

History: Weissmuller, who played Tarzan, famously enjoyed the desert



Johnny Weissmuller was really famous. He was so famous, he was pictured on the album cover of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" right behind and between Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr.

Weissmuller shot to stardom way back in 1922 being the first to swim the 100-meter freestyle under one minute breaking Duke Kahanamoku's world record with a time of 58.6 seconds. Swimmers at the time wore woolen bathing suits that were required to cover the trunk of the body and everything above the knee. Heavy when soaked, the suits were a major drag in the water. Weissmuller and Kahanamoku were to be able to achieve incredible speeds wrapped in water-soaked woolen weight.

Skimpy bathing suits, which allow for even greater speed through the water, are recent and are interestingly connected to Weissmuller himself. Josh Sims

in The Rake magazine in 2018 mused, "Exposing so much flesh... is a relatively recent phenomenon when it comes to being attired for beach or pool. You might well thank Tarzan for that. Close to 90 years ago... BVD hired Olympic swimmer... Johnny Weissmuller... to model its ground-breaking new trunks. Luckily for them... Weissmuller won another contract — with Goldwyn-Mayer — to play the lord of the jungle. Worldwide fame followed."

Weissmuller had perhaps the best competitive swimming record of the 20th century. He set numerous world records and competed at the 1924 Paris and 1924 Amsterdam Olympic Games winning a total of 5 gold medals. His fame, and his physique, got him a contract with BVD, the underwear manufacturer, in 1929 to promote their new line of swimwear.

Weissmuller's career as an actor began in 1932 but might not have begun at all if Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios had not just had a hit jungle movie. The studio had a ton of extra jungle footage, and not wanting to waste it, decided to make a movie of the Tarzan book by Edgar Rice Burroughs. According to Gabe Essoe in his 1968 book chronicling the history, MGM director William Van Dyke said, "What I want is a man who is young, strong, well-built, reasonably attractive, but not necessarily handsome, and a competent actor. The most important thing is that he have a good physique. And I can't find him."

The studio considered hundreds of candidates with no success. Screenwriter Cyril Hume was staying at the same hotel as Weissmuller. When he saw the champion swimmer in the hotel pool, he knew he'd found the man the studio wanted. (According to Essoe, Van Dyke later praised Weissmuller's ability to be comfortable wearing almost nothing.)

At first BVD refused to release Weissmuller from his contract. MGM, undaunted, sent a team of lawyers to try and convince the manufacturer. Eventually, BVD would let Weissmuller act in the Tarzan movie and MGM would allow some of its biggest stars, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, and Jean Harlow to be photographed in bathing suits for BVD advertisements.

The producer of the film didn't follow sports and had his own ideas. "Johnny Weissmuller, that's too long, it won't go on the posters, we will have to change it..." until someone told him about the gold medals and the global fame.

The movie, "Tarzan, the Ape Man," featured scanty costumes, little dialogue, hot romance and a lot of jungle action. It was an immediate success. Essoe quoted critic Thornton Delehanty, who wrote that Weissmuller was "the complete realization of this son-of-the-jungle role. With his flowing hair, his magnificently proportioned body, his catlike walk, and his virtuosity in the water...."

The swimwear produced by BVD wasn't as successful, but its name, BVD, became synonymous with men's underwear (which became more and more brief, in the style of Tarzan's costume, but white.) And Weissmuller became a major movie star wearing nothing but a loin cloth.

Weissmuller toured the country and had engagements at Billy Rose's aquacade in San Francisco for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. There, he met Esther Williams, another aspiring swimmer who had secured a place on the United States Olympic team for the coming games in 1940 in freestyle and butterfly. The outbreak of WWII caused the cancellation of those Olympics. Instead, in 1940, both Weissmuller and Williams could be found at the El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs at the behest of publicity man Tony Burke, who staged swimming and diving shows at the hotel's enormous sparkling pool. Burke sent photos countrywide in order to tantalize the nation with the balmy winter weather found in the desert.

Weissmuller took to the desert like a fish to water. In 1941 the local newspaper carried a headline, "Does Some Swimming." The story beneath noted, "Johnny Weissmuller, who was in Palm Springs for the golf tournament, delighted El Mirador guests by presenting an impromptu swimming program at the pool over the week-end."

Replete with swimming pools and golf courses, the desert life suited Weissmuller. The newspapers covered his appearances on the links. "You couldn't buy the talent for \$100,000 a day, but stars of the entertainment and sports world are building up charity coffers with their golfing prowess. Bob Hope, Bing Crosby... Johnny Weissmuller, Hoagy Carmichael...and many others love the game—and they devote days and weeks of their time every year to help worthy causes and get in a game of golf at the same time. 'We love to play golf' says Weissmuller who was here to play in a charity international, 'and we like to help worthy causes. When we can do both at the once, we jump at the chance....'"

Bing Crosby's tournament in 1958 was described by the paper as "a million-dollars-worth of talent in addition to the top golfers of the day, Der Bingle will call on Phil Harris, Howard Keel, Gordon MacRea, Bob Hope, Dean Martin, Fred MacMurray and Johnny Weissmuller."

He was a regular at the O'Donnell Golf Club. The La Quinta Hotel's first annual Golf Tourney in 1950 saw Weissmuller shoot a sizzling 139 over 36 holes to take second place. He was often not given the handicap allowed other movie stars and amateurs. The newspaper captured his picture and printed the caption, "Latin Music enthusiast Johnny Weissmuller dropped in at Howard Manor to hear his friends the Evaro Trio play." He was part of the star power at the Classic tournament in 1953 along with Bing Crosby, Jack Benny, Harpo Marx, Leonard Firestone. He inaugurated the new Tamarisk clubhouse which "was site of big cocktail party and buffet for the awarding of prizes." In 1962 he was paired with Arnold Palmer at the Desert Classic.

Weissmuller liked to be out on the town. "Ranch Club Sportsman of the Month tomorrow night is none other than Johnny Weissmuller. He's a Hollywood Hacker and last weekend swung out at Indian Wells Country Club. A top swimmer, Johnny played the part of Tarzan in the movies...He's well known in Palm Springs and hereabouts."

He swam his way to stardom, created the demand for spare swimwear, married five times, made dozens of movies, shot under par a lot, and spent considerable time enjoying the desert lifestyle. One account of his colorful life noted he was "long on celebrating, kept a lot of people awake beyond their regular bedtime."

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