



Herbert Nitsch

"The Deepest Man on Earth"

A title given to Herbert when he set the world record for freediving at a depth of 214 m (702 ft) in 2007.

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On June 6, 2012, Herbert Nitsch dove to 253.2 m (830.8 ft), on a No Limit sled-dive, which would also become a world record dive. But, something happened, something unexpected. Herbert was given the prognosis of being a "wheelchair-bound care-dependent patient".

For some, this dive would have ended their career, but for Herbert, it became an experience that has become a part of who he is but an experience that he has not let define who he is.

Herbert shared some insight into this moment with us.

"I incurred severe decompression sickness approximately 15 minutes after resurfacing. During the dive, well after having reached the planned depth, I temporarily fell asleep due to nitrogen narcosis and consequently missed the planned one-minute underwater decompression stop on the same breath-hold."



“At the surface, I was alert and asked for a mask to return underwater to recompress on pure oxygen, which is a standard after-dive safety feature to further off-gas. But, it was too late. While decompressing underwater, I felt the onset of DCS (Decompression Sickness), which would eventually result in multiple brain-strokes. I arrived comatose at the hyperbaric chamber and my future did not look good.”

“I dismissed myself from long-term facilitated care and took healing into my own hands.”

“With a prognosis of remaining a ‘wheelchair-bound care-dependent patient’, I dismissed myself from long-term facilitated care and took healing into my own hands. Two years later, I was fit, training and deep-freediving again.”

Not only did Herbert go back to freediving, he would go on to make an impact in the freediving community.

Herbert is more than a multi-record holding freediver. He is also working on an oceangoing eco-boat that will possibly leverage solar energy, wind energy or fuel cell (hydrogen) technology, and he is an inventor.

Instead of a waist weight, Herbert is credited with inventing the neck weight, which he worked on to provide a better hydrodynamic and streamlined body posture and balance for horizontal distance diving.

Then, there is his pipe mask, which is a nose-free, snug-fitting swimmers mask that includes a tube to the mouth.

And, he now uses homemade fluid goggles that are, as Herbert described them, “basically an open carbon wrap-around that require no equalization. Eyes are exposed to seawater constantly and special lenses allow underwater vision.”

It is this entrepreneurial spirit that seems to help shape Herbert, which extends to how he is a self-taught freediver. He offered more insight into this aspect of his world.

“If you follow the path of someone else, it is hard to become better than them. I listen, learn and innovate to create my own way. My different freediving techniques, alternative training methods and novel equipment designs are surely unconventional, but have proven themselves time and time again. Sometimes this meant one step back to go two steps forward, but you shouldn’t be afraid to make an ass of yourself because you always learn from it. I am open to constructive critique, but have no time for argument without substance. ‘Never change a winning team’ does not apply to me, because I believe you can always improve.”

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There is one part of Herbert’s diving routine, one could say, does not change though. It’s the fact he works to keep feelings, emotions and challenges at the surface and does not take them into a dive.

“I don’t practice yoga or meditation, but I am able to zone out at will. The moment I am putting on my wetsuit to get ready, I am getting ‘in the mode’.”

in short...

- Current Freediving World Record Holder
- Can Hold His Breath for More than 9 Minutes
- Over 33 World Records
- First and Only Freediver Documented and Recorded to Go Beyond 180 m (590 ft), during Multiple No Limit Dives
- First Freediver to Reach 100 m (328 ft) sans Fins or Sled

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“Emotional or mental clutter is not beneficial. You don’t want thoughts and hormones running around that stir up anxiety. For a freedive to succeed, you have to remain as calm and relaxed as possible, as if just waking up on a lazy Sunday morning. So before and during a dive, I am only focusing on the essentials of the moment and nothing more.”

Herbert does give credit to the body and mind and appreciates and sees the potential. Although he confirms freediving is a rather new sport, and there is more to learn, especially by the scientific community where he was once told by a medical expert that a human could not freedive beyond 200 m (656 ft), which at that time, he had already done a few times.

We also spoke with him about the film, *The Big Blue*, which is loosely based on the true stories of Jacques Mayol and Enzo Maiorca who became world-renowned freedivers.

“When I saw it in the late eighties, I thought it was purely fictional. I did not believe at the time that people could dive that deep on one breath. I highly respect the real-life freedivers portrayed in the movie. Both men showed the world there are no limits and that you can prove the experts are wrong time and time again. Another example of a great pioneering spirit is American Bob Croft.”

With so many records and experiences under Herbert’s belt, we cannot wait to see what is next. We know, though, we should be prepared for the unexpected and not limit our anticipation to breaking or setting another world record. Instead, it could be another invention or another cause. Whatever may be next, we will be watching.



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Insight from Herbert on Sea Conservation

Believe it or not, the story of Herbert does not end here. Another aspect of “The Deepest Man on Earth” is his participation in the [Sea Shepherd Conservation Society](#). Herbert shared more about this with us.

“A big highlight for me was becoming a member of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society’s advisory board, in late 2013. Being an advocate for them on behalf of our oceans and its marine life is a great feeling, especially after having observed firsthand the results of overfishing and pollution and knowing something needs to be done.”

Herbert continued, “Instead of just talking about it, Sea Shepherd takes direct action and physically does something. With an international crew aboard their sea-going vessels, they dare to confront illegal whaling ships and poacher-fishing boats to enforce international laws and treaties when nobody else does. They protect marine environments worldwide with their large volunteer base, bring attention to many causes and work closely together with many governments and marine sanctuaries.”

How can you help care for your oceans? Herbert offered some thoughts.

“Be aware of what you are consuming and throwing away because a lot of it comes from the ocean and finds its way back into it. Our seas are overfished and used (often unknowingly) by everybody as their garbage heap. Our oceans are essential for life on our planet. There are many conservation groups around the globe, and the Internet is a good place to start for locating them in your neighborhood no matter where you live. Even landlocked Austria has ocean conservation initiatives.”



Quickies with Herbert

Describe the emotions of a dive, in three words.

A competition dive: tranquility, peace, nothingness.

And, after a bull shark attacked me during a fun freedive: too f***ing close.

During a (record attempt) dive, what do you fear the most?

Nothing. Fear makes adrenaline run wild, which is counterproductive to the near meditative freediving-state I aim to achieve.

During a dive, what are you most focused on?

On the task of the very moment and on nothing else.

What are the initial feelings you experience when you breach the surface, after a dive?

Believe it or not, it is actually quite nice not to breathe for a while. When breaching the surface, I am breaking this spell.

What are some misconceptions you have come across about freediving?

Freediving is simple. Everybody is a freediver, even babies are. We just “un-learn” it over time and have to “re-learn” to adapt again in this medium of water. Just hold your breath, keep equalizing your ears and mask and off you go.

How do you prefer to unwind after a long day at sea?

By eating! I don't eat anything before or during freediving, so I am quite the customer when food is on the table afterwards.

What goal(s) do you have for 2017?

Stay fit and happy, love my woman and keep enjoying life.

Advice from Herbert for Future Freedivers

Listen, Learn and Innovate: You can learn from everyone. Listen to all information and experiences. Innovate to make it better. Follow this new path because if you follow those of others, you can only be as good as them.

Work on the Weakest Link: It is easy to focus on something you are good at. The key is to focus on your weakest link and make it a strong one.

Visualize and Believe You Can Do It: Visualize what you set out to achieve. See yourself doing what you aim for. Know that you will succeed and believe you can make it happen.

Never Give Up because There Is No Limit: No matter what experts or others tell you, always know there are no limits to what humans can achieve, one way or the other.

Keep this Motto at Heart, “Each time I think I’ve reached a limit .. there is a door .. it opens .. and the limit is gone.” – Herbert Nitsch.



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