

Golden men and a bronze girl

The French call him Mr Perfect. Not just because he's smart and handsome and has the kind of physique that makes Greek gods jealous, or because he's one of the best freedivers in the world. But mostly because he is, besides all that, extremely kind -he is a swimming teacher for handicapped kids. He's flawless in such an unassuming way that you don't even want to kill him for it, it's not even annoying, it's just ...perfect. And now Morgan Burchis has a gold medal.

At the Freediving World Championships in Kalamata, Greece this year, Morgan was one of the contenders for a silver or bronze medal in a discipline called Constant Weight no Fins (CNF), where you dive down a measured line as deep as you dare to announce and back up, without the use of fins, just with your bare hands and feet and a lungful of air. According to a lot of freedivers, it is the purest form of freediving.

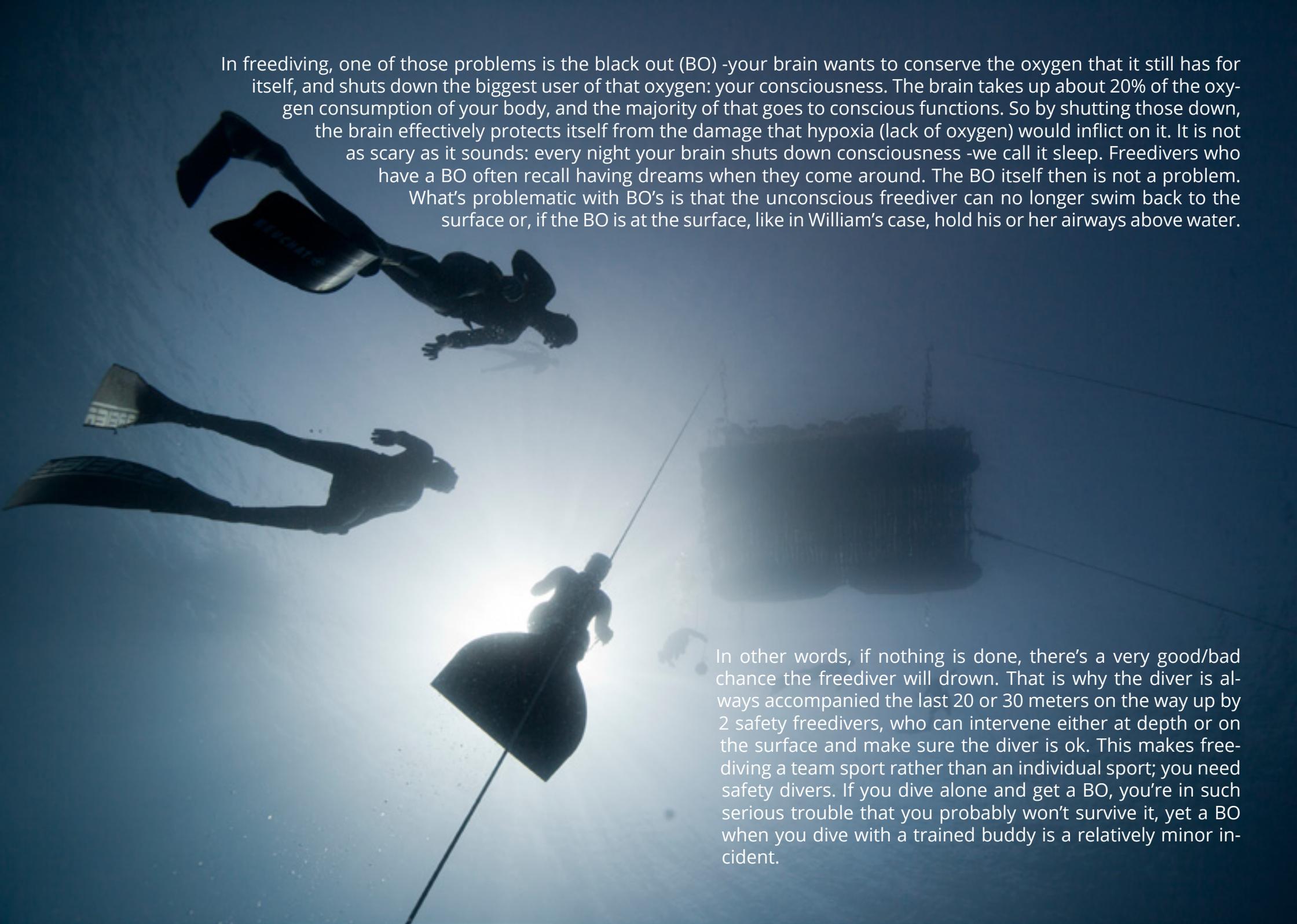
It certainly is the hardest. Earlier that month Morgan had set a French record with his dive to 89 meters, making him the third deepest man in history in this discipline. For the world championships, he announced a dive to 87 meters, which under normal circumstances, and if he'd make the dive, would give him bronze. But normal circumstances rarely apply to anything that involves the sea; one of his main competitors had experienced trouble on an earlier dive and decided not to compete in the discipline. So that would give Morgan silver, because the shoe-in winner would be the world record holder, the man who has completely dominated this discipline for the last 6 years.



William Trubridge is of a similar perfect ilk to Morgan: model-good looks, a brain so sharp you could theoretically split hairs with it, kind, a great sportsman, ridiculously fit. His wife is perfect too -enough to make you puke in self-loathing if they weren't also funny and actively involved with real world issues like the extinction of the Hector's dolphin, and proliferation of plastic in the sea. William truly loves the ocean, not just because it's his training ground, but because like most freedivers, he feels part of it. And amongst freedivers who dive without fins, he is our deepest part of it. On December 16th 2010, he dove to an incredible 101 meters, and back up, setting a world record so much deeper than the rest of us that he is truly in a league of his own. Nobody has come within 10 meters of this -think of it as the 100 meter dash, where the best do it in 10 seconds, and then this guy comes and does it in less than 9.

So obviously William was going to win this one. All he had to do was dive conservatively, announce something in the low 90's, and bag gold. But noblesse oblige, in previous world championships he had done 92 meters, then 94, so he went for a 96 announcement. On the day of the CNF competition, the sea was 2 degrees colder than before, which eats energy, and it was rougher, which makes it harder to relax. Plus William suffers from nerves. All these factors made it a tricky dive, and when William returned to the surface, he momentarily lost consciousness. These things happen; competitions are designed to take your body to the limit, whether it be football, marathons or freediving, and the solutions to the possible problems that might arise are in place so it's perfectly safe to push yourself.

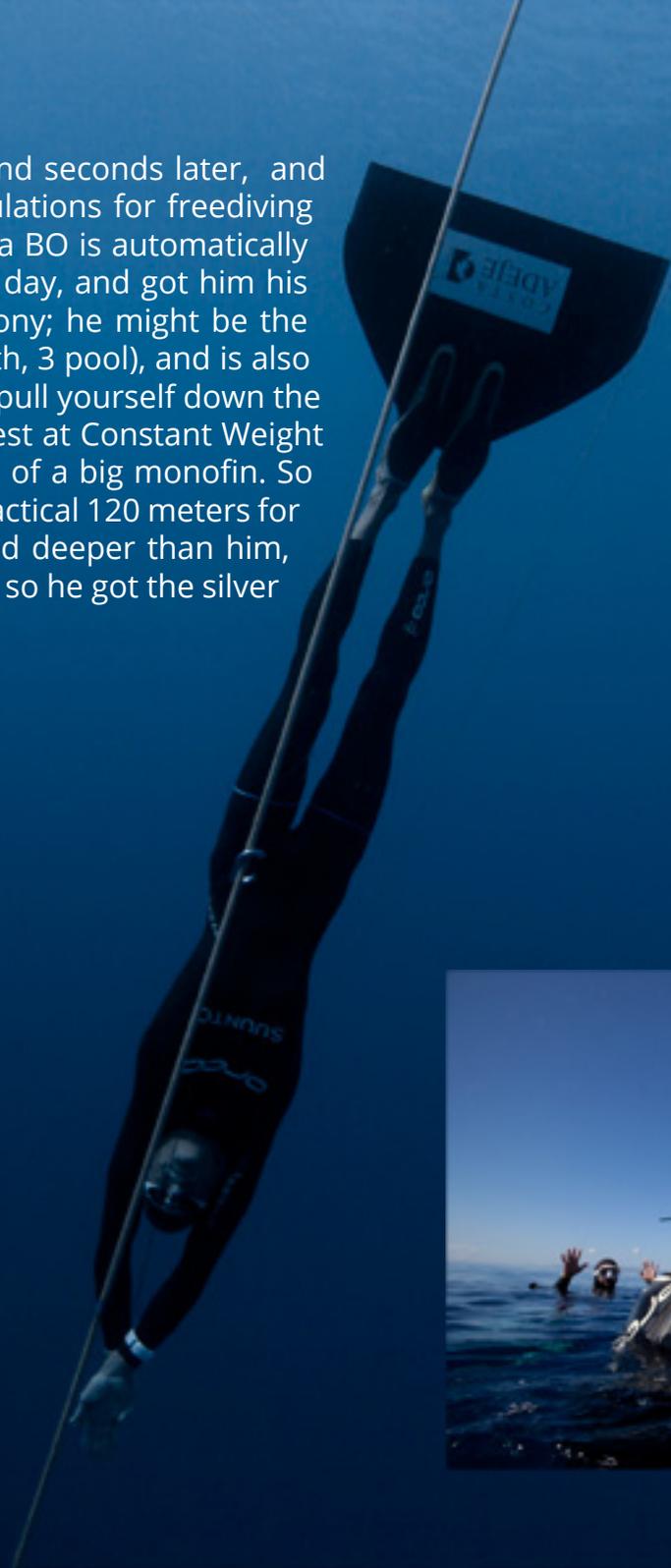


An underwater scene showing three divers and a large, dark, rectangular object. The divers are silhouetted against a bright light source, likely the sun, which creates a strong lens flare. One diver is in the foreground, holding onto a rope that is attached to the large object. Two other divers are positioned above and to the left of the first diver. The water is clear and blue, with some bubbles visible. The overall atmosphere is dramatic and somewhat somber due to the silhouettes and the bright light source.

In freediving, one of those problems is the black out (BO) -your brain wants to conserve the oxygen that it still has for itself, and shuts down the biggest user of that oxygen: your consciousness. The brain takes up about 20% of the oxygen consumption of your body, and the majority of that goes to conscious functions. So by shutting those down, the brain effectively protects itself from the damage that hypoxia (lack of oxygen) would inflict on it. It is not as scary as it sounds: every night your brain shuts down consciousness -we call it sleep. Freedivers who have a BO often recall having dreams when they come around. The BO itself then is not a problem. What's problematic with BO's is that the unconscious freediver can no longer swim back to the surface or, if the BO is at the surface, like in William's case, hold his or her airways above water.

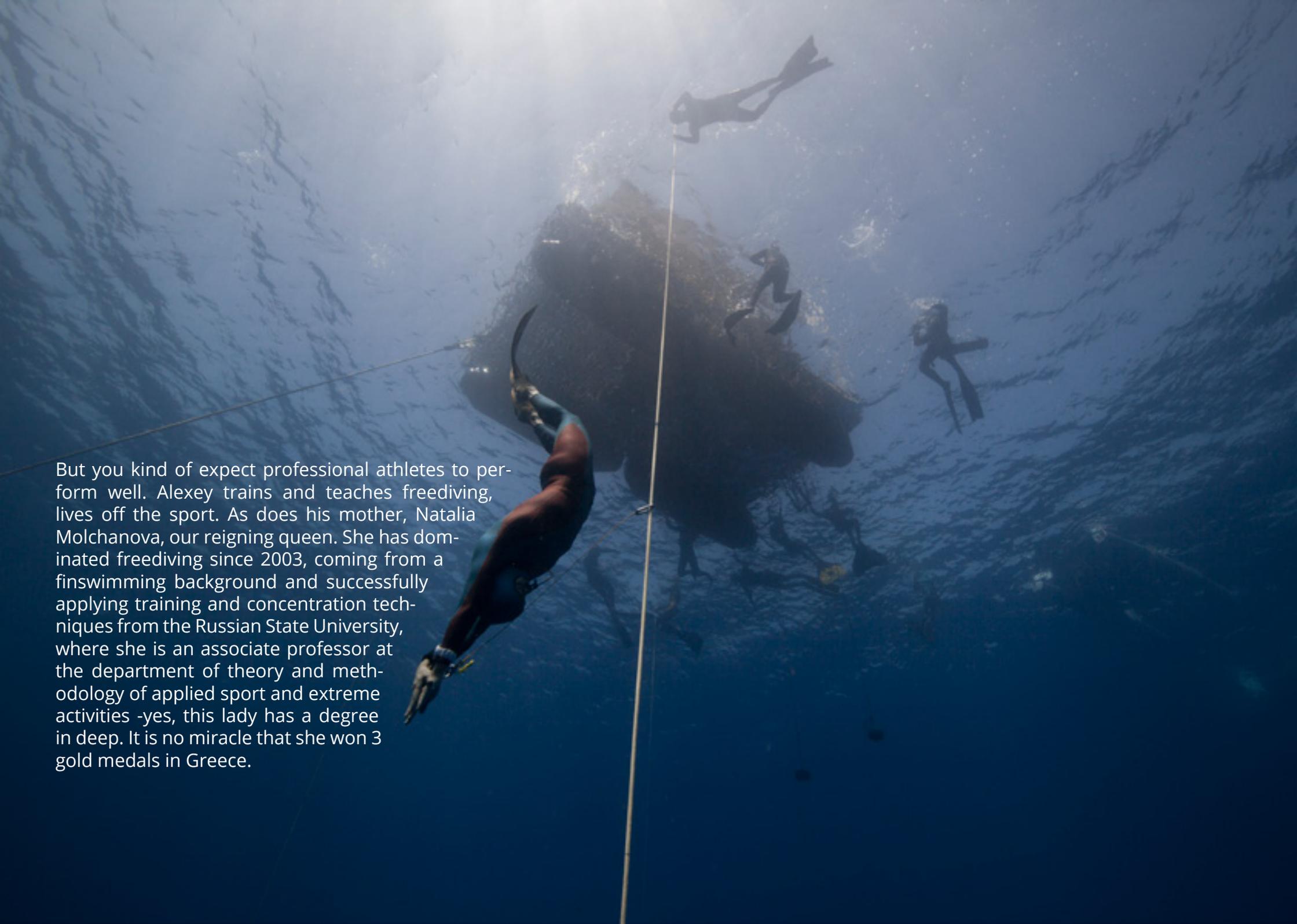
In other words, if nothing is done, there's a very good/bad chance the freediver will drown. That is why the diver is always accompanied the last 20 or 30 meters on the way up by 2 safety freedivers, who can intervene either at depth or on the surface and make sure the diver is ok. This makes freediving a team sport rather than an individual sport; you need safety divers. If you dive alone and get a BO, you're in such serious trouble that you probably won't survive it, yet a BO when you dive with a trained buddy is a relatively minor incident.

So William had a little sleep on the surface, came around seconds later, and realized he'd messed up. Obviously, the rules and regulations for freediving competitions don't allow for BO's, and a dive ending in a BO is automatically disqualified. This left Morgan as the deepest diver that day, and got him his gold medal. William, however, is not just a one-trick pony; he might be the very best at CNF, but he trains in all 6 disciplines (3 depth, 3 pool), and is also a world record holder Free Immersion (FIM), where you pull yourself down the competition rope and back up, and he's amongst the best at Constant Weight (CWT), where you swim down and back up with the aid of a big monofin. So he recovered, announced a relatively conservative and tactical 120 meters for CWT, and made that dive. Three people had announced deeper than him, but two turned early and therefore got points deducted, so he got the silver medal for CWT.

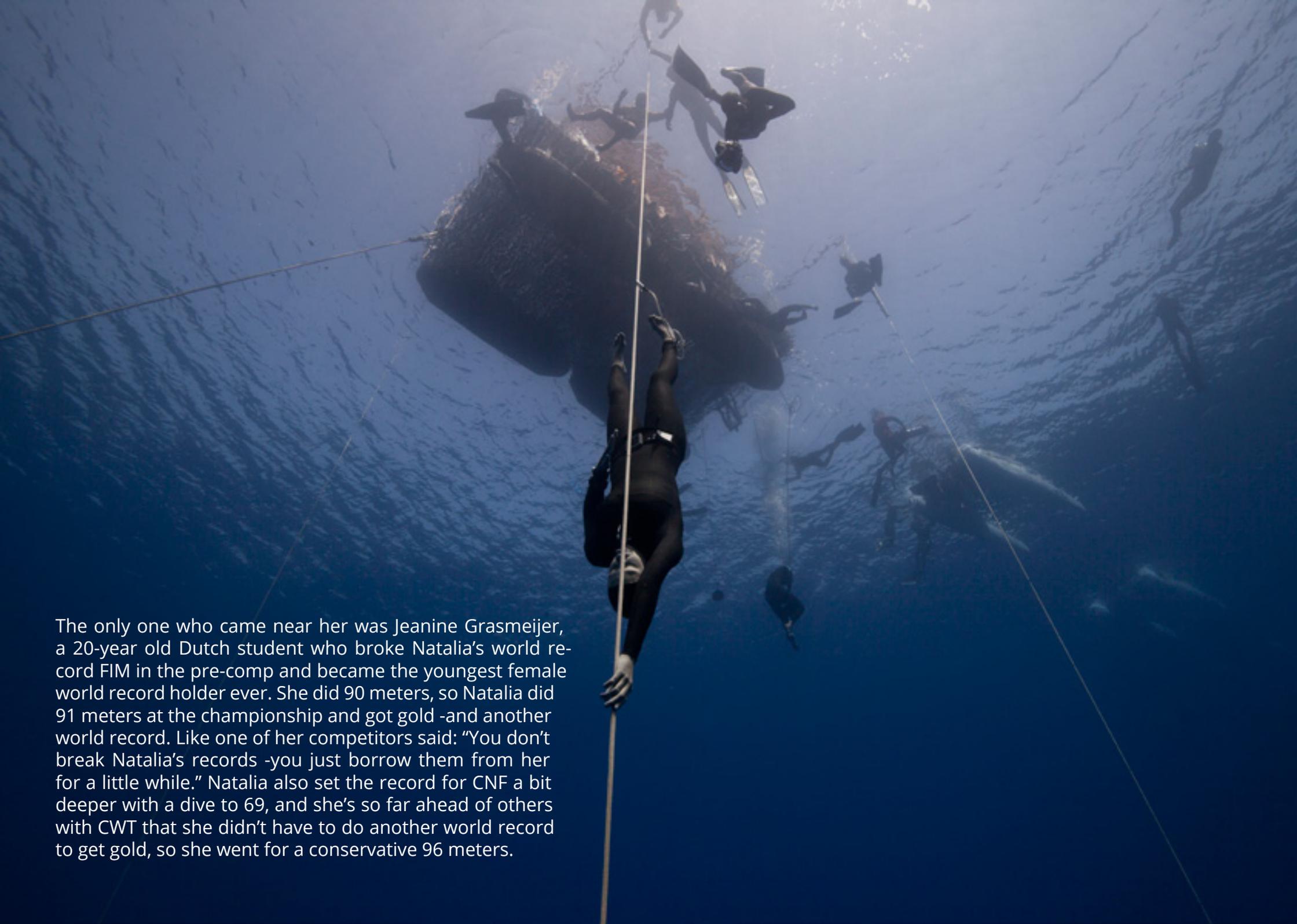


Gold went to the golden retriever of freediving, Alexey Molchanov. He's earned his nickname because of his blonde hair, sunny temper and ever-present smile, plus he goes down the rope like a retriever after a tennis ball, full of joy and vigour. He set a world record at 128 meters, doubly impressive since his previous attempt at that depth earlier that month had gotten him into some serious trouble. He experienced a reverse block on his way up, which is when the expanding air in the sinuses has nowhere to go due to a blockage. This causes a lot of pain and sometimes disorientation. It's rare but it can happen in freediving, and in Alexey's case it did make him disoriented, enough for him to go down again, and then up again very slowly. Too slowly, as a matter of fact. All dives are monitored on the surface by sonar, and it was obvious that he was in trouble, he was going too slow. The safety that was waiting for him at 30 saw him getting less and less coordinated, so the safety diver went down deeper, and at 40 meters had to grab Alexey and take him up. Another safety diver on a scooter then took him over and brought him to the surface, where Alexey came around quickly and got administered oxygen to recover. It was an unusually deep BO and it took Alexey some time and quite a lot of guts to try again.

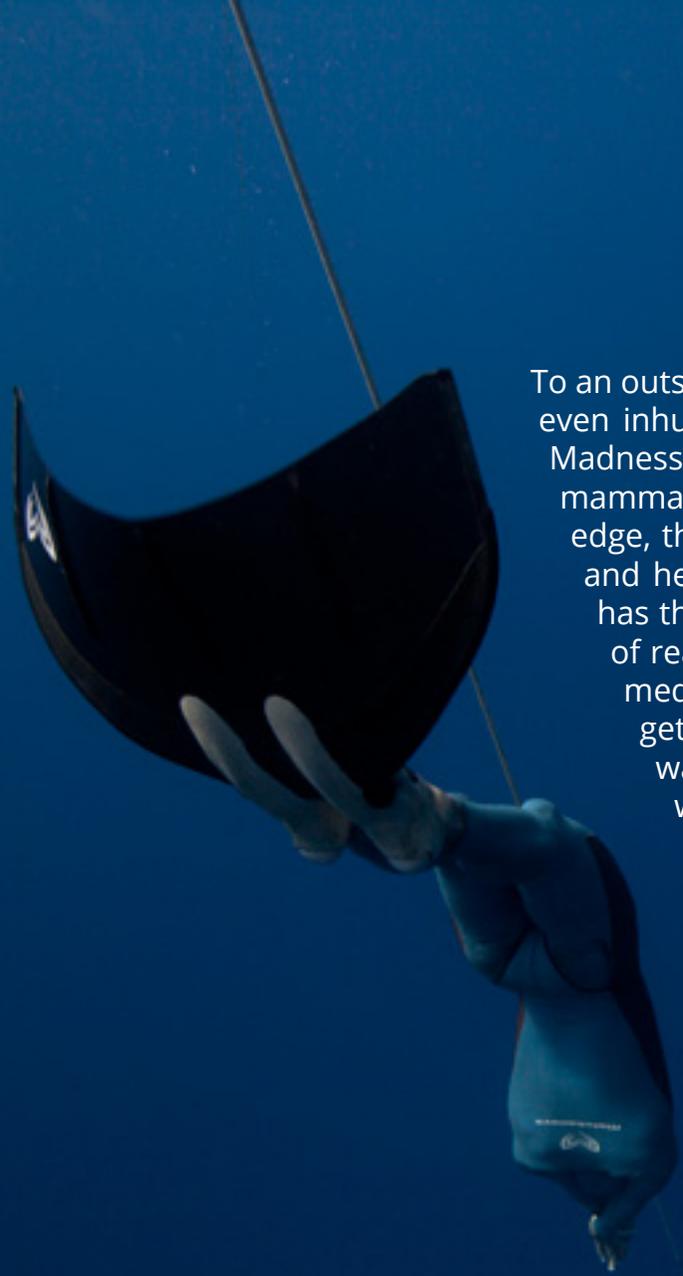




But you kind of expect professional athletes to perform well. Alexey trains and teaches freediving, lives off the sport. As does his mother, Natalia Molchanova, our reigning queen. She has dominated freediving since 2003, coming from a finswimming background and successfully applying training and concentration techniques from the Russian State University, where she is an associate professor at the department of theory and methodology of applied sport and extreme activities -yes, this lady has a degree in deep. It is no miracle that she won 3 gold medals in Greece.

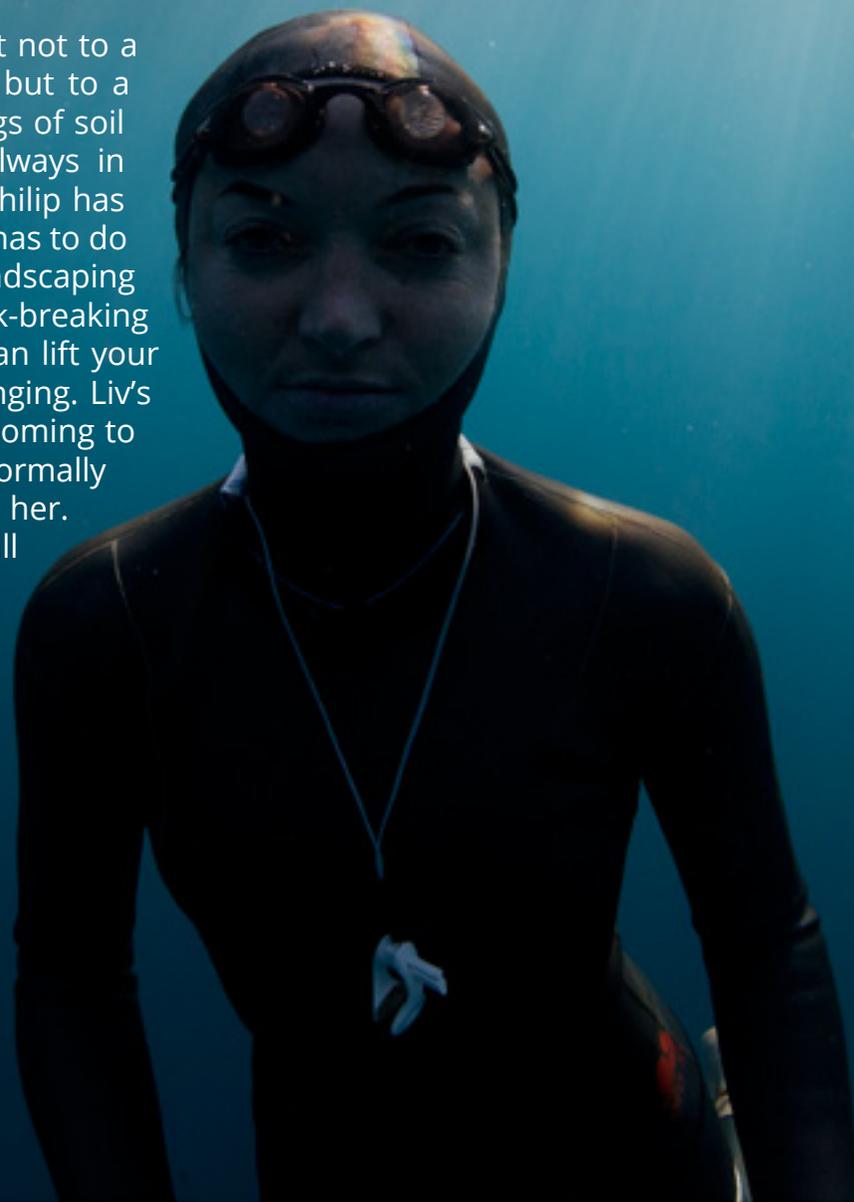


The only one who came near her was Jeanine Grasmeyer, a 20-year old Dutch student who broke Natalia's world record FIM in the pre-comp and became the youngest female world record holder ever. She did 90 meters, so Natalia did 91 meters at the championship and got gold -and another world record. Like one of her competitors said: "You don't break Natalia's records -you just borrow them from her for a little while." Natalia also set the record for CNF a bit deeper with a dive to 69, and she's so far ahead of others with CWT that she didn't have to do another world record to get gold, so she went for a conservative 96 meters.



To an outsider these numbers and achievements might seem enormous, maybe even inhuman -diving deeper than Big Ben is tall while holding your breath? Madness, right? But the aquatic potential of humans is huge, as big as some sea mammals. That's just not very common knowledge. What is common knowledge, though, is that when you train something, you get better at it. Natalia and her son train every day, William moved to a remote island because it has the best spot for freediving in the world -it is very much within the line of reason that they are as good as they are. Most of the silver and bronze medal winners have a similar story; they had been training for months to get where they are. Morgan might not be a professional freediver but he was part of the French swimming team and lives near the sea. There were some exceptions, though, most notably from the UK.

The bronze medal for CNF for the females went not to a professional swimmer or a sponsored athlete, but to a landscape gardener, who was lugging about bags of soil and lawnmowers through narrow London hallways in preparation for this world championships. Liv Philip has a small landscaping business, which means she has to do most of the work herself, from a little van, and landscaping isn't puttering about in gardens: it is hard, back-breaking work. At the end of a day, you're lucky if you can lift your hands above your head without your back whinging. Liv's shoulders and her right wrist were messed up coming to Greece, and the days leading up to the event, normally used for training, were more about healing for her. There was concrete and mud in her sinuses, all her muscles were stiff and hard, where water demands you to be smooth and loose. Yet she managed to pull off a 50 meter no fins dive, equal to her personal best in competition. She managed to do that with very little training -and most of the time when she is training she is also instructing beginners.





So the extraordinary things were not so much the gold medals here, though the people behind those medals are quite golden themselves. Most of the people there are not professional athletes: there was a bookshop owner, and a police officer, a beautician, two landscape gardeners and a tree surgeon (all three from London), a teacher, a dentist, a yoga teacher and a student, a doctor and an investment banker, a botanist and documentary maker. What is extraordinary about freediving, as exemplified at this world championships, is that it is not exceptional humans that can go to these depths, but that normal humans can go to exceptional depths.

Read more about the plight of the Hector's Dolphin at William's site: <http://williamtrubridge.com/trublue/>
More on Liv and how she applies freediving to daily life can be found here: <http://free-flowh2o.com/>