

The bane of 'natural ability'

I once heard an anecdote about Russian trainers screening children to become gymnasts. They asked them all to jump off the highest diving board at the pool, and the ones who did so were selected.

To them a fearless and obedient personality was more important than coordination, strength, or any of the other physical factors that were on display. Surely these physical factors are just as necessary to a gymnast, but they chose to start with a pool who had the right mental blueprint and then whittle these down to those who could also develop physical prowess.

Does a freediver need to be fearless, or obedient to their coach? Both might help, but on the other hand the indomitable freediver can easily get in over their heads, where someone more apprehensive will make more methodical and safer progress. Likewise, an autonomous freediver without a coach might ultimately make more progress in a sport where at some point you will have to deal with being very alone and very deep.

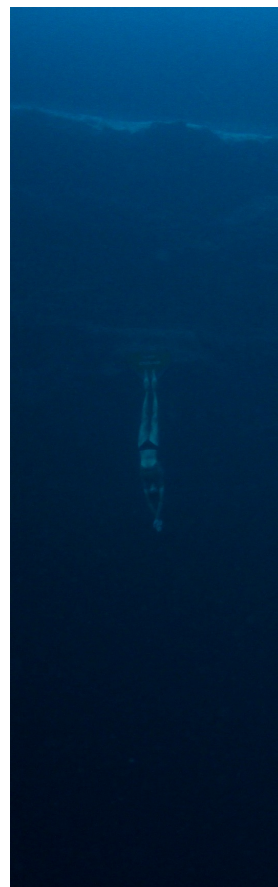
With so many elements that have to come together in the training of a depth freediver - breath hold, technique, mental calm, flexibility, patience - it is highly unlikely that any one person will be born with natural abilities in all of them. Alone, one of these abilities will only get you so far, and so the remainder must be cultivated. And this means that the most important quality for any freediver will always be their dedication and application.

Ultimately the discipline has to be grounded in pleasure - it is one of the first things I tell students, and it was passed to be from my mentor Umberto Pelizzari, who told us that the freediver who dives for results will stop diving the moment they stop winning.

But as well as enjoying the sport the competitive freediver must have the tenacity to persevere in their training. They must not shirk the hard task of isolating their weaknesses and turning them into strengths. Here there is no 'winning,' it is a constant and inexhaustible process that needs to be re-comprehended and resumed at every juncture.

photo © Igor Liberti

The best athletes are those who, through huge workloads and unfailing perseverance, reach a level where their performance appears effortless, and is often attributed to their natural ability. Kelly Slater and Roger Federer are supreme examples of such athletes.



And so I believe that natural ability will get you about as far in freediving as hyperventilation: an initial spurt of results, followed by an abrupt wall. You could say that those who have zero natural ability are kind of at an advantage, since they will never acquire the complacency that can come with a head start. They must earn each meter and every second, and in doing so will develop discipline and techniques that in the long run are more valuable than natural ability.

So the next time you hear your defeatist inner voice telling you "I'm not built for it," "My lungs/hands/feet are too small," "I've got bad ears," or "I'm just not cut out for deep diving," remind yourself that these obstacles are opportunities for you to develop fortitude, and by overcoming them turn yourself into an unstoppable juggernaut of confidence and prowess.

Pity those poor freedivers with big lungs, or who equalise hands-free, for they won't have the same motivation to train as you do, and in time, like the complacent hare napping under the tree, they will fall far behind.

And in the end do you even want to have everything handed to you on a silver plate? Would it be rewarding to discover you have some bizarre gene that allows you to hold your breath longer than anyone else, and that you can set a record overnight?

How much more rewarding to start at square one with an off-the-shelf level of ability and earn every step of the way through grit and determination.

With farther to go to the top, the view will be so much more satisfying when you finally arrive.



photo © Josh Neilson, Southern Underground Productions

Very well said and motivating. I know I personally have to find the inner discipline by keeping my training fun and more of a personal challenge, than a comparison to others. Ocean diving amongst sea life really sparks my motivation if my training becomes stagnant. After a day of diving on the reef I'm motivated to push my training knowing that my next day of diving on the reef will be that much better.

by Brian Pucella on 2012-06-22 09:25:55

You got me thinking.....

by Adelito Sotolongo on 2012-06-22 23:29:07

This was indeed an inspiring and well written article. From my diving I can share the following example. During the Apnea Academy instructor course I met Federico Mana. He has spent a lot of time and effort to improve results by a very methodical and thorough approach to equalization. What was before left to intuition and trial and error is now described in such a detailed and instructive way that I can understand and improve. When I told him this he said in a very calm and confident way "That is my goal". I believe that we all have different start levels but in the end it is our method and dedication that will take us to the destination.

by Carl Marcus Stenlund on 2012-06-26 18:49:24

Indeed a good article. As an athlete, who hasn't tried losing motivation in their sport. I too find that diving on the reef, enjoying watching the marine life putting the goals aside for some time and simply relax and enjoy in the element can rekindle a lost motivation for training. \r\nAlso doing some other activity, not freedive related can help spark that desire for training again, giving our whole system time to rest, digest and assimilate what has been put in. And of course not feeling bad about not having done ones usual training scheme. Anyhow, one can easily progress and improve due to the recovery effect from such a break, rather than overtraining.

by Ken Kiriama on 2012-06-26 20:19:29

There is a saying that goes like this: "one percent inspiration, 99 percent transpiration" Very good article, check to reality.

by Mario Albuquerque on 2012-08-15 08:49:46