

Who was Kitty O'Neil?

Name _____ Class · period _____ Date _____

THE SHORT VERSION

Kitty O'Neil (1946–2018) was a Deaf stuntwoman and racer who set the women's land-speed record at 618 mph, doubled for *The Bionic Woman* and *Wonder Woman*, and said her deafness helped her focus.

EARLY LIFE

A high fever, a mother who taught her to read vibrations, and a love of speed

01 CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS

- 01 O'Neil was born in Corpus Christi, Texas to a Native American Cherokee mother and an Air Force father.

Kitty lost her father in an airplane crash when she was young, but before his death she liked to ride the mower when he was doing yard work, sparking her love for speed.

- 02 When she was a few months old, Kitty suffered a simultaneous bout of measles, mumps and smallpox.

Because of this, she had a dangerously high fever that caused her deafness.

- 03 After going deaf, her mom refused to teach her sign language, and instead taught her to read throat vibrations and lips.

Her mother Patsy became a speech therapist, and established the *School of Listening Eyes* in Wichita Falls, Texas.

02 SPORTS, AND A PLAN THAT FELL THROUGH

- 01 Even though Kitty had learned to play the piano and cello when she was younger, sports became her main focus.

- 02 She became a talented swimmer and diver in high school, and earned multiple medals. She ended up moving to California to train for a spot on the 1964 U.S. Olympic diving team.

However, a broken wrist stopped this plan from becoming a reality, along with a case of spinal meningitis that threatened to leave her paralyzed. If that wasn't enough to stop Kitty from swimming, there was the fact that it "wasn't scary enough" according to her.

LIFE AFTER DIVING

Water, sky, and a three-wheeled rocket car

03 CHASING SPEED

- 01 Kitty's love of the water continued after she gave up diving, and she enjoyed both scuba-diving and water skiing.
- 02 However, Kitty also expanded her love of adventure to the skies, trying skydiving and hang gliding.
- 03 She also searched for thrills on the ground, driving motorcycles, dragsters and eventually rocket-fueled cars.

Kitty ended up breaking the women's land-speed record in a three-wheeled rocket car called an SMI Motivator in 1976. Her speed averaged over 500 mph, and she hit a high of 618 mph.

04 ENTERING HOLLYWOOD

- 01 Kitty showed that her deafness did not hinder her skills, and stated that it actually helped her focus. This was further shown by her success in Hollywood.
- 02 Kitty met and lived with stuntman Ronald "Duffy" Hambleton in the 1970s, which led to her career on film.

O'Neil was best known for her role as a stunt double on *The Bionic Woman*, but the most famous image of her is of a record-setting dive she later took on the *Wonder Woman* show.
She also did work in the films *Airport 1975*, *Airport '77*, *Foul Play*, *Damien: Omen II*, *The Blues Brothers* and *Smokey and the Bandit II* before she retired in the early 1980s. She left stunt work because she felt too many friends were dying in the business.

LATER YEARS AND LEGACY

A first at Stunts Unlimited, a TV movie, and an action figure

05 THE END OF HER LIFE

- 01 Throughout her life, Kitty had a number of relationships, which took her to Minneapolis, Minnesota and eventually Eureka, South Dakota.

Kitty never had any kids, even after two marriages, which both ended in divorce.
- 02 Kitty O'Neil died in Eureka, South Dakota in 2018 due to pneumonia.

It was seen as a rather ironic fate for Kitty to pass away due to an infection after surviving two rounds of cancer in her twenties and constantly putting herself in harm's way as a daredevil.

06 KITTY O'NEIL'S LEGACY

- 01 Kitty was the first woman to join the elite *Stunts Unlimited* team, and her story was told in a 1979 television movie entitled *Silent Victory: The Kitty O'Neil Story*, which she revealed only partially captured the truth of her story.

Because of her impact, a Kitty O'Neil stuntwoman action figure was created.

Deaf people can do anything... Never give up.

KITTY O'NEIL

07 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

NAME OR TERM	WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY
School of Listening Eyes	The school her mother Patsy established in Wichita Falls after becoming a speech therapist.
SMI Motivator	The three-wheeled rocket car she drove to the women's land-speed record in 1976, hitting 618 mph.
<i>The Bionic Woman</i>	The show she was best known for as a stunt double; her most famous image is a record-setting dive on <i>Wonder Woman</i> .
Stunts Unlimited	The elite stunt team Kitty was the first woman to join.
<i>Silent Victory</i>	The 1979 television movie about her life, which she said only partially captured the truth.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

08 WRITTEN RESPONSE

- 01 What caused Kitty's deafness, and how old was she?

02 How did Kitty's mother choose to teach her to communicate, and what did she go on to build?

03 Kitty trained for the 1964 Olympic diving team but never went. What stopped her, and what did she do next?

04 What record did Kitty set in 1976, and in what vehicle?

05 Kitty said her deafness actually helped her focus. Why might that be true for stunt work and racing?

06 Kitty said the movie about her life only partially captured the truth of her story. Why do you think a person might feel that way about a film made about them?

09 WHERE THIS INFORMATION COMES FROM

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