville performance troupe. For the next six years, she staged diving and swimming demonstrations in a tank built onstage at various theaters across the east coast.

Despite a busy vaudeville schedule, Rose somehow found the time to keep swimming. In 1911, she swam the 17 miles from East 26th Street in Manhattan to Steeplechase Pier on Coney Island in 8 hours and 7 minutes—another first. And she was featured on the cigarette cards, the era's equivalent of baseball cards today and the mark of a truly famous athlete.

But it wasn't all sunshine and success for Rose. She was unable to start her swim across the English Channel, the most alluring of swims in her day, despite spending more than two months in England in the summer of 1912 waiting for a break in the lousy English weather. "I was ready to start twice but the weather conditions were so bad that they wouldn't let me start. Finally, they called it off."

Although she was disappointed, Rose turned that frustration into yet another opportunity by completing an astonishing 16-mile swim down the River Thames from Richmond to the Tower Bridge in London. She finished the swim in 4 hours, 32 minutes—becoming the first female to make that swim in the process—using her favored breaststroke.

Rose's vaudeville work made her a pioneer in the workplace as well. At a time when women either worked in the home or in factories where they were generally overpowered by men, she made her own living as a teenager. She followed the savvy saving advice her father gave her and recalled later in life that having done so left her in "good financial security."

Still, as the headlining star performing to packed houses, Rose later realized that she was worth more than she'd been paid. "I didn't have an agent. I don't think they gave me as much as I was worth, but I couldn't do anything different after I got started and signed a contract. If it had happened in my later years, I would really have gone to town with them."

Nevertheless, Rose was a star by any measure of the world. In 1915, was offered the starring role in a Hollywood film called "Neptune's Daughter." Sadly, the social mores of the era would not permit Rose to have a marriage and a career, and she had already planned to marry a dentist named Frederic Weene. As a result,

Rose Pitonof's likeness made it onto cigarette cards, popular collector's items of the era.

she decided to retire from swimming at the ripe old age of 21, a decision she reflected on many years later. "After I left vaudeville around 1916, it got much bigger and I've thought, if I had kept at it, I suppose I would have been into more things."

Though we will never know what Rose Pitonof might have accomplished had she continued swimming and performing, we do know that she had an extraordinary impact on the early years of women in marathon swimming. And more than a century after her retirement, she's still held in the highest esteem among modern-day swimmers of the annual Boston Light Swim race. The annual swim from East 26th Street to Coney Island, called the Rose Pitonof swim, also draws some of the biggest names in marathon swimming—male and female.

What Rose Pitonof lacked in height, she made up for with strength, determination, and a hearty constitution perfect for the cold water. "Swimming just came natural to me, and I was strong and could stand cold water — and that meant a lot," Rose said. Indeed, it did. Rose rocked in many ways and left a lasting, meaningful impression on her sport.

