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FREEDIVE
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HERBERT NITSCH
THE 253M DIVE
PART 2
Herbert Nitsch has set 32 world records in all of the freediving disciplines and an additional one in the traditional Greek discipline of Skandalopetra. These are unrivaled achievements in freediving history. The title “the Deepest Man on Earth” was given to him when he set the world record for freediving at an incredible depth of 214 metres (702 feet) in 2007 in the No Limit discipline.

On June 6th, 2012, Herbert surpassed this world record with a No Limit dive to 253.2 meters (830.8 feet) but suffered from severe decompression sickness. His path from a wheelchair-bound and care-dependent patient back to the ocean would become the biggest challenge of his life and is described in this article.

Part one of this story, about the preparations and the dive itself, was published in the previous issue of Freedive Magazine. Both parts are exclusive excerpts from Herbert’s upcoming autobiography.

He lives in his native Vienna, Austria with his partner and co-writer Jeanette.
The Deepest Dive: Part 2

My personal memory of what happened during my last No Limit freedive in Santorini is mixed with video footage I have seen. After thorough analysis of all the data and film it was concluded that “touch down” was at 233.2 metres (763.0 feet) and that on the way back up, I fell asleep due to nitrogen narcosis at around 90 metres (295 feet), and woke back up at approximately 8 metres (26 feet).

I had planned to do a one minute decompression stop while still on the same breath hold at 10 metres (33 feet) where the sled stopped automatically. But because I showed no reaction, the safety divers took me off the sled. Shortly thereafter however, while still underwater, video footage show that I tried to grab the rope just above the sled.

“I remember that I woke up underwater and realised that I had omitted the very important decompression stop. Bad news.”

Falling asleep is not a far-fetched theory. Any freediver wanting to reach great depths has to be in an extremely relaxed state that borders on being asleep. In the past I have fallen asleep and woken back up underwater while spearfishing and waiting at the bottom to catch fish. This was probably less related to nitrogen narcosis and more to tiredness from a party the night before. Nitrogen narcosis, which is similar to being drunk or stoned, became my nemesis in Santorini.

After reaching the surface, I did go back down to 10 metres on pure oxygen (O2) to offset any decompression symptoms (a regular post-dive safety measure on all my deep dives). I stayed over 20 minutes on pure O2, much longer than originally planned. While this decision may have saved my life and reduce the outcome of DCS-2 (decompression sickness type 2), some effects nevertheless set in. DCS-2 symptoms can show up to two days after a dive.

The rescue-chain was set in motion after my condition became worse while decompressing underwater. I fell in and out of consciousness from the moment I was pulled onto the safety boat. After being flown by ambulance plane from Santorini to Athens and then onto the Naval Hospital for hyperbaric treatments, I was put in an artificial coma for seven days and diagnosed with DCS-2.

DCS-2 mainly manifests in skin, joints and lymphatic systems and its symptoms usually go away within hours or days with or without treatment. DCS-2 strikes organs, the spine and the central nervous system. In my case I had multiple brain strokes mostly in the cerebellum (“little brain”) which controls voluntary motor movements (balance, posture, coordination, eye movements, speech) and certain cognitive functions.

After eight days in Athens I went for further hyperbaric treatments to a specialised hospital in Murnau, Germany.

“I arrived there heavily medicated and it took several days before I realised my terribly state of health.”

Due to non-stop flickering eye movements I was constantly dizzy and my vision was double and blurred. I could not control my tongue and I was only capable of uttering slurred words. My long- and short-term memory were limited. My coordination and balance were totally off, and the right side of my body felt as if it was detached from me. I could not even sit up in bed without holding on for stability.

Some doctors were unaware that my brain was not totally fried and they would discuss my case in my presence as if I was not there. My hearing was perfect, and I overheard one serious conversation among them. They agreed that I would most likely remain a wheelchair-bound basket-case for the rest of my life.

That statement would resonate in my head over and over again and made me reflect upon my current situation. I had tubes sticking out of my body where there were no holes before. I could neither stand nor walk. My right arm and leg were lame. I could not see straight. My memory was appalling and I spoke like I was in a drunken stupor.

If this were to be my future, I questioned if it would be worth living. I could not imagine being constantly dependent on the care of
others. I had to get out of this trapped world.

With great effort I managed to get from my bed into my wheelchair and roll onto the balcony of my room. I had decided that it was easiest to simply jump off the balcony. I sat there for quite some time thinking about how on earth I would be able to get over that railing before someone figured out my intent.

I pulled myself up from the wheelchair by the balcony railing. I looked down the balcony and realised that I was only on the second floor. This life-ending mission would most likely be a failure and possibly make my current condition only worse. I opted to wait until I returned to Austria where I live on the 26th floor.

After three weeks of recompression treatments in Murnau, I was transferred to a rehabilitation center in Vienna.

“Back on my home turf, my urge for balcony jumping faded as my self-pity morphed into self-motivation.”

During the first few days I was going with the flow of treatments, medication and rehabilitation routines but soon after I insisted to know exactly my treatment plan to get well again. Medical personnel saw me as a difficult and stubborn case because no matter my current limitations, I continually asked questions and questioned treatment methods.

For example, I asked the doctors repeatedly for the medical leaflets of all the drugs I was taking. The initial answer I got was “the patient shouldn’t read this.” After being insistent to the point of annoyance, I received all the leaflets. After reading through all of them (which took me hours as I still had a hard time focusing and remembering what I read), I asked the doctors if I could stop taking some of the medication because of their strong side effects and questionable benefit. The answer was “you have to take them as it might help.”

I was undergoing the same therapeutic treatments as all other patients who had brain injuries from accidents or strokes.

Rehabilitation was not adapted for pigheaded freedivers. These “standard routines” made for “standard cases” would not be enough for me.

“I had no intent of learning how to live in a wheelchair. I wanted to walk around and freedive again.”

The medical team was not open to the idea that top freedivers (and probably most elite athletes) have an excellent understanding of their own bodies. We know how to manipulate our bodily functions and how to push ourselves to the limit. Because of our motivation to constantly improve, we also know that it is possible to surpass these limits and this knowledge reflects directly back into our healing. As I was not getting much support for any adjustments to my therapies, I stubbornly started taking some of the rehabilitation into my own hands.

Firstly, I decided to secretly stop taking most of the medication and eventually stopped taking them all. To get rid of the pills, I threw them out the window while seated in bed (which turned out to be an excellent coordination exercise).

Secondly, I had most of my food brought in from friends and family, because the food at the facility was terrible. It was obvious to me that the body cannot heal without the right nutrition.

Thirdly, I did not participate in treatments that I deemed senseless as I wanted to use my time efficiently. For example, I refused anything related to psychiatry after the first and only session, as I was convinced that the doctor was more messed up than I was.

Fourthly, I detached myself more and more from the established therapies to follow my own routines. I kept motivated by overcoming one small hurdle at a time while aiming to reach bigger goals eventually.

It worked. My health was progressing. The doctors could not explain the progress, and believed that the medicine had worked wonders. As my memory was not improving...
with the speed of light, I used my mobile phone and laptop to type to-do lists and notes. It gave me reminders and assisted me in making decisions.

However, when reading more complicated matters, half way down a page I would have forgotten what I had just read and the content of which I had read something. Therefore I often got lost and had to go over the same page many times.

“But I kept on going until that hurdle became smaller and smaller and eventually vanished.”

I had also forgotten all my passwords and at first neither understood how to operate simple things on my laptop, nor knew where to find files, folders or programs, or worse, I did not even know of their existence. I kept persevering. It took me several weeks to figure it all out.

Meanwhile my father told me that he had spoken to my girlfriend. “Girlfriend. Did I have a girlfriend?” I had totally forgotten about her. I could not recall what she looked like, what her name was, or having been in a relationship for almost a year! I was pleasantly surprised when she visited and it felt like a wonderful second beginning for me. Not for her obviously, as several meetings later she finished the relationship with me. It hurt badly, because she was a shining light in my darkness for a few weeks.

After approximately two months at the centre, I wanted to go home for the weekends. As this was unusual, the pre-requisite was that I would be picked up and brought back. I could not be bothered with that, so I neither used public transport or the car. I realised that my reaction time was slow and that I had to drive carefully, but I believed that I was less of a danger than some drivers out there.

One day at the centre when I rolled in my wheelchair to my car, the head doctor saw me and said “don’t tell me you are driving that car in your condition!” This was followed by a meeting amongst medical personnel to discuss whether or not they should contact the authorities to have my driver’s license revoked. From that day onward I parked the car around the corner.

After four months at the rehab centre, I was finally able to get rid of the wheelchair and walk with a four-wheeled walker. Another goal checked off the list.

I persuaded a therapist that my balance would further improve by relearning how to cycle. I brought my bike to the centre by car and within a day, managed to peddle around thanks to the help of the therapist.

The weekend thereafter I asked her to unlock the room where my bike was stored, as I wanted to ride home. A doctor became involved and insisted I take a taxi instead because I was still unable to walk unassisted and I could not see well. Of course I rode the 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) home on my bicycle across Vienna. Another goal reached.

An incredible amount of time and treatments were spent on the fact that I had urination problems and that supposedly my bladder was not emptied sufficiently after urination. This residual volume was measured with an ultrasonic scanner. Because of the inconsistent measurement results, I had catheters placed through my belly to empty the bladder. The doctors claimed that catheters prevented bladder stretching and infections. I think that the probing and probing with these tubes were the real cause of the six infections I had back-to-back.

“The heavy antibiotic treatments that followed made my immune system weaker every time and thus made me more prone to get an infection again. A wonderful catch-22.”

I was ready to leave the centre after having been there for five months! I do appreciate that hospitals and rehabilitation centre’s are a good safety net, but if you really want to heal, you have to get out as soon as possible. Western medicine hardly considers the amazing ability of the human body to heal.
Itself when given the right environment and means to do so. For me that was at home where I would be far away from “disabilities and disease” and where I could lead my own life, eat my own food and follow my own exercise regime.

On discussing my departure with a team of doctors and nurses they all tried to persuade me to stay “for my own health and safety”. My parents and some doctor friends were also not in my favour.

“Looking back, the decision to leave was the best one I have ever made. I even cycled home on my bicycle.”

I got a bladder scanner at home to keep monitoring the ever inconsistent “residual volume”. I soon found out that the nurses had continually operated the scanner the wrong way! After getting only good results for two weeks, I stopped using the machine altogether and stopped cathetering. The infections stayed away and I have no problems urinating.

At home my healing progressed well over time. My vision and memory came back fully. I operate all programs on my laptop without any problems. My detached right side is part of me again. I have given up driving my car and either walk (without walker or cane) or cycle everywhere. My balance and coordination are still a challenge at times, especially when I am cold and my speech is normal, except when I am tired. Handwriting is still impossible, but I have the computer to type with anyway.

“Early 2013 I went with my Dad to the South Pacific. I went freediving in crystal clear waters amidst manta rays and lemon sharks.”

Once below sea-level I had no physical limitations and felt like a fish in the water and as a bonus, I met my current girlfriend and partner. We travel a lot and I keep occupied with lectures, writing books, designing an ocean eco-boat and of course with freediving.

Another highlight was becoming a member of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society’s advisory board late in 2013. I am proud being an advocate for our oceans and marine life, especially after having observed first-hand the results of overfishing and pollution.

“A few months ago I did some serious dive training to see how I would feel during deep dives. The results were positive and encouraging.”

The “deepest dive” in Santorini took me a lot deeper then I could have ever imagined. The way back up was very long, very challenging, and seemingly impossible at times. But I have not given up as... “each time I think I’ve reached a limit... there is a door... it opens... and the limit is gone.”

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