

## A Front Row Seat at the 4th AIDA Individual Freediving World Championship - November '07

Text & Photos by Sarah Woodford

Acting as a safety diver gave me a front row seat at the Individual Freediving World Championship's first visit to Sinai; an event involving 85 athletes from 30 countries. Joint organizers Marco Nones from Only One Apnea Academy and Riccardo Mura from Apnea Academy Red Sea, where the competition was held, together with official videographer Ivan Incalza, briefed us on how the event would work. Athletes would be judged on two disciplines where they would attempt to retrieve a Velcro tag attached to the bottom of a line set at a preplanned depth by swimming on one breath with or without fins while wearing a fixed amount of weight. Infringements such as not reaching the depth would incur penalty points. Safety Freedivers would accompany the athlete up through the 'danger zone' where the chance of shallow water blackout due to pressure reduction is at its greatest, but if something happened deeper, a counterweight system could be activated, returning the athlete to the surface. Ricci's words were sobering 'you will only dive as a last resort, if all other safety precautions fail'. For the first time ever, I hoped not to dive. The seriousness of it all sunk in when a shallow water blackout occurred; the first of a few which would keep Dr Mustapha from Sharm's SAR busy over the next few days.

On the practice days, the boat filled with shiny clad people bursting with health and excitement; competitors seeking respite from the choppy seas mixed with the seasoned old-hands and bright young newbies that made up the Safety Diver Team. We were repeatedly

asked about our rebreathers but the regular 'how long can you stay down for?' was subtly replaced by 'how quickly can you descend?' There was a sudden buzz of excitement 'It's Herbert Nitsch' someone whispered in my ear. This man, who had held records in seven of the eight Freediving disciplines, held his breath for over 9 minutes in competition and in June 2007 had become the Deepest Man on Earth with a No Limits dive to 214 metres proceeded to make a practice dive to 100m! The arrival of another cool customer caused a bit of a stir; an inquisitive oceanic whitetip cruised amongst the freedivers for a while before disappearing into the blue.

Bad weather cancelled the first day of competition, forcing organizers to combine the men and women's Constant Weight with Fins discipline on the second day. At 7.35, the first competitor successfully dived to 25m; the start of a seven hour marathon during which the depths would get progressively deeper. Everyone worked hard to keep the competition moving; safety divers tirelessly dived down to meet athletes, while judges, cold in the water or sun-beaten on the platforms watched like hawks. The only breaks were to recharge the cameras, suspended on the bottom of each line and handheld by videographers on each platform; a vital part of the judging process. By 3.30, eleven National Records had been broken and the depth was already at 86metres, but there were still eleven competitors to come.

Sara Campbell, tiny in a shimmering blue suit emerged from her 88m dive with a huge

smile. She is a regular contributor to Mix Magazine, and nicknamed 'the Comet' due to her meteoric rise resulting in three World Records. Natalia Molchanova, doyenne of freediving with a 205m dynamic apnea dive and many World and National Records on her cv, had made a brave move, promising 95 metres; five more than Sara's current record. Complete silence as Natalia made her dive was broken when she had an unfortunate blackout on arrival at the surface, quickly recovering with the attention of the safety freedivers. Sara Campbell had won the Gold, Swedish Annelie Pompe the Silver, and Maria Livbjerg from Denmark, the Bronze. Now it was the men's turn. Nery Guillaume of France set the pace with a dive to 99m followed by Slovakian Juraj Karpis, knocked out of the medals with a dive 4m shy of his 101m tag. Carlos Coste of Venezuela, who had held the World Record for this discipline three times previously and was the first man to dive over 100m won the Bronze with a dive to 103m. Herbert Nitsch attempted to break his own World Record of 111m. You could feel the tension mount during his long dive; leaning forward to watch for his return, I almost fell off the boat! He arrived from 112m with tag in hand, and didn't even look out of breath. Herbert's new World record was crowned with a Gold medal when New Zealander Dave Mullins who won the Silver, turned back four metres early on his attempt at 114m.

A rest day was followed by the Constant Weight No Fins competition; a new discipline, included in World Competition for the first time. Swimming down and back with only the propulsion of arms and legs sounded hard work and the day proved tough for many as diver after diver was disqualified. Natalia Molchanova had decided not to compete which left the door wide open for Sara Campbells' 60m attempt at her own World Record. Unfortunately, she experienced her first ever shallow water blackout on return to the surface, still managing to make everyone giggle with a loud 'oh hello!' when she woke up a few seconds later. Czechoslovakian Jarmila Slovencikova won the Gold medal and a National Record with her 50m dive, Susanna Saari from Finland the Silver and the Bronze by a bemused Anna von Boetticher from Germany, a newcomer to the sport who had only entered to gain experience! One of the biggest surprises was when World record holder and 'no fins' specialist William Trubridge failed in his attempt at 75m. Natalia's son Alexey Molchanov won the Bronze and a National Record with his 65m dive. Canadian William Winram who, in June had swum with no fins through Dahab's deep arch on a single breath, had missed the Constant Weight with Fins Discipline due to a bad ear infection which had been dogging him for seven weeks. His decision to just 'go for it' paid off when without any training, he won the Silver with an amazing 75m dive, two metres short of Herbert Nitsch, who picked up the Gold. It had been a tough day which had produced an incredible 15 new National Records.

The competition finished with an awards ceremony attended by special guests the Governor of Sinai and

famous freediver Umberto Pelizzari, who would be staying on to oversee a freediving workshop for Sharm children. It had been a privilege for me to look through a window at a sport which I had previously known nothing about and proved to be much more exciting than expected. I had also been struck by how nice these freedivers were...it was a competition but held between a large supportive family!

### National Records – Constant Weight With Fins

Danja Subotin	Serbia	45 metres
Claudia Rollero	Switzerland	50 metres
Anna von Boetticher	Germany	55 metres
Helen Garner	South Africa	60 metres
Jarmila Slovencikova	Czechoslovakia	61 metres
Annelie Pompe	Sweden	77 metres
Ashod Papazian	Egypt	61 metres
Gordon Savic	Serbia	62 metres
Jure Daic	Slovenia	67 metres
Zanki Veljano	Croatia	76 metres
David King	United Kingdom	78 metres

### National Records – Constant Weight No Fins

Solenn Launay	France	33 metres
Bettina Wolfer	Switzerland	35 metres
Susanna Saari	Finland	40 metres
Jarmila Slovencikova	Czechoslovakia	50 metres
Joao Costa	Portugal	40 metres
Kars Van Kouwen	Holland	43 metres
Gorden Savic	Serbia	43 metres
Antero Joki	Finland	46 metres
Simo Kurra	Finland	48 metres
Robert King	USA	50 metres
Andrea Zuccari	Switzerland	51 metres
Sebastien Naslund	Sweden	56 metres
Jure Daic	Slovenia	56 metres
Federico Mana	Italy	60 metres
Alexey Molchanova	Russia	65 metres

### FREEDIVING info:

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