

DEEPER SHADES of BLUE

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Going deep, spitting blood,
and blacking out with the
world's greatest dive instructors.



Kirk Krack dives deeper than you.



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That's not an insult, just a fact. The best freediver you know, on his deepest dive, would likely need over 100 feet of visibility to see Kirk "touch plate" at his personal best depth of 78 meters, or 257 feet. If you find it shocking that someone can hit that depth on one breath, brace yourself because there's more: Kirk does not hold the world record for the deepest breath-hold dive. He's not even close. That title belongs to one of his top students, Martin Stepanek. Martin's record depth: a mask-shattering 362 feet.

"Hitting that sink phase is the best part of the dive," says Kirk about the moment when he's deep enough to be negatively buoyant and fall like an anchor to his maximum depth. "You take those last few kicks, relax your chest and diaphragm, and just feel yourself dissolve into the ocean – like dropping a sugar cube into hot water."

If sweetness helps you dive deeper then it's no surprise that Mandy-Rae Cruickshank has the female world record for a constant ballast (fin-propelled while wearing a weight belt) dive: 78 meters. That record is bound to be short-lived though, as Mandy has already improved her personal best to 85 meters, or 279 feet.

They're two of the world's greatest freedivers, and they've come to Kona this Memorial Day weekend to share their secrets with a diverse group of spearos, underwater photographers, and adventurers ranging in age from 18 to over 50. In the next four days we'll spend approximately 12 hours in the classroom, six hours in the training pool, and 12 more hours in the ocean learning everything from safety

techniques to glossopharyngeal inhalation or "packing." The goal is to help us go deeper and stay longer, and to teach us how to do it safely. Here are some highlights:

DAY ONE :: Hey, you've got some blood on your face

Although pushing your limits in freediving is inherently dangerous, Kirk spends nearly the entire first day teaching us about shallow-water blackout and other dive injuries, and how to avoid them. We learn several techniques to pro-

tect ourselves and our buddies, and we practice those techniques every day for the remainder of the course.

The classroom sessions cover everything from freediving equipment to techniques, physics, physiology, and psychology. All this science might sound yawn-worthy, but Kirk is a gifted teacher and weaves complex concepts into vivid descriptions of what's happening to every organ in your body during your dive. His 20 minute narrative on how your nervous system experiences the drowning process is so intense that it'll have you begging for a bag of popcorn and an encore.

Once we learn concepts in the classroom we move to the training pool to practice techniques. These focus on safety, breathing, body position, and some nifty exercises that allow

you to simulate the effect of depth from the comfort (or discomfort) of a ten-foot pool. It's these that start to get to me.

Hoping I had finally kicked the sinus infection that's been plaguing me for weeks, I'm devastated when my first dive to the bottom of the pool produces excruciating pain above my left eye. Embarrassed and in denial, I continue doing the exercises with everyone else, and continue to feel like my eyeball is being forced out of its socket. Mercifully, we end the day doing some breath-holding exercises at the surface, and I think I've gotten away with everything. Only as I'm taking my gear off and talking to my classmates does someone point out to me that I have a streak of blood running out of the side of my mouth. That's funny, I thought I tasted something. Nothing like a sinus rupture to start out the first day of a freediving course. And the fun was just beginning.

DAY TWO :: Six minutes...bring him up

I've been holding my breath for two minutes and fifty seconds when the first contraction hits me. A quick, involuntary spasm of my diaphragm, its intensity is somewhere between a hiccup and a dry heave. John "JJ" Johnson taps me on the shoulder for the three-minute check in. I respond by slightly raising my index finger to signal him that I'm okay while conserving as much oxygen as possible. We're starting day two of the course, and Kirk has given us the green light to go for our personal best in static apnea: floating face-down at the surface of the pool and holding your breath for as long as you possibly can.



JJ and I shocked ourselves on Day 1 of the course by employing Kirk's heart-slowing breathing techniques to reach static times of four minutes. JJ has just raised the bar even further today by staying under for a whopping five minutes and 15 seconds. Unbelievable! But now it's my turn, and a contraction at three minutes is a bad sign. "Shit," I think, "I'll be lucky to make four minutes."

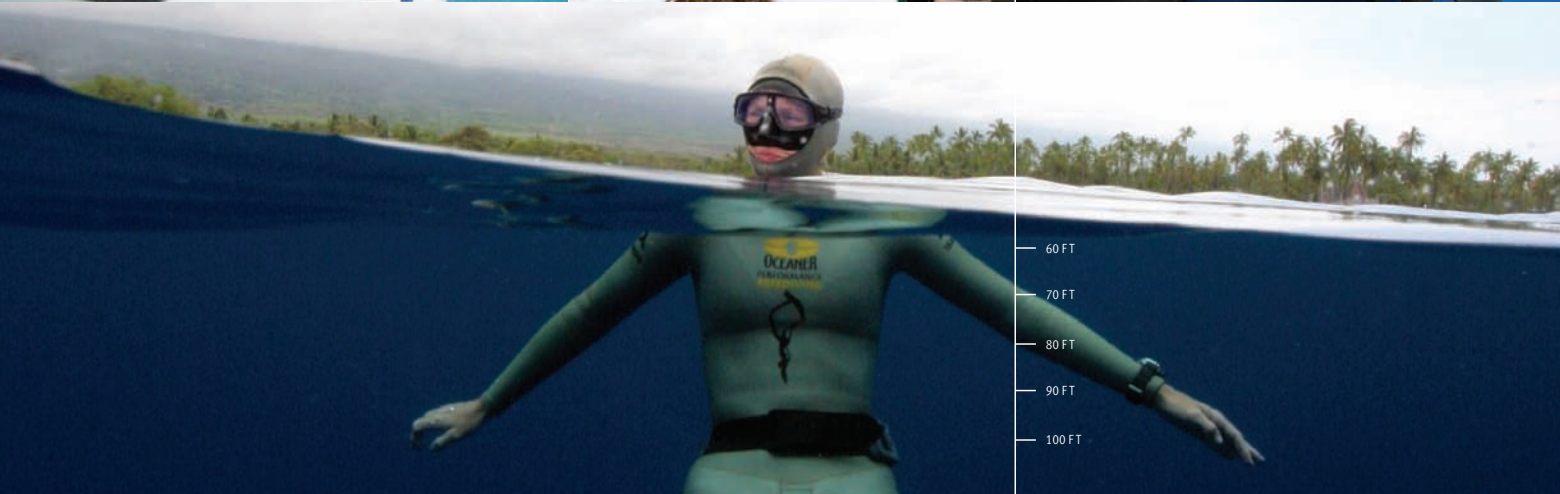
One of the biggest surprises with this technique is how quickly time passes after you've breathed yourself into a truly relaxed state. Floating there with your eyes closed,

you're trying to think relaxing thoughts, or not think at all. I kept an endless loop of Enya playing in my head for as long as I could, but any distraction can lead to excess thought and oxygen consumption. The previous day, it was my dive buddy who had thrown me off. JJ is nothing if not a communicator, so unless his snorkel is in his mouth, he's going to be talking to someone. While I wasn't surprised that he had struck up a conversation with one of the instructors during my static, I was pretty annoyed when he talked right through my two-minute safety tap. Only at 2:45 did he belatedly

tap my shoulder, apparently remembering his responsibility to keep me from drowning. I signaled back with my middle finger.

Today JJ has been silent for the first couple minutes but can now see the first contractions hitting my stomach, and has taken it upon himself to talk me through them. "Just relax. Let the contractions come. Doing good. That's right."

"Please shut up," I think, turning up the volume on my internal elevator music. But as the contractions increase in intensity, I find myself relieved to be distracted by his comments. >>>



...Mandy swims over to check on us. I explain my problem of having to stop at 70 feet and wait for my ear to clear.

“So why don’t you keep going down after that?” she asks with a smile. “Could it be because you’re a wuss?” her tone implies.

Why don’t I keep going down after that? “Uh, because I don’t want to drown,” I think to myself.

“That’s right. Let them come. Nice and easy. Doing good.” Four and half minutes and I’m glad I didn’t eat a big breakfast. It’s like someone is punching me in the gut every ten seconds as my diaphragm tries to force me to take a breath.

“Good job. Lookin’ good. Just let the contractions come.” I open my eyes and watch the bottom of the pool. It distracts me from my stomach pain, and I figure it will help me notice if I’m passing out. At five minutes I’m more out of air than I’ve ever been in my life. The contractions are almost continuous now, and I’m responding to safety taps from JJ every 15 seconds.

At 5:30 there’s just enough brain power left to respond to the taps and to hear the instructors, Kirk and Mandy-Rae, approach me on either side. Kirk’s telling me to put my feet down and my hands on the side of the pool. I do. Mandy’s telling me to focus on the recovery breaths I’m going to do when I come up. Bubbles are involuntary seeping out of my mouth and nose now – one of the signs of impending blackout. At this point I’m not sure if I’m staying down out of determination or just

impaired judgment from oxygen deprivation.

I hear Kirk’s voice say, “Six minutes, bring him up.” I lift my head out of the water and go immediately into my recovery breathing. I sense hands around me to keep me from whacking my head on the pool if I black out, but within a few seconds I’m okay. Kirk sticks a video camera in my face for a triumphant quote, and I mutter something about feeling like I just died. I have no way of knowing how close I was to blacking out. I don’t know what it feels or looks like. Little do I know that the next day I’ll have a front row seat.

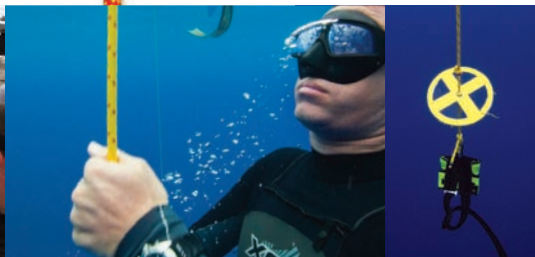
DAY THREE :: Breathe, breathe

It’s our first full day in the ocean and everyone is stoked. I’m feeling like a megastud for holding my breath so long the previous day, and I think JJ is feeling pretty good too but he keeps pretending it’s no big deal. “I’m just trying to learn the technique,” he repeats whenever I talk about attempting personal bests. Several of us are lucky enough to catch a ride to the dive site with Shawn “brakes are for

wimps” Patterson from Oahu, and surviving the trip has made us confident we can handle anything we may encounter in the beautiful waters of the “Place of Refuge” at Honaunau.

Kirk and Mandy have recommended a secret combination of over-the-counter sinus medications (not Sudafed – which increases your heart rate and decreases your dive time) to give me some temporary relief, and they work great. We swim offshore to a spot in 150 feet of water, deploy our dive floats and anchor lines, and begin our practice dives. Once the diving starts it is nearly silent on the water. We work in three-man teams, so at any given point you are either diving, acting as safety for the person diving, or preparing for your next dive.

I’m floating at the surface like a rag doll, breathing up for my fourth dive of the day, when I open my eyes slightly to watch Roland Teruya descending the line below me. He stays down longer than I expected, but I’m relaxing and lowering my heart rate, so time passes quickly. Roland’s silhouette finally emerges from the depths, and he looks fine. He’s kicking strongly with good form, and JJ meets him at 30 feet to go to p.72



SAFETY FIRST

Kirk Krack has trained some of the world’s best freedivers. He’s seen dozens of blackouts and has rescued blackout victims on multiple occasions. While there is no substitute for the safety training provided in one of his courses, here are a few of Kirk’s tips for avoiding shallow water blackout and other freediving related injuries:

- 1_Always dive with a buddy, and monitor each other closely.
- 2_Watch your buddy on the surface for at least his first six breaths after each dive. Ninety percent of blackout cases happen AFTER the diver has reached the surface.
- 3_Use a watch, or better yet, a freediving computer to monitor your dive depth and time.
- 4_Reject the idea that you know your body and can instinctively stay within your limits. “Some of our best freedivers and spearfishermen have died from shallow water blackout,” says Kirk.

“They knew their bodies a lot better than you do, and it wasn’t good enough.” Decide in advance how deep and how long you’re going for each dive, and stick to those preset limits.

- 5_Spit your snorkel out at the surface before you dive. If you black out underwater, your mouth will stay closed and keep water from flooding your lungs – as long as your snorkel isn’t in it.
- 6_Weight yourself properly. For deep freediving you should be neutrally buoyant at 30 ft. In other words if you stop swimming anywhere in the upper 30 ft of the water column, you should float to the surface. This makes it harder to swim down at the start of your dive, but you want to put in the most effort at the beginning, not at the end when you try to ascend from 90 feet wearing 12 pounds on your belt.
- 7_Stay properly hydrated. Your physiology is in a constant state of flux and this has a huge impact on your diving capabilities. The two-minute, 60-foot dive that was a piece of cake

for you in the morning could black you out in the afternoon. When you’re spending large periods of time in salt water, you should bring along plenty of fresh water – and drink it!

- 8_Give yourself ample recovery time between dives. A good rule of thumb is to spend twice as much time breathing at the surface as you spent underwater on your last dive. For depths greater than 80 ft, a minimum eight minute rest period is advised.
 - 9_Always protect the airway. If your buddy is in trouble, you must bring him to the surface and keep his face above water (that means you need to be close enough to recognize the problem and get to him). Remove his mask and remind him to breathe. Blowing across the eyes can also stimulate the inhalation reflex, but try not to spit in his face.
 - 10_Get training from the best. Take a diving course with Kirk, Mandy-Rae, and Performance Freediving International.
- >>> www.performancefreediving.com

PERFORMANCE FREEDIVING FROM P.25

escort him to the surface as safety diver. My only clue that something's wrong comes from Mandy-Rae, the instructor, who was filming the dive but now drops her camera to her side and rushes towards Roland as he hits the 15-foot mark. Later she would tell us that his abdominal contractions were so strong, she could hear them underwater. Her change in body language rattles me from my breathe-up trance, and I lift my head up to watch Roland and Mandy break the surface together.

"Kirk!" she yells, even before taking her first breath. Kirk lunges over from one of the other dive teams. Roland grabs the buoy with both hands, takes one breath, and does what Kirk and Mandy refer to as a "samba." His eyes flutter, his head rolls slightly, and he loses control of the muscles in his face and lips, making motorboat sounds as he tries to breathe. He's on the edge of consciousness, but hasn't quite slipped into blackout. "Breathe, breathe," Mandy is calmly reminding him as she holds his chin and head to prevent him from going under. After a few anxious seconds, Roland comes around and is smiling as he gives the okay sign. Far from panicking, Mandy had only yelled to Kirk so that he could come over and videotape the event while she handled the rescue. There's a sigh of relief from the rest of us, and now we're laughing and congratulating Roland on his new personal best dive: 91 feet.

Surrounded by safety divers, including two of the world's best, Roland couldn't have picked a better place to blackout. Only later do I realize that Roland's symptoms probably matched those of dozens of other divers before him who, over-weighted and diving alone, exhaled at the surface and slipped down to their deaths. It really brings home some of the safety themes that Kirk and Mandy have been preaching throughout the entire course.

DAY FOUR :: Touching plate

It's the final day of the class and time to go for our personal best depths at Honaunau. By this point, several of my classmates are approaching the 100 foot mark, including JJ who's hitting it repeatedly.

I'm stuck at 70 feet, struggling with my sinuses again. Everything is fine until I reach about 66, then I have to stop on the line, pinch my nose, and blow for several seconds before I can clear my right ear. By the time it does clear, the timing and momentum of my dive are thrown off, and I make a break for the surface. Several other people are having similar clearing problems, including Roland "lights out" Teruya, who after hitting 91 feet the previous day can't get below 30 feet today.

So I'm wallowing in self-pity at the surface and have decided I'm done for the day when Mandy swims over to check on us. I explain my problem of having to stop at 70 feet and wait for my ear to clear.

"So why don't you keep going down after that?" she asks with a smile. "Could it be because you're a wuss?" her tone implies. Why don't I keep going down after that? "Uh, because I don't want to drown," I think to myself. The confidence just isn't there yet.

It's getting late now and most people are done diving. They're starting to dismantle the dive floats and lines, and ours is the last one to come up. I picture myself writing this article, having to admit to the millions of HSD readers that I couldn't get passed 70 feet. I imagine flying back to Honolulu with JJ, listening to him talk about how it's really no big deal that he made it to 100 feet, just that he got the technique down.

I ask the instructors to wait while I go for one last dive, and they watch me breathe-up and descend. After my equalization layover at 70 feet, I push myself further. I creep down the line to 80 feet, 90 feet. Pressure is building in my ear again but this is my last chance. At 100 feet I grab the plate and shake the hell out of it for taunting me for two days, and I learn the most valuable lesson of the whole course... **PAU**
...which is that I'm a badass. **Okay, NOW PAU**