



Walter Poenisch, Honor Swimmer, United States of America, 2020



[Personal Website](#)

Videos: [Show 1](#) [Swim 1](#) [IMSHOF at 1:30:14](#) [ISHOF 1](#)

Walter Poenisch at the age of 65 was the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida: 207 km in 34 hours and 15 minutes. The swim ended on July 13, 1978, when he reached Little Duck Key, Florida. Walter swam under pre-announced rules, with independent witness and the observation report was immediately placed in the public record. The observer/authenticator was J. Marvin Mims the President of the International Federation of Professional Ocean Swimmers and Divers. Their rules allowed: fins, snorkel, shark cage and getting out of the water four times for no longer than five minutes each at a time to administer emergency medicine, receive critical nourishment, or for any reason that directly threatened the life of the swimmer. Walter was out 3 times for a total of 12 minutes. These facts were never in dispute, and he broke his own record for the longest ocean swim.

As a young man his occupation was listed as a cookie baker, rodeo competitor and strongman. Walter was late to marathon swimming (50 years of age) – first entering (but not finishing) the 1963 Jim Moran Lake Michigan Swim. He was credited as the “World’s Strongest Endurance Swimmer” for such feats as towing 30-ton paddlewheel boats while swimming with his hands and feet shackled.

Walter set world records for the longest ocean swims before the Cuba swim: 146 km in the Atlantic Ocean and four year later 197.1 km from the Florida Keys to the tip of the Florida peninsula. Motivated by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Poenisch conceived of the idea of Swim for Peace, swimming from Cuba to the USA: "to further better relations between my country and Cuba". It took him 15 years of letter writing and lobbying, to both governments, to obtain permission. Walter was the first swimmer to use publicity to deliver a positive political message (now called "Speedo Diplomacy") – other IMSHOF Honorees including Lynne Cox and Lewis Pugh have since followed.

Cuban Leader Fidel Castro was on hand (proposing a toast honoring his efforts and his dream of peace between their two nations), on Walters' 65th birthday. The next day he started and completed the swim. Walter was inducted in 2017 into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

[Expanded Biography \(Openwaterpedia\)](#)

[Long Swims Database \(Marathon Swimmers Federation\)](#)