

Is Freediving An Extreme Sport?

With the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics in full swing, I found myself watching the diverse multitude of sports being performed so flawlessly on my TV and wondering: “Will I ever see freediving on my screen?” I know most of the diving community would be ecstatic for our beautiful sport to be added to the Olympics roster, but why hasn’t it been yet?

Besides the fact that freediving is still quite a new and underfunded sport, many worry that it is simply ‘too risky’ for the general public to watch. However, though unsupervised freediving is likely as risky or more than technical diving, there has only ever been one fatality in competitive freediving. Even so, most non-freedivers do consider the sport to be extreme when they hear of the incredible depths some apneists are capable of. But is it more extreme than sports like skiing, rock climbing, or surfing? All of which have their place in the world-famous competition.

We would like to explore the statistics and varied opinions on the matter, and dive a little deeper into this question with you so we can decide once and for all... Is freediving an extreme sport?



Alice Modolo receives the Olympic Torch. Credit: Activimages/Poissonluneprofuntion

What Makes a Sport “Extreme”?

Firstly, let’s take a look at some characteristics that define an extreme sport. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, an extreme sport is: “A sport that’s exciting and often dangerous”. More specifically, this would include:

High Risk: Extreme sports are inherently dangerous, often involving high speeds, great heights, exposure to powerful elements, or complex manoeuvres. The potential for serious injury or even death is a constant factor, demanding exceptional focus and risk management.

Pushing Physical Limits: Extreme sports require athletes to operate at the peak of their physical capabilities. Strength, endurance, coordination, and exceptional fitness are all crucial for success.

Technical Expertise: Mastering an extreme sport goes beyond just physical prowess. Specific skills and knowledge are essential, involving specialised equipment, understanding environmental conditions, and employing intricate techniques to minimise risk.

Mental Fortitude: The psychological demands of extreme sports are equally significant. Athletes must overcome fear, maintain composure under pressure, and make quick decisions in high-stakes situations.

At first glance, it seems that freediving does tick all of these boxes. But let's dig a little deeper.



Freediving World Cup in Sharm El Sheikh by Alice Cattaneo

Why is it So Difficult to Concretely Determine Freediving as Being “Extreme”?

Freediving: the art of diving underwater on a single breath, presents a unique case in the world of extreme sports. In comparison to high-octane activities fuelled by adrenaline, freediving can appear deceptively tranquil, a meditative dance with the underwater world. Yet, beneath the serene surface lies a realm of physiological demands and potential dangers that one must be prepared for and stay calm while navigating them. But can a sport that relies very much on avoiding the presence of adrenaline to excel

really be put in the category of an 'extreme sport'?

We've seen that 'on paper' freediving does tick the correct boxes to be considered extreme. So, let's now look at the various reasons why freediving might not be:

A Spectrum of Experience: Freediving encompasses a wide range of activities. So, you will find that competitive freedivers push the boundaries of depth and time, but recreational divers explore the underwater world at shallower depths within what most people would term 'safer' limits.

Focus on Training and Technique: Just like any sport, proper training and controlled techniques are paramount in freediving. With the right instruction and a focus on safety, one could argue that freediving can be a rewarding and relatively low-risk experience.

Mind-Body Connection: Freediving can be a meditative practice, fostering a deep connection between mind and body. The focus required to manage breath-holding and navigate underwater can be a source of peace and self-discovery, and the very opposite of adrenaline fuelled.

While freediving may not involve the high speeds of base jumping or the aerial acrobatics of wingsuit flying, it does present a very specific and unpredictable kind of danger: The constant battle against our natural limits and the unforgiving nature of the underwater environment.



Credit: Activimages/Poissonluneprofuntion

The Stats and Facts

It might help to take a plunge into comparisons of freediving risks and risks involved in other extreme sports to understand its place on the danger spectrum:

Freediving: While data is not definitive, studies suggest freediving fatalities may be more common than scuba diving fatalities, despite potentially fewer participants. DAN reported that the death rate between 2006 to 2011 averaged 59 freedivers each year. Shallow water blackouts and uncontrolled ascents are major risk factors. However, there has been only one reported fatality in competitive freediving.

Base Jumping: This extreme sport, involving jumping from fixed objects with a parachute, holds a notorious reputation. Base jumping has a significantly higher fatality rate than freediving, with estimates suggesting a 1 in 60 chance of death.

Skydiving: Despite its inherent danger, skydiving boasts a much lower fatality rate than freediving, around 15-20 per 100,000 jumps due to rigorous safety measures and equipment advancements.

Freeride Skiing/Snowboarding: These high-speed descents on un-groomed terrain can lead to serious injuries, but fatalities are less common compared to freediving. Statistics often focus on injury rates rather than deaths.

Boxing: Between 1890 and 2011 an estimated 1,604 boxers died due to injury sustained from the ring. That is an average of 13 deaths a year.

Rock climbing: The injury rate is 4.2 per 1,000 hours of climbing, with a fatality rate worldwide of around 30 deaths per year.

It is however important to remember that statistics can provide a general picture, but the actual risk in any extreme sport can vary depending on factors like experience, equipment, and environmental conditions.

Hence, accurately gauging the risk of freediving is a challenge. There are limitations in fatality statistics and here's why they may remain elusive:

The Underreporting Enigma: Freediving incidents, particularly non-fatal ones, often vanish into the depths unnoticed. Unlike team sports, freediving can be a solitary pursuit. Imagine a diver experiencing a shallow water blackout (loss of consciousness due to lack of oxygen) alone; the incident might remain unreported.

Blurred Lines Between Worlds: Data collection sometimes struggles to differentiate between freediving activities itself (i.e. spear fishing, underwater photography, recreational and competitive freediving), plus scuba diving mishaps. This muddies the waters, making it hard to isolate the specific risks associated with freediving.

Spotlight on Spectacle: Media attention often gravitates towards high-profile competition deaths in freediving. This might overshadow the reality of recreational freediving, where responsible practices significantly reduce risk.

Fragmented Data Landscape: Freediving lacks a single, centralised governing body that meticulously tracks incidents around the globe. Data collection might be scattered or limited to specific regions, creating an incomplete picture.

The Injury Iceberg: Statistics on freediving injuries might be more readily available than fatality rates. Injuries offer a glimpse into potential dangers, but they don't capture the full spectrum of risk, particularly the risk of death.



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What Do Divers Think?

We took a survey to see what others think about the matter. Out of over 100 responses that we received, over 60 participants were experienced in other 'extreme' sports (not including freediving) e.g. kitesurfing, rock climbing, paragliding, big wave surfing, skydiving, highlining, mountain biking and/or martial arts. Whilst 66% of participants were trained freedivers, with just a few seemingly 'untrained'.

The survey determined that:

- 19.8% said they believed that freediving was not an extreme sport, 38.7% said it was, and 41.5% were undecided.
- Nonetheless, nearly 90% would recommend freediving to a relative or friend without question.
- A sport was mostly defined as 'extreme' based mostly on its high risk of injury and the thrill of adrenaline, including uncontrolled variables such as weather and equipment failure for some. The rate of fatalities defined it the least.
- Over 50% of respondents are freediving for their overall wellbeing, compared to 20% wanting to dive deep and 40% wanting to spend more time underwater.
- On a scale of one (least dangerous) to five (most dangerous), nearly half of participants rated freediving as number three (averagely dangerous).

The Verdict

Considering all that we have explored, we think it can be decided that freediving overall cannot firmly be placed in the extreme sport category.

Freediving holds a unique position on the risk scale. The perception of freediving as an extreme sport stems largely from a lack of knowledge and dramatized media news. Though shallow water blackouts do pose dangers, especially if the buddy system isn't followed, with proper training and adherence to safety protocols, recreational freediving is much safer than most other extreme sports.

Ultimately, the risk in any activity depends on the approach, highlighting the importance of safety protocols and responsible participation. It is also important to remember that freediving is not *just* a sport. It's also a way of life; A journey of exploration, self-discovery, and a profound connection with the ocean. It requires a deep understanding of your body and limitations. It teaches you to be comfortable in unfamiliar situations and to trust your instincts. In the right hands, freediving is not extreme.

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About the authors

Charly is a writer who's originally from the UK but has been based in Dahab, Egypt for the past seven years. She taught scuba diving for three years in Cyprus, Thailand, and Egypt before discovering her love of freediving. She still scuba dives for fun but these days she's more focused on her freediving training. When she's not in the water, diving, she's on her laptop, writing about diving.

Gen is passionately dedicated to her career in instructing adventure sports, sharing her expertise across the globe. From tropical beaches to rugged mountains, she has lived around the world, honing her skills to become a top-notch instructor in freediving, kitesurfing, rock climbing and Yoga. You can find her teaching outdoors in the adventure hub of Dahab, Egypt. Reach out to her via [@gen.morris.travel](https://www.instagram.com/gen.morris.travel)

Cover photo: Alice Modolo holding the Olympic Torch. Photo by H el ene Pedemonte.