

ONE BREATH

BREATHE

KICK

DIVE

EQUALIZE



▲ FRESHMEN LUKAS BURNETT DIVES in the open ocean near a shipwreck in Jupiter, Florida. He ascends slowly from the bottom at 40 feet.

Take a long, deep **breath**. Now imagine holding that breath for over 24 minutes. **Lightheaded** just by the thought of it? Us too. Holding your breath for long periods of time takes **discipline and practice**, and for most of us normal humans who walk on land every day, there's really no reason to try. But for one group, this skill is essential to learn and difficult to perfect. Enter **freedivers**.

words_sal puma. photo & design_sydney burnett.

We aren't sure if mermaids exist or not. But if they don't, freedivers are the next best thing. Whether it's for sport or their own fulfillment, these individuals push the depths of human mental and physical boundaries as they dive the depths of oceans, lakes and ponds without external breathing apparatuses.

Freediving may seem like a new sport, but it has existed for millenia, longer than Scuba tanks and modern fishing rods.

According to the freediving organization International Association for the Development of Apnea, the practice has been around since ancient times. During the Peloponnesian War, its website says, Alexander the Great's soldiers dove deep to destroy underwater barricades. Meanwhile in Japan "Ama," or "sea women," were diving for pearls about 2,000 years ago.

Think you wouldn't last more than a minute underwater? Without training, you may be right, but this is a skill that can be learned. Just look at Guinness World Record holder Budimir Šobat, who held his breath for 24 minutes and 37.36 seconds.

Of course, not all freedivers are shooting to break this record, or get anywhere near it. For many, the peace and challenge of taking the plunge is enough. "It's just really cool to be down there with nothing attached to you," said freshman Jessica Axtman. "Very relaxing."

"I loved the challenge of holding your breath and seeing

the ocean in a more natural way, without tanks and a buoyancy control device," said first-year law student and newly certified freediver Izzi Klayman.

Klayman, like multiple members of the freediving community, was certified as a Scuba diver before giving freediving a try.

While it may be tempting to assume the only difference between these two sports is the existence of a tank or lack thereof, this is not the case. According to a blog post by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), one of the largest certifying bodies for both sports, Scuba and freediving diverge in a number of key ways. This includes the amount of time practitioners can spend underwater, the training and safety processes they undergo and the feelings of challenge and accomplishment that individuals feel.

"Freedivers have endless ways to improve and enhance their underwater experience, which makes for a more interesting challenge," freediver Sarah Russel wrote for PADI. "Whether it's working on technique, mindset, relaxation or awareness, freedivers must challenge themselves to better understand themselves as much as their environment to progress."

Comparisons aside, this still begs the question: Exactly how is all this possible?

In an article for diving blog "Deeper Blue," Kristina Zvaritch, a freediving instructor certified under multiple organizations

including PADI, writes that divers' crazy breath holds are possible due to an evolutionary factor called the Mammalian Diving Reflex that all humans possess.

This reflex, she explains, is what "triggers our bodies to conserve oxygen, use it more efficiently and it protects our organs at deeper depths." When divers hold their breath, Zvaritch writes, the heart will pump slower and the blood vessels will narrow in order to use less oxygen. The more experienced a diver is, the more they will be able to increase and benefit from these adaptations.

"As a freediver prepares for a dive, time seems to slow down. Breathing from the belly and relaxing muscles with each slow exhale, the heart rate drops, the eyes close and all doubts and apprehension are swept away," explained Virgil Price, an instructor at Florida Freedivers.

"Confident, relaxed, calculated, the diver fills his or her body full of air with the peak inhalation," he continued. "Letting go, mind clear, the diver begins his or her descent into the deep blue."

Sounds pretty cool right? If you're looking to get started, the first step is getting certified by a credible agency like PADI, Freediving Instructors International (FII) or Performance Freediving International (PFI.) Classes are taught all around the country at local dive shops accredited by these agencies, and while there are multiple levels of certifications, the first one will teach you all about freediving breathing methods, safety and how to nail your first dive.

Needless to say (hopefully), before you do any of that, you need to know how to swim.

Before even stepping into a pool, Klayman was taught techniques for holding her breath. Then, she said, "I had to perform static apnea for two minutes—holding your breath with your face underwater and not moving."

Next, Klayman said, she had to swim back and forth across a swimming pool underwater while holding her breath. Finally, in order to earn her certification, she had to dive down 30 feet in the ocean. Both of these exercises would require her to practice dynamic apnea—basically holding one's breath underwater while moving.

Additionally, Klayman said, her class learned about safety procedures and how to rescue divers experiencing blackouts.

One of the golden rules of diving, according to PADI's "Standard Safe Diving Practices," is to always dive with a buddy. The safest practice, according to Florida Freedivers' website, is to have one buddy dive while the other remains on the surface and then switch. Partners should wait at least 30 seconds before switching, the site states, and the diver on top should be within arms reach of the surfacing diver returning from below in the case of a hypoxic or blackout event.

What is that? Glad you asked.


According to FFI, "During freediving blackout all the bodily functions that are not necessary for survival are shut down in order for the remaining oxygen to be distributed where necessary.

A freediver experiencing blackout cannot see, talk, feel, etc. because that person is not conscious, but their heart is still beating and their blood, with remaining oxygen, is still being pumped into their brain."

Every diver faces the possibility of a blackout if they push their limits too far, the site explains, and while these events don't have to be deadly, you better hope your partner is trained and attentive if you have one. Likewise, when your buddy is down there, you have to keep your eyes on them too. Like Klayman said, the proper way to deal with these events is taught in basic freediving training.

So, considering the risk of blacking out, what is the reward? For many divers, euphoria, relaxation and self-reflection.

One thing Beatriz Minguez, a certified freediving instructor and owner of Sufibreathe in Miami Beach, focuses on is the mental health benefits of static apnea. A holistic aqua-wellness coach, Minguez helps divers improve their breath-holding skills by taking them through guided meditations in order to focus their mind on the goal at hand. Mental relaxation, she said, is key to keeping your breath under control, and her course aims to provide divers that peace of mind.

"Whereas most would focus on their destination, the freediver looks inward, living moment to moment, attempting to gain control of the body and mind, knowing the journey is the key to success," Price said. 

HOW TO GET STARTED

Ready to get down to business? These local surf shops should be on your list.

South Beach Dive and Surf Center

This shop across the bay offers dive and surf rentals and dive and snorkel trips all around Miami, Jupiter and other Florida locations. Their range of freediving courses include private and discounted group lessons, half and full-day wellness retreats, and "basic" and "level one" freediving certification accredited by PADI.

Nautilus Spearfishing

This shop on SW 57th Ave. offers two day freediving certification courses with instructors accredited with FFI. They also offer a wide selection of dive and spearfishing gear and accessories, as well as spearfishing, freediving, snorkel, Scuba and deep sea fishing charters where participants can see (or catch) a wide range of wildlife.

UMiami Freediving Club/Vortex Freediving

Vortex, run by Ricardo Paris and UM alumni Beatrix Paris, offers their own freediving courses and works frequently to help students get certified through the UMiami Freediving Club. For more information on joining, reach out to @umiamifreediving on Instagram.

