ADAM STERN
FREEDIVER

BY ADAM MCDONALD // PHOTOGRAPHY KAROLMEYER, C_TWIST, MATTK1979
ADAM STERN AND THE SPORT OF FREEDIVING WAS BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION BY A SEARCH4HURT FACEBOOK FOLLOWER EDWIN PERRY. EDWIN, ADAM’S MATE, MESSAGED US AND MADE THE INTRODUCTION, INFORMING US THAT STERN HAS BEEN AUSTRALIA’S MOST SUCCESSFUL DEEP FREEDIVER IN 2013, FREEDIVING TO A DEPTH OF 85 METRES IN COMPETITION THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

Now, while I have heard of the term freediving, and have seen some footage of it on TV at some point, I have never personally met anyone who freedives. To be honest, I know absolutely zero about the sport, which, I imagine, I am not the only one out there. So I was really excited to meet Adam and find out more about him, the crazy sport he is doing in and find out about his breath hold classes.

SO HERE IS THE LOWDOWN
Freediving is a form of underwater diving that relies on a diver’s ability to hold their breath until resurfac ing rather than using breathing apparatus like the more traditional method of diving, scuba. Competitive apnea is the side of freediving that garners the most public attention as it is the extreme side of the sport in which competitors attempt to attain great depths, times, or distances on a single breath. This is the discipline that Adam Stern competes in.

There are other areas of freediving. These include breath-hold spearfishing, freedive photography, recreational breath-hold diving and apnea competitions. Competitive freediving is currently governed by AIDA (Association Internationale pour le Développement de l’Apnée), the body responsible for competitions and records keeping.

While there are team events, what most types of competitive freediving have in common is that it is an individual sport based on the best individual achievement. Competitions tend to be separated into either depth disciplines or pool disciplines because it can often be hard to find a place that has both great depth conditions and Olympic standard pools. Pool disciplines are focused on swimming distances and are defined by their different methods of propulsion (with fins, without fins, and also Static Apnea - breath hold without moving). Depth disciplines are the same except the goal is to reach a certain depth.

WHERE AND HOW
Adam spends most of the year (March to Dec) in a small village in the Sinai region of Egypt called Dehab. Located on the Gulf of Aqaba, Dehab is renowned as a free diving mecca, as the Red Sea offers near perfect conditions with clear blue water (25 to 50 meter visibility), no currents and easy access from shore.

Dehab attracts visitors wanting to learn freediving from experts like Adam. It also has the famous Blue Hole, where Adam and many other professional deep freedivers spend their time training. Due to the low cost of living in Egypt, professionals like Adam can do a few clinics every month and earn enough money to live and focus on their own training and competition. Adam and his girlfriend Katarina Linczeniycva, a Slovakian freediver currently ranked third in the world in the Constant Weight discipline (swimming to depth with fins) spend nine months coaching and training then come home for Christmas and usually run some clinics while they are home.

Adam’s Australian home is Copacabana, which is on the Central Coast of NSW. It is here where we catch up with Adam to take on his breath holding and free diving clinics and also to find out just what the life of Australia’s best deep freediver looks like.

AS DANGEROUS AS IT SOUNDS?
Before I met up with Adam, I wanted to know just what physiological effects freediving would have on your body as the very thought of diving down eight metres and getting back to the surface, let alone 85 metres, was a daunting one indeed. My first look into it led me to learn about the death of Nicholas Mevoli, a freediver from New York who in November 2013, died attempting to break a freediving record. For two years prior to his passing, freediving consumed Nicholas’ life, turning him from novice diver to national record-holder in a timeframe unheard of in other professional sports. Mevoli, it is claimed, was obsessed by freediving and died during a USA National record attempt at Hidden Cove in the Bahamas. After being underwater for a total of 3 minutes and 38 seconds, reaching a depth of 72 metres, Mevoli returned to the surface, removed his goggles then fell into unconsciousness. After numerous resuscitation attempts he was taken to hospital where he died later of pulmonary edema.

Mevoli’s life and death reflect both the spirit of a fast-growing niche sport and its dangers. His rise from a novice to a national record-holder in just over a year serves both as inspiration, but also a warning. Maybe rising to the top in a sport so rapidly has its drawbacks? Maybe those years athletes spend working their way toward the top add valuable experience, experience that helps the athlete better adapt to their environment and maybe even keep them from harms way? But as extreme and dangerous as freediving appears, and as hard as it pushes athletes to their physiological limits, amazingly enough. Mevoli’s death was the first in over 20 years of freediving competition and quite possibly could
have been avoided with common sense. The word circulating the free dive circles is that in the days before his death Mevoli experienced lung squeeze, which is a tearing of lung tissue, damaging lung tissue or bursting blood vessels in the lungs. Usually these things all happen during a ‘squeeze’ due to the pressure of the water and how it compresses the lungs. Most divers would take a week or so out of the water to recover. If the talk is correct, Mevoli unfortunately did not give his body any chance to recover.

Adam admits that following Nick’s death he was inundated with messages from friends and family to be safe. Like Mevoli, Adam has also seen a rapid rise and is considered one of the young guns of the sport, having advanced rapidly in only two and a half years of freediving.

**THE ROAD TO DEHAB**

So, how does a 25 year old Aussie find himself living in Egypt, eating and breathing freediving? In Adam’s case he had been traveling around experiencing what the world had on offer for around four years. During his travels he dabbled in some Scuba diving and it was in a dive shop in Thailand that he came across a poster promoting freediving and he thought, ‘that looks cool’.

The poster was advertising freediving courses in which Adam joined up, and the rest, they say is history. But freediving didn’t come naturally and Adam admits he is not a natural like so many he sees take up the sport. He didn’t just start being able to breathe hold for extended periods of time and has to work hard to keep his ranking in the sport. ‘In the three hour static breath hold workshops that I run almost everyone does a breath hold of over three minutes while 30% will hold their breath for over four minutes and around 10% will do a five minute breath hold on their very first time’, Stern says, but then notes, ‘it took me months before I could do a 5 minute breath hold’.

One thing Adam did notice when he first started deep diving was how it stripped muscle mass. Not long after taking it up, Adam lost over eight kilograms of muscle mass, which at the time was over 10% of his total body weight. So he says jokingly that he is waiting for the freedive diet to hit Hollywood sometime in the near future.

**DIVING LIFESTYLE**

Whilst we were on the subject of diet, when asked what a professional freediver’s diet looks like, Adam explains that as much as he would like to follow a full nutrition plan, he can’t be too selective when based in Dehab as every bar and liquor store is imported and only come in on certain days. So while he eats as natural as possible, what’s available predicts what he eats.

‘I try to balance the pH level of my blood. Naturally our blood is slightly alkaline and so I eat foods that alkalise my body. If my blood stream is acidic then the haemoglobin in my blood will deposit the oxygen molecules into my tissue rapidly. If my blood is too alkaline then the haemoglobin will hang onto the oxygen molecules for a long time before being deposited into the tissue. Because my dive requires muscular effort I need the oxygen to be deposited in my tissues but not so fast as if I had acidic blood. So I stay away from meats, wheat, sugar, dairy and other acidic foods to keep me slightly alkaline. The carbs that I’m after are mostly rice, sweet potato and beetroot to name a few’.

But that’s a small price to pay to live in the beautiful freediving mecca that is Dehab. A place where Adam and other professional freedivers can do one lesson per month for 200 euros which is enough to accommodate, eat and travel to competitions.

**FREE DIVING BY THE NUMBERS**

Adam notes that numbers play a major role in professional freediving and take up the majority of conversation around the professional circles in Dehab. But, obsessing over numbers can be dangerous, as it seems was the case for Nicholas Mevoli.

‘There are a few thousand competitive free divers, all at varying levels. About 50% of those freedivers are recreational but join in on competitions through the year for fun. Last year I was ranked 29th in the world in the Constant Weight Discpline (that was the discipline I trained last year - it is swimming to depth with fins or a monofin).’

‘Last year we had many Aussies competing in freediving comps but they were mostly pool comps. There were actually only three logged Aussies in depth comps last year. Though to get a better idea of where I stack up, I am the second deepest Aussie of all time. There was only one person that has ever done a deeper dive than me and there have been around 300 Aussies that have competed in depth competitions. Not really enough Aussies competing in depth at the moment though now to make that statistic sound impressive.’

‘So the world Record for the deepest dive done with a monofin is 128m by Alexei Molchanov And without fins (breast stroke) it is 101m that is by a Kiwi, William Truebridge.’

**ADAM’S GOALS IN 2014**

‘I want to take all the Australian depth records.’

**Constant Weight: 106m (monofin)**

**Constant Weight No Fins: 74m**

**Free Immersion: 83m (pulling yourself down the rope with arms)**

‘So first I will be after the no-fins record which is the hardest record of the three. I’m aiming for 75-80m, which will place me well within the top five for the year and close to the top 10 of all time for that discipline.’

‘Then I will be aiming for the Free Immersion record, which is the easiest of the three. That will be an easy snatch.’

‘Then finally I will strap the monofin back on and be aiming for a dive of around 110m.’

‘I’m not sure if I will have time for all three records but definitely the No Fins and the Free Immersion.’

**FREE DIVING DISCIPLINES:**

**Constant Weight:** (swimming to depth with fins)

**Constant Weight No Fins:** (swimming to depth without fins)

**Free Immersion** (Pulling with the arms down a descending line)

**Static Apnea:** (breath held face down in water without moving, based on time)

**Dynamic Apnea:** (swimming distances horizontally with fins)

**Dynamic Apnea No Fins:** (swimming distances horizontally without fins)
ADAM’S EXERCISES HE RECOMMENDS FOR EVERYONE:

Learn how to breathe into the stomach. Slowly push out your stomach as you inhale with your mouth as if you were pretending you had a beer gut. As you exhale, relax your stomach. The bottom half of your lungs, which you can activate by pushing out your stomach as you inhale, is more efficient at transporting the oxygen to your blood stream than the top half.

Your heart rate cannot be controlled directly but it can be influenced by your breathing. Slow relaxed breathing with prolonged exhales doubles the length of your inhalation will help slow down your heart rate.

ADAM’S FREEDIVING WORKSHOP

Terry, Search 

Hurt’s Production Manager, is a real keen surfer and when he found out about Adam Steen’s workshops just down the road from Search 

Hurt HQ, he jumped at the opportunity to learn whatever he could from one of the best, despite not really knowing what he was diving into.

Who goes to a freediving/breath holding workshop? Anyone really. It was in a quiet room at Long Jetty, NSW, where I gathered with a mixed group, mostly but not limited to, water sport lovers. There were non-water based athletes taking the course to help maintain performance when they were extremely exhausted whilst competing. And there were lifeguards and surfers who were super interested for the purposes of those times when they’re held under the water.

What happened at the course? After Adam’s introduction and some questions and answers about his experiences, it was down to business. We kicked off with a lesson in anatomy behind breath holding.

Breath holding anatomy? Yep, Adam explained the reactions the body has when holding your breath, the signals your body sends the brain regarding how and why you need to breathe and how much longer before you can hold out. The part that surprised me the most was how the body sends a ‘please breathe’ signal even though your body does not need to breathe for a fair period after this. In training this reaction, Adam noted that his body does not even send the signal anymore.

Is it all in the mind then? No, we got physical. We worked through some breathing exercises, which again, amazed me. I swear I have never exhaled a breath for so long in my life, which brought an unexpected sense of achievement and excitement. Adam worked his magic in his humorous way as he went around ‘one on one’ with each person in the group. He identified the signs to and from your brain when it is telling you to breathe.

And what next? Assessment of course. Not really, but we did a final test, so to speak – how long can you hold your breath. The record in our group was five minutes 30 seconds with each person averaging between three to five minutes. Everyone was astounded in their results.