

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 unflinching 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.

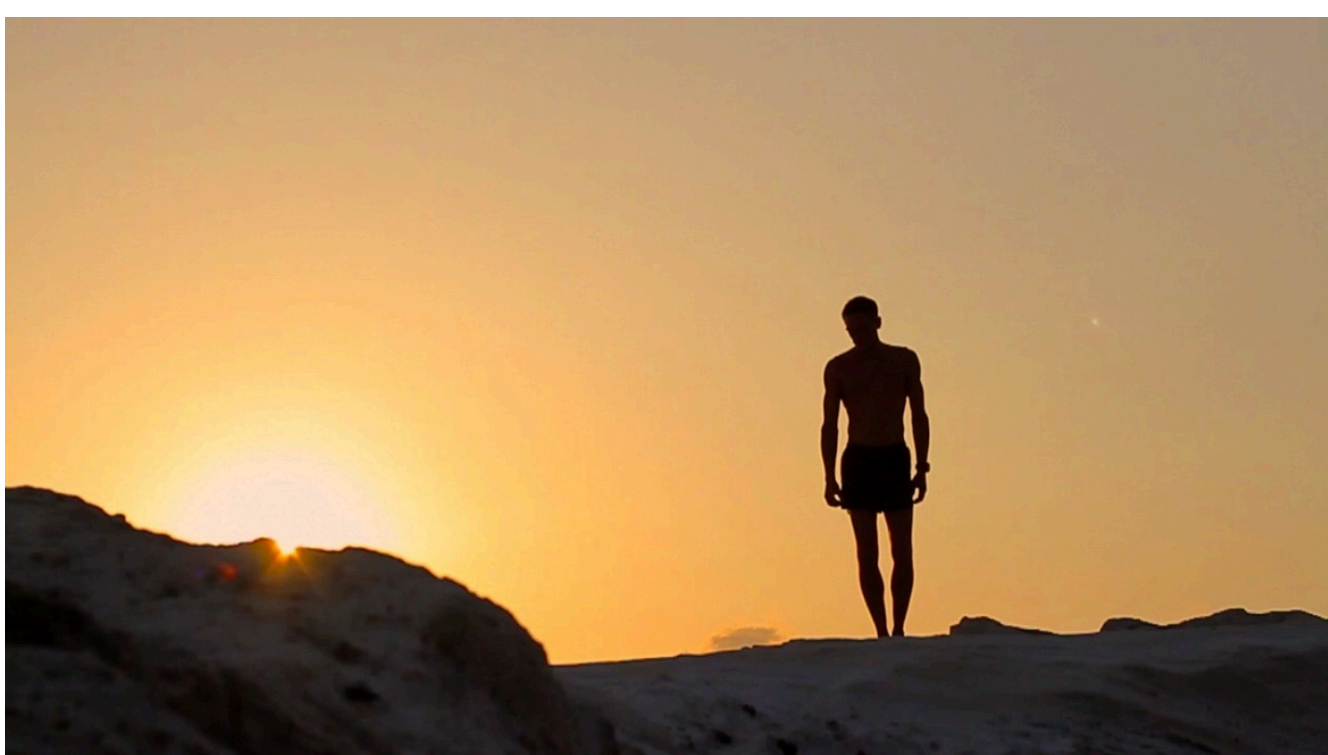


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WORLD'S ABSOLUTE FREEDIVER AWARDS 2011

The Wafa awards is the most objective measure of freedivers' rankings in each calendar year. In 2011 I was honoured to win the award for the second time, and this year there were some great prizes. A special thanks to Ivo Truxa, who organises the award, and who is the genius behind the incredible rankings engine on the Apnea.cz webpage. Here is the official press release:

Last week APNEA.cz sponsored by Scubapro and Apneaman.cz announced the results of the annual award for the best and the most complete freediving competitors. The Wafa 2011 lists competitors with the best combination of performances in six freediving disciplines achieved in competitions or in individual attempts officially sanctioned by one of existing freediving federations. This year, the main awards belong to Alena Zabloudilová (Czech Republic) and to William Trubridge (New Zealand). They both receive a revolutionary diving computer Scubapro Uwatec Meridian with an integrated heart rate monitor, and freediving equipment from Apneaman.cz.

- The complete results can be found at <http://apnea.cz/?awards>
- Freediving ranking 2011 per discipline: <http://apnea.cz/ranking.html?simple+2011>

women		men	
1	Alena Zabloudilová (Czech Republic) 422.8 pts Static Apnea STA 5:34 66.8 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 1:11 85.5 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 1:17 58.8 pts Constant Weight CWT 75 m 75.5 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 56 m 56.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 81 m 81.0 pts	1	William Trubridge (New Zealand) 607.7 pts Static Apnea STA 7:21 88.2 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 2:19 109.5 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 1:14 37.0 pts Constant Weight CWT 116 m (Y) 109.0 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 93 m 93.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 121 m 121.0 pts
2	Jody Fisher (Australia) 393.8 pts Static Apnea STA 6:09 73.8 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 1:56 83.3 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 1:50 75.5 pts Constant Weight CWT 54 m 54.0 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 86 m 86.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 56 m 56.0 pts	2	Rune Hallum Sørensen (Denmark) 548.8 pts Static Apnea STA 7:55 95.0 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 2:26 118.0 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 2:00 100.0 pts Constant Weight CWT 86 m 86.0 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 88 m 88.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 81 m 81.0 pts
3	Jarmila Slovenčíková (Czech Republic) 385.4 pts Static Apnea STA 4:22 52.4 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 1:29 64.5 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 1:13 56.5 pts Constant Weight CWT 86 m 86.0 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 51 m 51.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 75 m 75.0 pts	3	Jesper Stechmann (Denmark) 501.8 pts Static Apnea STA 7:94 84.8 pts Dynamic Apnea DYN 2:16 108.0 pts Dynamic Apnea without Fins DNF 1:00 90.0 pts Constant Weight CWT 93 m 93.0 pts Constant Weight without Fins CNF 48 m 48.0 pts Free Immersion FIM 88 m 88.0 pts
4	Liv Philip (Norway) 363.2 pts	4	Alexey Molchanov (Russia) 477.8 pts
5	Irina Karina (Russia) 346.2 pts	5	Mateusz Malina (Poland) 470.8 pts
6	Natalia Zharkova (Russia) 335.3 pts	6	Antero Jokki (Finland) 459.2 pts
7	Cristina Kümme (Germany) 319.7 pts	7	Aristeides Ioannidis (Greece) 451.2 pts
8	Nanja van den Broek (Netherlands) 318.9 pts	8	Michal Rišian (Czech Republic) 443.8 pts
9	Jana Balounová (Czech Republic) 313.5 pts	9	Jonas Krahn (Germany) 436.8 pts
10	Misuzu Hirai (Japan) 294.7 pts	10	Samo Jeranko (Slovenia) 432.7 pts

Alena Zabloudilová is a successful freediving competitor since many years, but it is her first time appearance on the list of the top 10 athletes, which she achieved thanks to balanced improvements in all disciplines. Her total score of 422.8 points is the second best rank of all times after the legendary Natalia Molchanova with incredible 540.1 points in 2009.

The second rank of Jody Fisher (Australia) is a big surprise. She was a complete newcomer in 2011. The third female rank belongs to another Czech, Jarmila Slovenčíková, who appears among the top awarded freedivers regularly.

In contrary, the first place of William Trubridge will not surprise anybody. He not only repeated his success from 2010 again, but he also managed to accomplish another historical achievement by beating his own best result of all times. In 2011, as the first man in the history, he broke the milestone of 600 points, and scored 607.7 points (over 65 points more than in 2010).

Danish freedivers confirmed their qualities this year again: Rune Hallum Sørensen finished on the second rank (third in 2010), and Jesper Stechmann ranked third.

In the country ranking, the Czech Republic did the best, followed by France, and Russia in the women category, and New Zealand won the male category, with France again on the second rank, and Denmark third.

Apnea.cz awards also the most diligent male and female competitors – those who booked the highest number of starts. In 2011 it was Junko Kitahama (Japan) with 27 starts and Grégoire Folly (Switzerland) with 23 starts.

All awardees receive prizes from the event sponsors Scubapro and Apneaman.cz.

The World's Absolute Freediver Award (Wafa) is an annual prize for freedivers with the highest combined score in six freediving disciplines: static apnea, dynamic apnea with fins, dynamic apnea without fins (pool disciplines), constant weight with fins, constant weight without fins, and free immersion (depth disciplines).

Apnea.cz is a popular freediving website, maintaining the database of freediving competitions of all coexisting freediving federations.