

A LETTER FROM

DOHA, QATAR

The open waters of Doha, Qatar

– Written by Noora Alawam



Photo: © Paul Popper/Popperfoto

*The recent release of the film **Nyad**, which chronicles Diana Nyad's legendary 2013 swim from Cuba to Florida, has sparked a resurgence of interest in endurance swimming. But long before this, Qatar had its own pioneer reaching extraordinary heights. Samir Alawam achieved an astonishing feat by swimming 78.92 kilometers within 24 hours, from Doha to Umm Said and back, using scuba equipment—a Guinness World Record set in 1985. His groundbreaking achievement captivated the nation, highlighting Qatar's deep connection to the sea, a link forged through its rich history of underwater pearl diving. I am especially proud to be interviewing my father about his historic swim—talk about having big fins to fill!*

So, Dad, what on earth inspired you to even think about swimming 78.92 km back in 1985? That's not exactly your typical weekend swim!

Well, my life from a very young age was centered around physical activity, not by choice, but by necessity. From the age of 8, I would walk 10 kilometers to the market to buy fish and vegetables for my mother and sisters. By 14, I was swimming in the

open sea, spearfishing to help provide for my family. The ocean was not just a place to swim; it was our main food source and livelihood.

Memorably, during Ramadan, my friend Khamis Jaber Al-Musfri and I would free dive from dawn until around 4 PM. Hours underwater, fasting without food or drink as we hunted for fish to fill our ice boxes. By the time we returned home (just in time to break our fast), we were exhausted but still grateful. The sea gave us everything we needed.

Then, one day, a man called Paul Creyne took notice of my ability in the water. He approached me with what I thought was a wild idea. He said, "Samir, I want you to attempt a world record with me". At first, this did not interest me in the slightest. A year later, Paul came back after completing a shorter record and probed once more, still I refused, but Paul was persistent. In 1984, on his third attempt, he shifted his approach—this time, Paul emphasized the immense impact this could have on sports in Qatar. I knew firsthand what sports had done for me in my personal life, and I wanted my people to experience that same benefit. That is when I finally agreed.

You mentioned previously that the initial plan was to swim from Doha to Bahrain, but that changed two days before your swim due to weather conditions. Could you walk me through, practically speaking, what the swim entailed?

We set off at around 7 AM and finally arrived back in Doha at approximately the same time the next morning. The swim felt endless, as you can imagine. We had tank changes almost every hour, each taking about five minutes. During these brief intervals, we would hydrate with water or sip on soup, which provided some much-needed nourishment. I suppose you could say those tank changes were our only breaks—there were no extended pauses; it was about 95% swimming and roughly 5% changing tanks.

Swimming in the open sea comes with its dangers. Were sharks or jellyfish ever a concern?

There are sharks wherever there is ocean, but most sharks are not dangerous to humans at all. Of course, there are standard tips to reduce the risk of an encounter: stay close to shore, swim in a group, and stick to daylight hours. Well, I did none of that—so



Image: Samir Alawam in his scuba gear.

yes, I guess I was at a higher risk! Another option would have been to use a shark cage, but because those are towed by a boat, they give you an unfair advantage by reducing drag, so I opted against this.

With regards to jellyfish, this wasn't much of an issue. It was the right time of year, and the jellyfish population was low. Back then, we did not have nearly as many jellyfish as we do today, thanks to a natural balance between predators like turtles and certain fish that kept their numbers in check.

I know you were using scuba equipment, which must've added a whole other layer to the challenge. How did that affect your

swim compared to traditional endurance swimming?

Swimming with scuba gear is entirely different from traditional endurance swimming. The equipment restricted my movement. For instance, biting down on the mouthpiece for 24 hours left me with severe temporomandibular joint (TMJ) pain, and the added drag from the tank and other gear made every stroke more challenging. The real difficulty, though, was managing our depth. We had to stay close to the surface, between 3 and 10 feet, to avoid the risk of nitrogen build-up in the body, which can lead to decompression sickness.

We had two support boats, and a barge equipped with compressors and spare cylinders, along with a full team. A medic was also on board to ensure the strain was manageable. Typically, scuba divers spend short periods underwater before surfacing; doing it for 24 hours straight, even with regular surface intervals, can be taxing, even on the healthiest individuals.

Did you experience any tough moments where you thought about giving up?

At some point, the difficulty really hits you. The exhaustion sets in, and it feels like you're stuck in an endless loop. But in those moments, you just focus on the next kick—one kick, then another, and then another. That's how I kept going. I reminded myself why I agreed to do this in the first place and how I'd been swimming my entire life, and I knew deep down, I could complete this feat.

Looking back, one of the toughest moments came during the night when I suspected one of my air tanks might have been contaminated. It felt like I was dealing with carbon monoxide poisoning—I had a pounding headache followed by nausea. Every time I tried to drink, I felt like I was going to vomit. That made it incredibly hard to continue. But somehow, I pushed through, even though I was feeling sick and weak.

What thoughts occupied your mind during those long hours in the water? Did you find yourself reflecting on personal memories, or did you focus on specific goals or mantras to keep you motivated?

I had to pull my boat through the ocean when it broke down. I have swum alone for countless hours throughout my life. I have spent my whole life at sea, mostly out of necessity. So, doing a swim with a crew felt like a luxury to me. I had no excuse! That was the mantra that helped me cope with the improbability of the task and kept me moving forward. In the more recent wise words of Dory, "Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming!"

I've got to ask, what was going through your mind when you realized you had set a Guinness World Record? Was it a surreal moment?

Honestly, right after finishing, I just felt incredibly sick. But once I had a moment to reflect, I would be lying if I said I did not feel extremely proud. It just proved to me that humans really have no limits if they push



In the test of endurance, it's not the splash that matters, but how far you can ripple.



themselves further. I believe that we all possess immense potential – we just need to awaken that giant within us.

How did the public and local community in Qatar react to such a unique and unprecedented challenge?

The reaction from the public and local community in Qatar was great. I was honored to be celebrated by the president of Al Sadd Club, His Excellency Abdullah bin Hamad Al Attiyah one of my sponsors, with the support of His Highness, the Amir's father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who recognized the achievement with great enthusiasm. There were even celebrations attended by the British ambassador, which highlighted the international interest in my swim. I also received a prestigious award from the Amiri Diwan in the shape of a beautifully crafted watch which is still dear to me.

In the days that followed, I was contacted by publications for interview requests. I found myself featured in numerous interviews and articles, sharing my story and inspiring others to push their limits. It felt amazing to be recognized not just for the record itself, but for the spirit of determination and resilience that it represented. The community really rallied around the achievement, celebrating not only my journey but also the underlying message of it all. We can all strive for greatness no matter how daunting the challenge may seem.

After achieving the swim and the record, what aspects of your life changed? Did it open new doors or inspire other challenges?

After the swim and setting the record, one of my main aspirations at the time was to create an air station for divers. This facility would provide a safe environment for filling tanks with high-quality, uncontaminated air. Recognizing the importance of clean air for diving safety, I embarked on a small venture to establish this station and indeed opened the first 5-star PADI International Dive Center in Qatar, named Pearl Divers, which is still operational today!

And finally, hypothetically speaking, if your daughter told you she wanted to try to beat your record, what advice would you give her?

As the British saying goes, I would tell my daughter to "jog on", light-heartedly.

Noora Alawam M.D.

Sports Medicine Physician

Aspetar Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital

Doha, Qatar

Contact:

nooranedeen.alawam@aspetar.com