

The Big

Blue



With only a lungful of air and zero equipment, freedivers plunge for minutes on end into a dark and dangerous underworld, risking their lives with every attempt. But why? MH ships out to the Freediving World Championships and discovers that the planet's most extreme sport might also be its most serene

WORDS BY DAN MASOLIVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHIE HOPSON AND DAAN VERHOEVEN

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With the sun still rising groggily from its slumber on the horizon, Alexey Molchanov draws in one final mouthful of air. If all goes according to plan, it will be his last taste of oxygen for almost four minutes. If it doesn't, it could be the last breath he ever takes.

Molchanov disappears under the water and starts to pull himself down the safety line, descending head-first to a depth of 20m, then 30. To those following his progress at sea level, on a barge anchored 3.8km off the Cypriot coastline, he has become just a blip on the ship's sonar. Forty metres... 50. This far down, his neoprene wetsuit, lungs and ribcage are compressed under the immense water pressure, putting huge strain on his body and making him negatively buoyant. In other words, Molchanov is in free-fall.

Ninety metres, 100 – the Russian plummets into the abyss like a lead weight, at a rate of one metre per second. His fellow competitors, along with the assembled judges, safety divers and event organisers, wait anxiously on the barge's cramped deck. Molchanov turns for his journey back to the surface after 118m. If he can get back to the sanctuary of the air above without assistance, it will be enough to see the 28-year-old beat his own personal record and secure his third gold medal of this week's AIDA Freediving World Championships.

Yet outside of the sport, few will have heard of Alexey Molchanov. Freediving tends not to make waves among the general public for its medals, its records or its feats of superhuman endurance. Rather, it hits the headlines when tragedy strikes, as it did last summer when one of the world's greatest divers drowned during an out-of-competition dive. Natalia Molchanova was the holder of 41 world records, could hold her breath for nine minutes and was widely regarded as the greatest freediver of all time. She was also Alexey's mother.

The exact circumstances surrounding her death remain unclear, but what



is certain is that she was the only experienced freediver in her party and was diving in an area known for its strong currents. Her body was never recovered.

At competitions such as today's, numerous safety precautions are taken to ensure such a tragedy is not repeated. Yet the risk remains. This is freediving at its purest – and most dangerous.

DEEP THINKING

In a depth competition, the winner is simply the person who manages to dive the deepest and return to the surface fully conscious. Athletes announce a depth and estimated dive duration to the judges before they enter the water. A line is dropped to that precise depth, and they follow it down to the bottom. Blacking out – either mid-dive or at the surface – results in instant disqualification, to discourage dangerously deep attempts. Even so, with just one attempt per athlete, boundaries are pushed and the margins for error are minute.

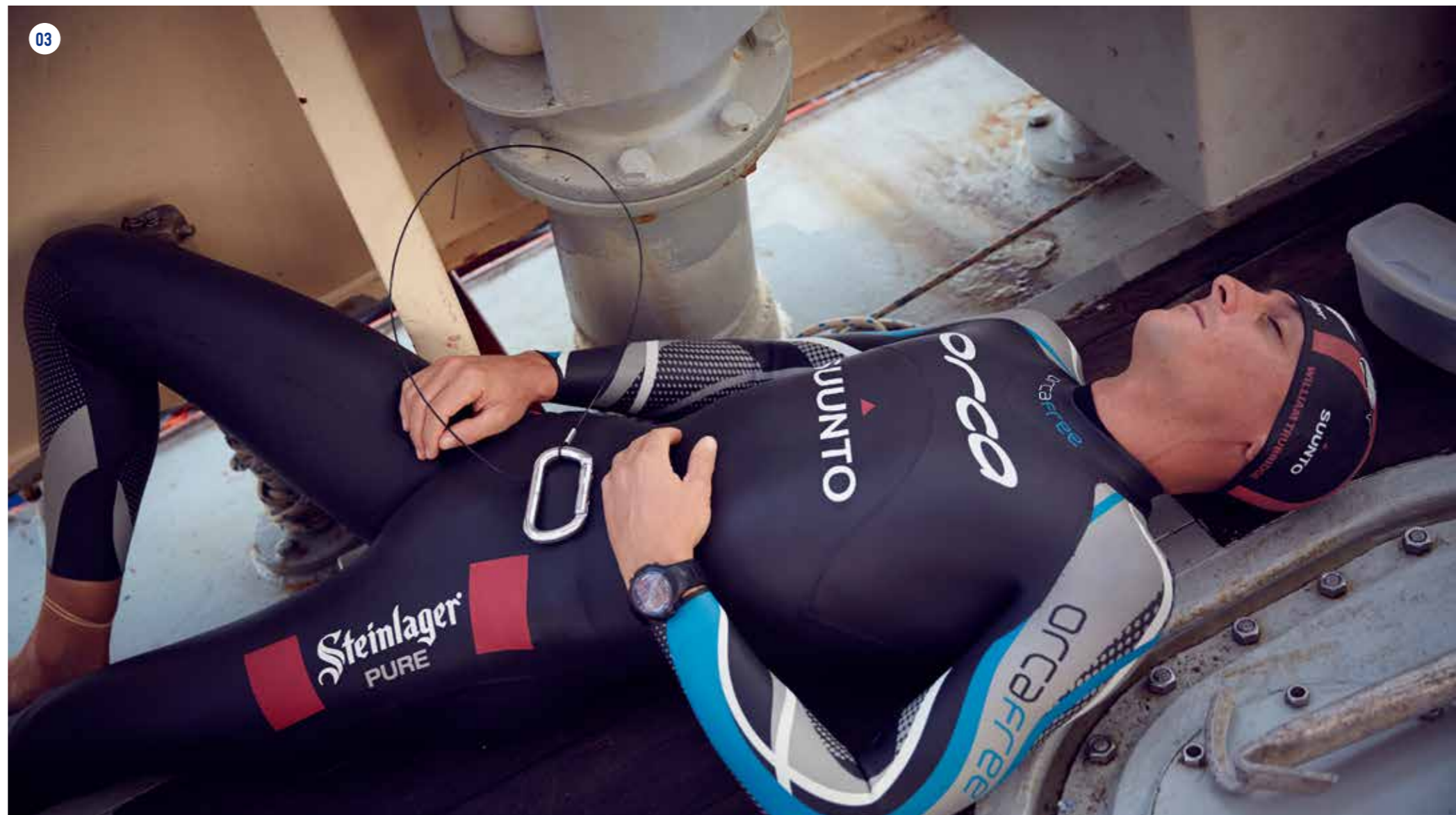
Thankfully, accidents are rare. But sometimes there's no accounting for human error. Just before the start of the championships, French freediver Guillaume Néry announced a new world record attempt of 129m. The line was set, and down he went. Only unbeknownst to him, someone had set the line wrong – Néry had descended to 139m. He blacked out 10m from the surface.

The Big Chill

01 BREAK OF DAY
Athletes arrive at a barge for the Freediving World Championships. At this early hour, the sea is at its calmest – crucial, as a deep-water current could easily prove fatal.

02 MIND GAMES
World Champion Alexey Molchanov gets ready for his third medal dive of the competition. Athletes do yogic breathing and stretching to prep for the pressure underwater – both of the mental and physical variety.

03 DOWNTIME
Eventual winner William Trubridge spends the hour leading up to his dive in the only quiet corner he can find aboard the crowded ship. To push your body when deprived of oxygen requires total relaxation.



The Big Blue

“That was a very scary one,” admits the heavily Gallic Néry, who has blacked out five times in 20 years of freediving. But despite coughing up a significant amount of blood, Néry is stoical, even sanguine, about his near-death experience. A week later he says he feels physically ready to get back in the water, but has nonetheless pulled out of the competition following medical advice. “What happened to me has never happened before,” he says with calm pragmatism. “The sport is very, very safe. Everything is ready in case of big problems. Sometimes people black out – which is bad, because if you are alone, you die – but because of all the safety precautions, my case ended up being a minor accident.”

For most mortals, the thought of holding your breath and plunging to such extreme depths might challenge notions of sanity. “That’s totally natural,” says Michael Board, an ex-Royal Marine and the UK’s top freediver, who runs his own freediving school in Indonesia. “It’s human instinct to be scared of the idea of going somewhere you can’t breathe. But it’s surprising how quickly it becomes comfortable to hold your breath for long periods, and how you can learn through relaxation to extend that period.”

This is where freediving differs most from other so-called extreme sports. Far from being a high-octane, adrenaline-fuelled sport, freediving requires athletes to completely and utterly relax – to enter a trance-like state where neither the foreboding environment nor the physical discomfort affects their ability to keep calm under serious pressure.

“We’re trying to conserve oxygen the whole time,” explains one of the favourites for today’s competition, William Trubridge, sheltering from the blistering 35°C heat. “Every organ and muscle in your body consumes oxygen, none more so than your brain. And that oxygen is consumed by neural activity, so the more you think, the more oxygen you use.” The solution is to enter a meditative state. “You try to empty your mind, to inhabit the spaces between thoughts. The water helps in that regard because it removes all the outside stimuli and so the brain slows down. It’s harder to quieten the mind *before* the dive – that’s when there’s the most mental chatter.”

For the final hour before they dive, athletes isolate themselves from the hustle and bustle of the world around them – no mean feat when there are 100 of you cramped together on a floating barge. They unfurl their mats, close their eyes and run through a series of breathing exercises and stretches not unlike a typical yoga class.

A DOT IN THE OCEAN

Alexey Molchanov is nearing the end of his dive. There are no big screens showing the action, no live commentary – only the slow progress of the dot climbing its way back up the sonar’s screen, the seconds ticking over on the judge’s stopwatch.

After three minutes and 44 seconds, Molchanov’s head surfaces above the gently lapping waves. Then, almost as suddenly, it disappears back under the water. A team of safety divers is on him in a split-second. “Breathe Alexey,” they command. And eventually he does. Given

Deep Sinkers

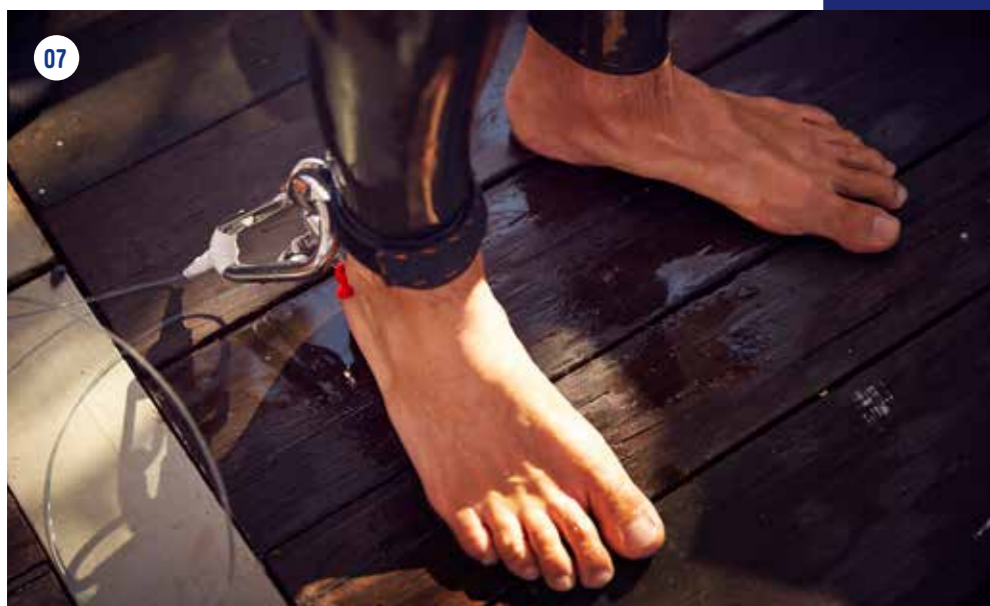
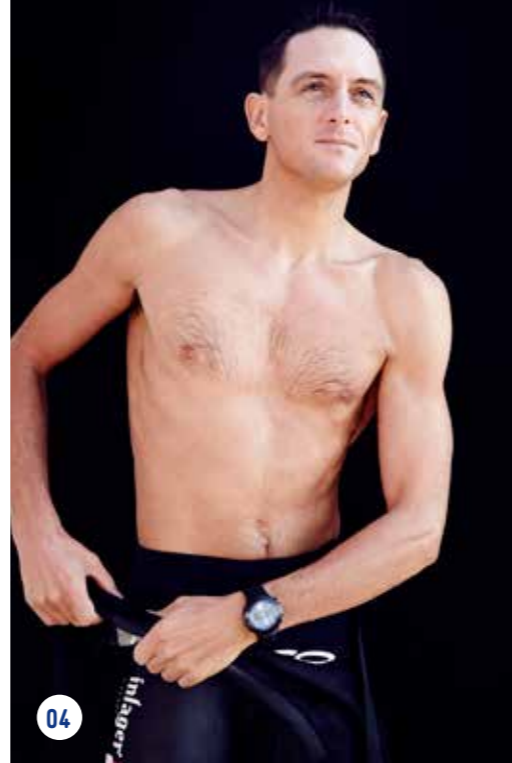
04 BIG FISH
Trubridge’s dive of 112m is enough to give the New Zealander the victory in the Free Immersion discipline, where divers descend without fins.

05 FIN TO WIN
Some disciplines allow athletes to use fins. Japan’s Hanako Hirose’s consistency across all three categories sees her finish second overall.

06 STAR ABOARD
Néry (who stars in the underwater video for *Runnin’* by Naughty Boy feat Beyoncé) is recovering from his near-death experience earlier in the week.

07 LIFE LINE
Athletes clip on to a safety line during dives – if they stay at one depth for too long, they’re pulled up to the surface.

08 WAIT & SEA
Divers’ relaxation continues in the final few moments before competing. Floats help them conserve energy.



Learning To Breathe

You too can train yourself to hold your breath for minutes, says the UK’s top freediver Michael Board



Buddy up

The first rule of freediving is to never go it alone. If you’re in water, make sure you have a trained ‘buddy’ observing you at all times.



Keep quiet

Find a peaceful place – distractions will affect your ability to hold your breath. Lie flat on your back with your arms by your side.



Chill out

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds, then out again for 10. Try to slow your breathing cycle. Do this for three minutes.



Take hold

Now inhale deeply through your mouth and hold. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but it will pass after about 10-15 seconds.



Full-body scan

Busy your mind by mentally scanning your body. Begin at your toes and work up to your head, relaxing and releasing tension as you go.



Take a breath

When it feels tough, hold for a bit longer, then relax. Repeat, starting with the three-minute warm-up; it gets easier each time.

09



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11



Surface Rising

09 PULL-UPS
Rising from 107m, Spain's Miguel Lozano is about to take his first breath for 4m 15s.

10 VITAL SIGNS
Safety divers watch for signs of distress from athletes as they reach the surface.

11 BREATHE EASY
It's common for competitors to inhale oxygen-rich air post-dive.

WANT TO TAKE THE PLUNGE? VISIT BRITISHFREEDIVING.ORG TO FIND A CLUB NEAR YOU

the circumstances, most people would be happy to be alive. But speaking to him later, Molchanov is clearly disappointed. The supremely confident, personable Russian has descended further than any of his rivals, yet will not add a third gold medal to his tally. He has been disqualified for blacking out. William Trubridge, next in the water, manages to keep his nerve – and his consciousness – to record a depth of 112m, winning the New Zealander the gold medal.

Trubridge had the mental edge today, but physically-speaking, all the top divers have reached new levels of athleticism. There was a time when the only training freedivers did was to dive. “To be a good diver you have to train your body to become like a marine mammal’s. That means spending a lot of time in the water,” explains Néry. “But today, we train

like sportsmen. You can’t just dive. You also have to work on your strength at the gym, on technique at the pool, to get your muscles used to working without oxygen.”

Just as freedivers must limit the amount of oxygen used by their brains, so they must with their muscles, too. The stronger your muscles, the more efficiently they can use oxygen and the better they perform when starved of it. All this has led Néry to develop a freediving-specific resistance programme with his coach. “I’ll do bench presses, deadlifts, all the exercises you need to build power – but crucially I do them on a breath-hold.” It’s important that not everyone tries this, he warns, as it could be dangerous for the inexperienced. “But it’s helpful for us as freedivers because we work with our muscles on breath-hold all the time.”

BRAVING NEW WORLDS

There is no denying the physical and mental strength of the competitors assembled on this floating sporting arena. Perhaps most impressive is that, for the most part, they are amateurs. The majority have taken time off work and paid large sums of money to fly to Cyprus to compete. And the reward? A gold medal for the winner, and the respect of

his peers. Given the amount of training necessary to compete at this level, not to mention the ever-present threat of death by drowning, the burning question remains: why?

“In the water you are in a zero gravity world,” says Néry, the romance palpable in his voice. “You reach a certain depth where the pressure squeezes your body and you can just let go as you sink down to the bottom of the ocean. At that point it feels like flying. It’s magical. You enter another world, the colours change, it gets darker and darker. You feel this immense pressure engulfing your body. It feels like you’re not on planet earth anymore.”

It’s this otherworldliness, says Néry, that drives freedivers to keep pushing their physical and mental limits, to go where only a handful of people have ever gone before. “It’s the exploration spirit – a quest into the unknown,” he says. “I started freediving when I was 14. I was swimming in the sea and I couldn’t see the bottom, and I thought to myself, ‘What’s below?’ It’s human nature: we want to explore space, to reach Mars, to discover what’s happening at the bottom of the ocean. This is our quest as freedivers: to understand our human capability to adapt to the underwater world.”