

Tanya Takes your breath away

Tanya Streeter has nine world records for freediving, can hold her breath for six minutes and slows her heart rate down to that of a dolphin. She explains the extremes of her sport to Sharon Krum

PHIL BAKER



Tanya Streeter is demonstrating how she stretches her ribcage just before she dives the length of a 50-storey building on one breath of air. Elongating her spine, she takes a deep breath. Then, using stomach muscles trained to the strength of steel, she pushes her ribs forward, then out to each side. It's like watching lift doors open, if they were creased in skin.

She does this to expand her chest cavity and that looks like a party trick is actually crucial to her success as a freediver, enabling her to pack 50 per cent more oxygen into her lungs. "It doesn't hurt, really," she says. "Compared to what my body experiences during a dive, this is the easy part."

Such as deep-water pressure crushing her lungs to the size of lemons, "making it feel like I have an elephant sitting on my chest." Or feeling the blood rush away from her arms and legs — the mammalian dive reflex — to concentrate oxygen in her brain and heart, which slows to 15 beats per minute. (Dolphin heart rates drop from 100 to 20 while diving.) Add to that the intense eardrum pain, and the chest contractions that push her to breathe, and you wonder why Streeter, 30, born in the Cayman Islands, educated at Rodean and Brighton University and now living in Texas, loves punishing herself.

Freediving — descending with or without weights on a single breath of air — is an extreme sport and Streeter, who can hold her breath for six minutes and has nine world records in the Tiger Woods or Lennox Williams of her game. The analog is not hyperbole but, for her last record, a dive of 122 metres (400 feet) in the Turks and Caicos Islands in July that lasted three minutes and 38 seconds, wrote both male and female records, once considered an impossibility in sport.

Yet what is so startling when you talk to Streeter, whose like 58 in (17m) frame and blonde hair scream bikini model, is how little the records mean to her. "I dive for entirely personal reasons, not the records," says Streeter, who started freediving in 1998 after a spear-fishing instructor noted that she had a talent for it. "My motivation initially was, can I go that deep? When I did it, I was overwhelmed by just how empowered I felt. "I did grow up as a confident person. I never believed I was the person I looked like. But I found freediving, which forces me physiologically and mentally beyond my limits, makes me feel really strong. So I dive to push my potential as a person, not to beat anyone else."

You joke that it would be easier to maximise her potential by going into therapy like everyone else in America, because doing it her way — three months of intense cardio before each dive — a daily regime that includes two hours of spinning and weight machines, followed by two hours of breath-holding training while lifting weights and then under water — is exhausting

Out of the blue: Streeter, right, trains for three months before a dive, doing breathing exercises, spinning, and vigorous workouts

work. Not to her. "I actually enjoy the training as much as the dive," she says. "I love to take my body where I thought I couldn't."

Despite her status, Streeter has none of the entourage of a top athlete. There is no nutritionist or sports psychologist on retainer, leaving her and her husband Paul to devise the cardio regime, motivation and diet for each dive. The latter can be tricky because, as with her physical training, she needs to eat her way to peak performance for a specific window of time.

"When I'm in training, I go very high protein [including protein powder shakes] — chicken, lean red meat — to build and feed muscle. I will eat a lower amount of carbs, mostly in the morning maybe a banana, or yogurt and toast." She takes a multivitamin, vitamin C and iron tablet every day. "When I am in a rest period, I balance protein and carbs a bit more."

But why is Streeter her own dive trainer, shrink and chef? Money. Freediving is a fringe sport and it's biggest star still attracts nothing like an Anna Kournikova (who hasn't won anything) in endorsements. The sponsorship Streeter receives from TAG Heuer and Red Bull goes into financing each \$75,000 (about £45,000) dive.

She has no fear of deep water and positively revels in the experience of diving into the equivalent of a blackout. "It's so peaceful down there. It's sort of euphoric," she says. What keeps her motivated is solely the idea of going deeper. "It's not a spiritual person, I don't meditate or do yoga before a dive," Streeter says. "But growing up, we didn't have TV — all I did was snorkel. I developed a special relationship with the ocean and feel it's an enormous privilege that I get to test myself in that environment."

In that environment, as Streeter calls them, is directed by Paul, 42, her husband who left his job as a construction manager to coordinate her dives. There is an unusually independent marriage. As he helps her to devise her training schedule and manages a team of safety divers, her life is in his hands. Last year the freediver Audrey Mestre died amid charges of inadequate safety precautions, but Streeter dismisses suggestions that her relationship with her manager is too close. "I know Paul would never take chances with my life," she insists. "Audrey had three safety divers and three training dives for the attempt that cost her her life. When I broke the record, I had 14 divers, and I'd training dives. I never very because I know we're trained and prepared."

Similarly, Paul says that the responsibility of sending his wife into life-threatening depths doesn't scare him. "I never worry because we have trained for six weeks and I know all the procedures, are in place," he says. "You don't drown for about seven minutes and our safety divers would have

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her surfaced before then. Nothing fatal can happen."

While Streeter dives for personal reasons, her husband is aware that it is a business, too. "What I do worry about is her not making the record," he says. "This is the USA — you can't self-fund. Our life is on the line if she fails." The speaking fees and endorsements are available only if Streeter remains a champion.

Called the "World's Most Perfect Athlete" by Sports Illustrated in 2002, Streeter admits that while she has the physiological advantage of being lean, becoming a champion is all in the training. "I am not a freak of nature," she says. "I have normal-sized lungs. But muscle strength allows me to expand my ribcage to pack in more oxygen and kick back from great depths."

Streeter is adamant that freediving does not have adverse effects on her fertility or her brain or heart. A long-time advocate for marine and reef conservation, she is looking to make and host environmental television programmes.

But what about another freediving record? In one breath, Streeter refuses to think about it and then suggests she may go for 600ft. "And again, this would be for me, not the record books," she says. "Once you conquer something, you thought was impossible, it changes your life."

I DIDN'T GROW UP CONFIDENT, BUT FREEDIVING MAKES ME FEEL REALLY STRONG

capillaries. If this happens repeatedly, freedivers will sustain lung damage. "Yet this doesn't seem to perturb Streeter, who estimates that if she maintains her fitness, she could dive for another ten years. "Eventually I'll simply reach my physical limit in breath-holding, but I'll probably stop when we have children, in the next two to five years."

The Streeters live on the outskirts of Austin, with coyotes in the hills and not an ocean for miles. They appreciate the view. They moved there three years ago to work at a dot-com but when it folded they decided to stay. "Initially I couldn't stand not seeing the ocean," Streeter says, "but the sporting facilities here are brilliant and I'm better trained since I moved here."

Not to mention close to media and business opportunities, which is where Streeter is heading next. A long-time advocate for marine and reef conservation, she is looking to make and host environmental television programmes.

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INTO THE DEEP

■ Freediving as a sport predates the invention of the scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) suit in 1858 and involves going under water to great depths on a single breath of air.

■ It gained official recognition in 1996 after the first world championships in Nice, where only four countries took part. The championships in Bala last year attracted participants from 28 countries.

■ Since she started freediving in 1998, Streeter has set nine world records, including the variable weight record of 400m (22m) on one breath. She lasted three minutes and 38 seconds.

■ She can slow her heart rate to 15 beats per minute; the average human heart rate is 72 beats per minute. A dolphin's heart rate can drop from 100 to 20 when it dives.

■ Streeter can hold her breath for six minutes; the world record is 7½ minutes. Most people can hold their breath for between 50 seconds and one minute.