

# The Secret to Deep Freediving: Tips from 3 Female World Record Holders

A few months ago we heard from three male national record holders about their [secrets to deep freediving](#). Now, it's time to hear what the women have to say.

Freediving as a sport is so unique, in that it's one of the only sports where women are up there at the top, achieving similar results as the men. At Vertical Blue 2021 we saw Alenka Artnik make a world record dive in CTW (constant weight) of 122m; just 9m shallower than the male champion, Alexey Molchanov. We also saw a whopping 25 national records from the ladies (just three less than the men), and most impressively, seven world records from three different female divers, compared to five world records from two different male divers.

After asking three male national record holders what it was that allowed them to reach such impressive depths, we wanted to reach out to some of the incredible women of the sport and see how their answers differ.

Let's find out the secrets of deep diving from the girls who keep the boys on their toes.

## Meet the athletes

**Alessia Zecchini**



Photo: Mauro Del Papa

- [www.alessiazecchini.com](http://www.alessiazecchini.com)
- <https://www.instagram.com/alessia.zecchini/>

Alessia is a freediving world champion from Italy. She has achieved an incredible 35 world records in pool and depth. The most recent being:

- Constant Weight (CWT): 115m (Vertical Blue 2021)
- Free Immersion (FIM): 101m (Vertical Blue 2021)
- Constant Weight Without Fins (CNF): 74m (Vertical blue 2021)
- Constant Weight With Benefits (CWTB): 105m (Kas 2021)

As well as the world records, she has achieved 17 gold medals in world championships during her time as an athlete. Alessia discovered freediving at just 14 years old when she took her first course, and then started competing in pool competitions at 18. Currently she is solely focused on freediving; training six days a week, and working with sponsors. She says she is very happy to be able to do this full time and that her dream became her reality.

## Sara Campbell



Photo: Michael Pitts

- [Discover Your Depths - Sara Campbell](#)
- <https://www.instagram.com/saracampbelldyd/>

Sara is a world record holder from the UK, her records are:

- FIM: 81m (Dahab, Egypt 2007)
- CWT: 90m (Dahab, Egypt 2007)
- CNF: 56m (Dahab, Egypt 2007)
- CWT: 96m (Vertical Blue 2009)

Sara hasn't competed in a while but is known to this day as one of the most impressive freedivers in the world after achieving three world records in three consecutive days. Her deepest dive to date is 104m in CWT (not performed in competition). Sara was originally convinced to try freediving by one of her yoga students back in 2007. After an unenthusiastic start, she soon realised that not only did she have a natural talent for the sport, but in fact she loved it, this led her to achieve her world records after just nine short months of starting out. Sara brings meditation and pranayama to her diving and considers freediving to be the perfect combination of physical challenge, mental focus, and inner stillness.

## Alice Modolo



Photo: Federico Buzzoni

- <https://www.instagram.com/modoloalice/?hl=en>

Alice is a world record holder from France, she holds one world record which she achieved just last year, and she was the first French female to dive below 100m. Her world record was:

- CWTB: 95m (Vertical Blue 2021)

Alice started freediving in 2007. Her first experience was in pool diving as she lived far from the coast. In 2010, she had the opportunity to practice freediving in the ocean, and three years later she achieved her first record for France. After this she struggled to juggle her passion for freediving with her career as a dentist and took a break for four years. She came back to the sport in 2018, and appeared as an underwater model in the music video for the song "[Runnin' \(Lose It All\)](#)" by Naughty Boy featuring Beyonce, and decided to become a professional freediver. This was a scary decision to start a whole new kind of life, but she's not looking back!

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## **Alert Diver: How does it feel when you dive your deepest?**

**When we asked the guys how they felt when they dived to their deepest depths we received answers including “focused”, “deep relaxation”, and “joy.” Many freedivers experience different feelings and emotions during deep dives. Some feel the effects of narcosis, some experience intense relaxation. Let’s find out how the ladies would describe it:**

**Alessia:** I feel excited, I enjoy almost all depth dives. To do a really deep dive you have to be calm and focused 100% so you can really enjoy the whole journey down and up. The feelings are quite hard to describe, something really unique. You really just become part of the sea and the water is helping you, it helps you to sink down and then it helps you to go up as you reach the surface.

**Sara:** For me freediving has always been and will always be, a meditative process, one that brings us closer to our true selves - if we are ready to confront all that we see. There is always a stillness and deep acceptance of what is throughout a dive. Not thinking (worrying) too far ahead, just understand the process and being 100% dedicated to each and every moment as it arises.

**Alice:** What I enjoy most when I dive deep is the feeling that I’m being held by the sea. I don’t feel the pressure in a bad way, I feel it more like the sea is holding me and protecting me. It’s guiding me and I feel so comfortable because I’m free and I feel that I’m in a safe place, which might sound weird but I do. It’s so powerful.

## **What advice would you give to someone wanting to dive as deep as you eventually?**

**Want to reach world record depths? There’s a few things you’ll need to do.**

**Sara:** Don’t focus on the numbers! Focus on the sensations and be as honest as you possibly can about what is really motivating you - does your motivation come from a place of expansion or contraction? For instance, 'my friend is a freediver and dives to 40m and I will only feel good enough when I’m deeper than him' (contraction), or I am curious about my potential, to learn about my body and mind and simply explore what the ocean has to show me?' (expansion). When you dive from a pure intention of expansion (you could also call it diving from an egoless state), then you will progress and have an amazing time. If you’re not having fun, then get honest and ask what contracted intentions might be driving you, even subconsciously. It’s a fascinating process of self-knowledge and understanding.

**Alice:** Understand what you need to work on the most. For me for example, I started with working on my mental strength first, and then when that side felt ready, I moved to the physical side. You need to work on your weaknesses, but you also need to work on your strengths. And you need to enjoy what you are doing. I would recommend working on two or three things per year, but no more because it’s too much.



## What is it about deep freediving that is so special?

**To people who have never freedived, the idea of diving down to the deepest and darkest parts of the ocean sounds like, let's face it, a pretty crazy thing to do. You're taking away your ability to breathe and putting your body and mind through intense pressure. So why do they do it?**

**Alessia:** I just enjoy it, so I want to keep doing it and practising it. I'm still learning so much, which is amazing. If you see yourself improving in something, it encourages you to keep practising and then you get a little bit deeper. I never really feel like I'm doing it perfectly, there's always something that I can do better. This is the reason why it's special to me... And I just love to be in the sea.

**Sara:** I loved the process of exploring myself, to see that I was so much greater than the physical form that I knew so well. I was amazed to find myself doing ever-deeper dives and always come up fresh and smiling. It felt like I met a new version of myself with every new depth, like I was unwrapping the layers of a parcel, each time getting closer and closer to my true self. Even in years of yoga and meditation practice, I have never found anything that gives me such an immediate and powerful experience of self, and self-expansion.

## Is it possible for anyone to dive as deep as you? Or is there a certain amount of natural talent?

**Are some people naturally more suited to freediving deep? Or can anyone break world records if they dedicate themselves and have the right motivation for doing it?**

**Sara:** This is impossible to answer as we don't have the scientific means to fully understand what makes a 'good freediver'. It is a mix of various physiological factors, which vary in many of the top athletes anyway, as well as the mental and spiritual approach. At only 5 foot tall, with three world records under my belt with only nine months training, my performances were a shock to the world. Perhaps I have a unique gaseous metabolism, which, combined with my yoga and meditation training, enabled me to progress so fast. I certainly think that most people have the potential to dive as deep as me, and deeper, but for most people the ego is a massive barrier to overcome. I think if people are out there, being curious and having fun, with a good level of mental awareness and control, then they are already a long way ahead of those with the supposedly 'ideal' physiology of athletic build, large lungs, and good breath hold. It's a complex and subtle mix that we really don't understand, and that is part of the magic of freediving. I hope it retains its mystery.

**Alice:** I feel that I am talented, but for these kinds of depths it's of course not only talent. To improve, you have to understand what you are doing. What I enjoy about freediving is that you learn about yourself, and this was my motivation, not records or medals. Work on yourself and what you need to get deeper, and don't be distracted by what others are doing around you. I knew if I did this, the records would come.

## What are the most important things to train to get to these depths?

**You don't become one of the best by accident. There's a lot that goes into record breaking freediving...**

**Alessia:** Train hard with a plan, and set a goal. Train all the things you need for performance: fitness, technique, power, strength, equalisation, and the mental part. You need to train all of these parts for deep performance. Firstly look at technique. Because it's important to not be consuming too much oxygen. Next is flexibility, including flexibility of the chest, so we don't feel the pressure when we dive deep. Lastly, the mind; we have to be calm. If we are in a good state of mind, we can bring that to the water. If we have some problems, it's hard to keep them away when we are diving. There are so many things that are important and we have to train them all, but if you do, you'll reach your goals.





*Photo: Alessia by Federico Buzzoni*

**Sara:** It won't surprise you to hear me say meditation, meditation, meditation. Of course the physical aspects are essential; we simply cannot go deep unless we have trained the body for real adaptation to pressure at depth, but I found through my own training and having worked with hundreds of freedivers and athletes, that the mind sits behind everything. Freediving is one of the most powerful ways to identify ego-driven thinking patterns and behaviour, and once we identify them, we can begin to work with them. When

we are driven by our ego (for instance, any feeling of being not good enough, or equally any feeling of superiority over others), then we will end up needing our dives to work out a certain way in order for our self-esteem to remain intact. Then we are on incredibly shaky ground and will experience contraction in our dives, which every deep diver knows is the fastest way to block equalisation or cause a squeeze. When we work courageously and honestly with our mind and its patterns, then we not only develop a really beautiful relationship with ourselves through true understanding, but we also go deeper, and go deeper safely. Time in the water then takes care of the physical adaptation and tweaking any aspects of the dives.

**Alice:** For me it's the mental side that is most important to train. Freediving is the only sport where you have to hold your breath. You're stopping something that is vital to the body. But everyone is different, so the question is how do you train the mental side? That's a big question.

## **Freediving is special in that the top female athletes are up there with the top male athletes when it comes to record depths. Why do you think that is the case in this sport? And how do you feel about being one of those women?**

**These incredible women are paving the way for new female freedivers who want to see what they are capable of. With such different physiology, why is it that women are reaching such similar record depths as the men? We don't see this in many sports. Is it because there is such a huge aspect of mental strength that isn't needed as much in other sports? Let's see what our record holders think:**

**Alessia:** I'm so happy and excited about this. So many women are breaking so many records in every competition and this encourages me to always push myself to do something better each time. Why? Maybe women are less impulsive than men, we are a bit more rational and we don't push more than we can. We want to arrive at our goals in a good way and have maximum control of the situation. This is how it is for me anyway. Maybe one day the women will overtake the men... although I'm not sure Alexey will allow it!

**Sara:** It has been spectacular to watch how the women's sport has developed since my deepest dive over ten years ago. It took a relatively long time for the women to catch up with my unofficial 104m world record, but since Alessia matched it officially in 2017, it feels like a glass ceiling was shattered and she and Alenka have been relentlessly defying our beliefs and expectations almost every time they get in the water. Why might this be? I think that women have always suffered from a gender gap in self-belief (their own and what society believes we are capable of). We have a different physiology and mental landscape to men, which may serve us in some ways, and hold us back in others. But I think the shift we have seen has come because the women BELIEVED they could dive deeper. Over the last ten years I think there has developed a new level of professionalism in the top levels of the sport, supported by better, more engaging media coverage, greater understanding of the sport, and women believing that they deserve to dedicate themselves to something they are passionate about. I'm super excited to see how the newer athletes are changing the sport, raising the bar, and carrying the torch for ethical standards in training and performance (ie non-egoic striving to be better). I feel humbled to still be considered among the top women in the world, and delighted by how my unique approach of sharing freediving as a spiritual unfolding continues to inspire a new generation of healthy, conscious, aware freedivers to explore their limits safely.



*Photo: Sara by Wendy Timmermans*

**Alice:** It is beautiful to see that women are starting to be very close to the men. Alenka and Alessia are deeper than a lot of men already. It's huge and I feel that I am not so far away from them and that's so inspiring. Of course I'm very proud to be a part of it. Women have a lot to give to the world, and we can show through freediving that women are strong in a different way to men. Women performing so well in sports can change the world and inspire people. It's a way to make the world better.

## **What does your DAN membership mean to you?**

**DAN offers different levels of insurance options for freedivers. This means you can dive deep and be assured you will be covered if you ever have an accident or become ill.**

**Sara:** DAN gave me reassurance both for my own deep dives and my students. It enabled me to travel all over the world to teach workshops.

**Alice:** I am a member of DAN insurance. Luckily I haven't had to use the insurance! But it's reassuring to know it is there if I ever need to.

There is still so much to learn about the relatively new sport of freediving. We are so excited to see how the sport evolves over time, and the amazing performances to come in future competitions by both the men and the women.

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## **About the author**

Charly is a writer who's originally from the UK but has been based in Dahab, Egypt for the past four 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.