

STRAIGHT SHOOTING

WITH TOM RAYNER



Spearfishing is a rich tapestry – woven with threads of exploration, adventure, hunting, travel, ingenuity and perseverance. However, in the hustle and bustle of friendly banter and competitive mateship, it's easy to forget that spearfishing is also a journey of personal development and life-long learning – it's about getting to know your gear, getting to know the fish and, most importantly, getting to know yourself.

In the last issue, I looked at the endless hunt for the perfect gun setup and touched on the issue of diver safety in poor visibility – especially in the Top End. Today, we deal with arguably the most important element of successful spearfishing: the mental game. How can you stay calm when you're alone on the bottom of the ocean, surrounded by things that you can't see that can eat you? I spoke with World Champion freediver Erez Beatus from Apnea Australia, to find out.

How did you get into freediving?

I started holding my breath in the bath tub, just experimenting, when I was 3 or 4 years old. I grew up in Israel with the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The Med was shallow, sandy and dirty, but you could spear there. When I was about 8 years old, I started diving with a small gun in 2-3m of water with my brother. I absolutely loved it and slowly started going deeper.

When I was 15, I did my SCUBA ticket in clear, deep, warm water. The course was quite stringent and a week long, because it was based on military courses. The first two and a half days were only skindiving. I really enjoyed that and discovered I could dive quite deep, to about 12m and hold my breath for 2.5 mins. I thought, 'If I can one day get to 20-25m, I could be world champion'.

After that I went on to get my SCUBA dive master and started freediving on my own. I started diving with too much weight, pushing too hard and doing all the things that I now teach not to do. There was no internet, no education in the sport. It wasn't until I

started writing the manuals that I thought, 'Hey, this isn't the right thing to do'.

Did you have a mentor early on?

It was around that time I met Aharon, who started being a bit of a mentor [Aharon Solomons is a renowned British freediver]. He's now over 70, can still dive over 70m and still keeps training. After I finished my three years of military service in Israel, I did a course with Aharon. I dove to 30m and it really helped open my eyes to new approaches and training methods.

Soon afterwards, I had the opportunity and privilege to train with Pipin in the Red Sea [Francisco 'Pipin' Ferrera is a former World Champion. His book *The Dive: A Story of Love and Obsession* is well worth a read]. Even to join the course I had to dive over 40m and complete a 4min static breath hold. Within a month, I was diving well over 40m and well over 5min static – that was in 1997. I went on to establish the Israeli free diving team and lead them to a series of international comps as trainer, coach and athlete.

I then trained with Umberto in Italy in 1998 [Umberto Pelizzari famously competed with Pipin to drive world records deeper across a range of freediving disciplines]. In 2001, I broke the unassisted world record, breaststroke up and down [This is also known as the constant weight without fins or CNF – the record is currently held by William Trubridge]. In 1998 I started teaching, mainly in my own school in Israel, Free Diving International. I moved to Australia in 2006 and now teach courses all over the country.

There seems to be an attitude among the spearfishing community that freediving is a completely different sport, would you agree? What do you see as the most important common ground?

To begin with, all spearos are freedivers. If you're a baby jumping in the pool, if you're an underwater hockey player, if you're a spearo, you're a freediver. The fact that some people say that freedive training is not good for spearing, seems strange to me. People go spearing without any freediving training. The first thing you need to know when you go spearfishing is how to hold your breath, but the first thing people do is buy a gun. They go out with their mates, maybe they go to a new spot and then try to dive deep. Then, you go to your deepest dive with a gun.

The issue is that, in spearfishing, unlike recreational or competition freediving, your whole concentration is outside – not listening to your body and when you should come up. Then you shoot a fish and come up to the surface like crazy. In this way, spearfishing is a lot more complicated than freediving – even if you're in 5m of water near the rocks, it's still more complicated than freediving to 60m. There is a big difference in terms of how the body operates spearfishing versus freediving on a line. In my courses, 70-80% of students in the 1st course are spearfishers. We teach them how to maximise their breathing technique. If you're a hunter, you're a hunter. Once you learn how to freedive, you can go and practice your hunting separately. From a freediving perspective we can offer more advanced stuff as well.

If you're a spearo predominantly, then diving very deep is not the way to go, because most fish are in shallow water [especially in Australia]. 13-14 spearos have been lost in the last 3-4yrs or so – most were young, keen, super-fit, who didn't die going very deep. They pretty much all died chasing fish in relatively shallow water between 10-20m. Complacency kills people; not going super deep or super difficult.

MIND GAMES



In our courses, the priority is safety and the logic behind what we do: how we breathe, why we breathe, what makes us want to breathe. Hyperventilation. Emergencies. Factors that reduce our ability during a dive. Once students learn about these things, they can begin to see the value and benefits and invariably change the way they dive. For example, most spearos don't recover for long enough. They don't understand the logic behind recovery for performance and efficient recovery on the surface. These things make diving easier, not only by reducing fatigue over the course of a day, but also from dive to dive.

I remember when I first started diving, it took me about 3-4 months of spearfishing twice a week to start feeling comfortable in 15m of water. Do most beginners on your courses face these sorts of hurdles, or can this process be streamlined through relaxation, meditation and breathing?

If your whole experience in the water has been with the gun, you haven't taken the time to get to know your body in the water without a gun. It would be best to do a freediving course anywhere: a course that is aimed at teaching you the basics. Relaxation is key. Once you learn how to do things correctly you will be more comfortable. Depth is actually not important: it's the mindset, the preparation. If you don't do a course, you can't understand how these things can change your diving.

When I was preparing for my world record, my training partner had a focus of 'being one with the ocean and so on'. I met him after a few years and then it was all about the depth – it didn't matter if it was

bad visibility or mud or concrete that he was diving through, it was about going very deep. Later, he changed his approach back again. Freedivers explore different approaches, with different motivations and ambitions.

Tomorrow I will start a course with beginners: by the end of the course they will be diving to 20m underwater, with 2 min plus static holds. But, if you drop them straight in and start out with a deep dive, of course they won't be able to do it. So structured training works well. Like when you start driving, you don't take a Skyline on the highway at top speed on your first day, you drive at 30-40, with someone beside you.

Being in the Northern Territory, with stuff in the water, preparation and having a buddy is the key. Always dive with a rigline, not too long for the water depth, with system's in place if something goes wrong, including a safety diver. Start shallow and build up to depth. In terms of relaxation – no freediving training is going to help with, 'I'm alone in the water with crocs and sharks, I don't like them and I can't see them'. Knowing that you've done training in the pool or in the ocean, without a gun, and knowing your capacity will allow you to put away your mental stress.

Another attitude in the spearing community seems to be that breathing techniques can be dangerous and should therefore be avoided. Could you give us some tips?

You need to know how to breathe. Period. Once you know how to breathe, that's enough to give you any performance you need. You need to have the whole system in place to use

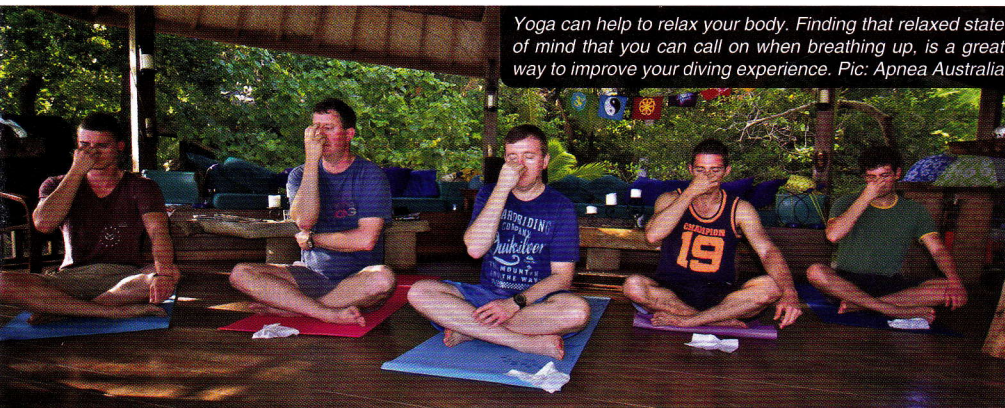
whatever your body has in the most efficient way. Your head space, your warm up, being comfortable with you're your breathing – these will get you the best results. Hyperventilating will reduce the feeling of the need to breathe, which will make you more likely to pass out, dependent on how much you know and understand about freediving.

What has changed in the world of diving since you started? What keeps you interested and passionate about freediving and teaching?

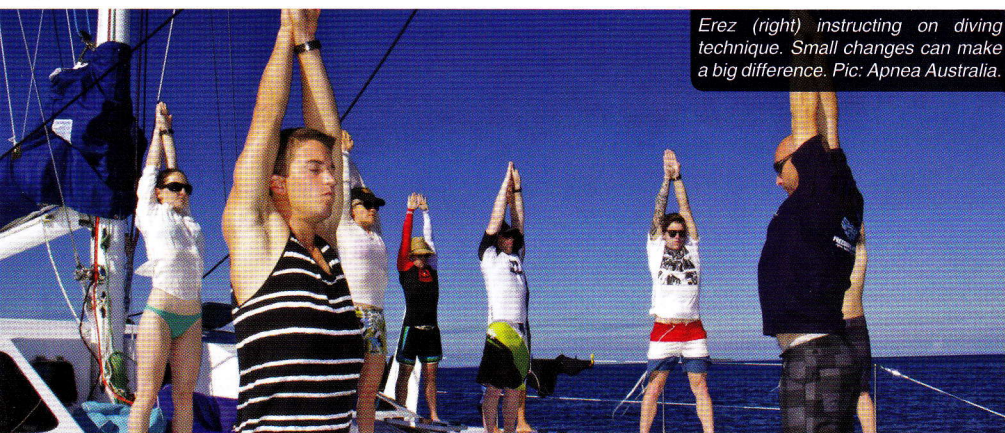
These days, I'm doing less and less spearfishing, especially since moving to Western Australia [who can blame him]. Instead, I've been doing a lot of photography. It is just as complex as spearfishing and requires the same skills. I might take one fish for dinner; not fill the Esky just because I can and then go back the next day to do it again. I'm training and teaching, and diving with the camera all the time. I hate hearing, 'My friend died, this happened, that happened', I feel that by teaching I'm helping, even in a small way.

I had a hunger to go deep early in the year. I just got back from leading a freediving expedition to Tonga – climbing volcanoes and diving in caves – but I didn't do any deep diving. I don't have the strong fire to go super, super deep. Instead, I get a lot out of teaching people in the water. Some spearos joined the trip to Tonga and the first question was, 'Can I bring my speargun?'. By end of trip, they forgot they had it. It's not all about catching fish, there's so much more out in the water.

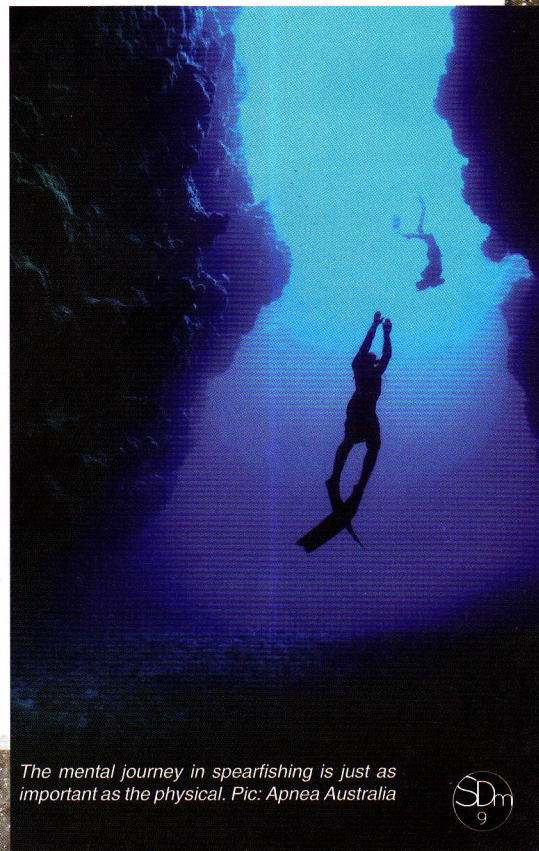
Apnea Australia runs freediving courses in most major cities and can travel to regional areas if there is demand.



Yoga can help to relax your body. Finding that relaxed state of mind that you can call on when breathing up, is a great way to improve your diving experience. Pic: Apnea Australia



Erez (right) instructing on diving technique. Small changes can make a big difference. Pic: Apnea Australia.



The mental journey in spearfishing is just as important as the physical. Pic: Apnea Australia