

Blue Straggler's Escapades At Triple Depth 2010

After a summer of feeble "training" which consisted mostly of "a bit less beer, eat a bit more healthily, occasionally cycle to work, and go freediving a little bit more than last year", suddenly mid-September was upon us! Time to get on the plane to Sharm, woo hoo.

Following a few hiccups (John forgetting first his wetsuit and then his passport), soon we had established base camp at Brian's "work in progress" mini empire in the Bedouin village.



The Crossland homestead

Prior to the start of the "official" training days at the Blue Hole with FreediveDahab, I got a couple of sessions in at Lighthouse with Brian. It seemed that (having not been in the sea since May 2009) I had underestimated just how much difference the 2.5% increase in density of seawater compared to fresh, can make to buoyancy. However, as I've been altering my weights this summer anyway, I decided to just stick with what I've in any case only just got used to, and put in a few more kicks and let the sink phase start a little deeper. Was also initially slightly thrown by the visibility; 15m is about the best I've seen in UK inland quarries, and whilst I have no problem with being able to see the bottom plate at about 30m from the surface, it was at first a little disconcerting to be able to see the clear surface shimmer above me with head tucked whilst sinking past 20m, when this depth is usually a kind of abstract "dark zone" for me! I soon adjusted though.



"You can see FOREVER!"

Without any organised training "schedule" as such, I took it pretty easy at first, just getting into the swing of diving in a slightly different environment and trying to "emprint" competition surface protocol etc. My main improvement at this stage was in my monofin technique; Brian pointed out that I wasn't flexing at the hip enough, so I decided to try a massively exaggerated flex kind of as a token gesture and for comedy effect, but it turned out to work quite well and to look more like "textbook" technique...so I shall start to employ this from now on, and hopefully it will stop feeling exaggerated!

Blue Hole training days were interesting. It was certainly nice to have someone else set up the buoys and set the depths and do all the safety so that our only energy expenditure was on our own training dives, but it also felt slightly "regimented" (that's not a criticism really – obviously the only way to organise these things for 15 – 20 divers is to set a start time and a finish time etc). I also got a chance to size up some of the other competitors and pretty much

confirm that I would indeed be pretty much at the bottom of the rankings. Ha! During the first training day I decided to focus on free immersion as I've never really tried for depth in this discipline; only really used it for warm-ups and "lazy" (or "emergency") ascents. Wasted a few dives thanks to my indecision as to whether to fix lanyard to wrist or ankle (the latter being the obvious better choice) and eventually hit a comfortable 32m which was effectively a PB but not particularly satisfying. Aside from the increase in dive time, I should find free immersion easier than constant weight; after all, it IS "just pulling on a rope, no technique needed" © But on subsequent attempts to go deeper, I got equalisation problems at 30m so knocked it on the head.



Pulling slack into a 20kg-weighted line!

Day 2, constant weight. Having been fully converted to the delights of the monofin (and having demonstrated some truly shocking bi-finning technique and feeble legs), I boldly left the bi-fins at Brian's. I also pulled my jacket on rather too boldly and tore the lower back almost all the way across. George Miller's lucky Duct tape to the rescue! Worked remarkably well, thankfully. Though with a water temperature of 28 degrees (even at 30 – 40m depth), I would have managed without a 5mm suit, I think...

Anyway one of my goals for 2010 has been 40m CWT and I figured that today was the day for it (planning to announce 36m for the competition, I wanted to ensure that 36m would feel reasonably within my abilities...though I noted that many fellow competitors were planning to go for PBs in competition...). After a couple of easy 25m and 30m dives I had the line put to 38m which would itself be a new PB, did a proper breathe-up (with practice "official countdown") and went for it. Felt mostly comfortable though a slightly scrappy dive, missed a final equalisation after a nice sink and looked up to see the bottom plate only 3m away so put a cheeky couple of light kicks in and reached down past the plate with the dive computer (didn't quite do a full dead hang off my lanyard), and a calm-but-firm return to the surface.



Ascent from CWT (actually a photo of Sung Chul)

Woo hoo, 39.5m. OK, we have to round down strictly so we'll call it 39m. And OK, I did momentarily dip my bottom lip into the water just after surface protocol, so that's strictly a red card, but I'm going to let that one go and call it a nice new PB. The dive profile shows a really marked steepening between 35m and 39m (I think this might be typical of a lot of my PBs!)

I didn't try for a "real" 40m after that, but felt confident that 36m on competition day would be fine.

Day 3, and time to practice some constant-weight-no-fins. I used to love this discipline despite my ineffective kick (old left-knee injury prevents me from doing a full classic "frog kick"; I still need to find a suitable workaround). However, I am out of practice with it, partly due to having been put off it by experiencing a blackout in 2009 going for a PB in this discipline. I was hoping to boost my PB from 26m to 30m at least in training, but I wasn't feeling the love and just managed a few 25m dives. Still, for 25m to be my "lazy" depth when 26m remains my PB, is kind of something, I suppose. I was mostly just tired out on this day; I clearly don't have the fitness/stamina for repeated training days. Interestingly a number of fellow competitors who also claimed to be a bit rusty in CNF, decided not to bother training with it at all and to instead concentrate more on the other two disciplines, on the grounds that a single day training CNF would be of very little benefit to them anyway, whereas more continual CWT and FIM training would be more useful. I imagine that this was a depth and equalisation issue more than a technique issue for these people.



Finishing CNF training

Between the end of training and the first competition day, was the “fun” static comp. Oops. I haven’t really practiced static since some time in 2007, and haven’t even done a 3 minute static this year! OK then, a brief dry static session lying on the bed....eased myself up to a quite comfortable 3:10 in about 4 steps and called it a day, blindly optimistic that in a nice pool with the dive reflex kicking in, I might get something respectable. Announced 3:15.

And again...oops. This static was in effect the first competition I’ve participated in since sports day at school, and even having marshalled at a pool comp earlier this year, I was still a little thrown by the whole atmosphere of it, the warm-up zones etc. Before I knew it, it was “2 minutes to official top”, and the first minute of that just flew by! Again I was slightly undone by my own indecision – will I wear any kind of suit, or just my trunks? In the end I put on my crappy shortie, which was a mistake as it’s now become just a little bit tight on me. Unable to relax properly and with a rushed breathe-up, I wanted to bail out within the first minute but decided to press on and see if somehow I could

get myself relaxed. It wasn't happening, and I surfaced for a lovely yellow card after a pitiful 1min51sec. For Heaven's sake I've done 1:52 on a full exhale! Gaah. It was however useful to practice doing a proper surface protocol in a real situation facing the judges (though it seems that the normal practice when you come up embarrassingly early is to deliberately break surface protocol so you get a red card and your performance isn't recorded...).



Cluttered warm-up zone at the static pool

Redeemed the day somewhat with a nice final depth training session just out at Lighthouse with John; planning to announce 35m for FIM I decided I'd better actually make sure I can do it! Ticked that for a new PB and John did a very relaxed 36m CWT – probably our best training session and maybe next time we'll do it this "low key" way rather than with the larger group.

A long competition briefing session at FreediveDahab, with Linda and Lotta going through all the rules and protocols and explaining the schedule. All the additional competitors who hadn't been part of the "official" training at the Blue Hole were present, and there was lots of talk of big (to me) numbers. 70s and 80s...none of it daunted me though – *someone* has to win the "wooden spoon" after all ☺

So day 1 of the competition, free immersion. Lovely air-conditioned coach down to Sharm. The openers were Sebastian Naslund going for 75m, and Aurore Asso going for 70m and a new French record. Then the running order was shallowest-to-deepest, and I was fifth up. This meant that from my warm-up buoy I could see Aurore's ascent, which looked really difficult as there was a bit of a current which made grabbing the line a bit harder especially as she

had no mask or goggles, but she got her white card, which was a lot more encouraging than having to watch a rescue and a blackout just before my first dive!

Nice and relaxed sitting on the platform waiting for my dive; I asked to be told 3 minutes before official top so I could get in the water and onto the line to start breathing up. Having recently increased my neckweight, I can't comfortably breathe up on my back and I don't use a snorkel, and some attempts with a noodle failed miserably, so I breathed up vertical – no problem. Unlike in the static competition, the atmosphere didn't faze me at all and I set off feeling relaxed.

And then.....oh dear, my undoing. I should have paid more attention to my weighting. I was after all too buoyant in my Michelin Man 5mm suit with only about 2.3kg. I stopped pulling down at about 18m expecting to see no change in descent rate, but I slowed down almost to a stop. "No problem", I thought, "I'll just put a few more pulls in". I have a feeling that I might actually have ended up pulling all the way down, can't be sure though. In my haste to redeem myself after that poor static performance, and ensure that I get my tag, I rushed the dive and missed an equalisation at about 30m. Again, "no problem" thought I, as I've often ridden out a bit of ear pain near the bottom of a dive. A scrappy couple of pulls at the bottom to retrieve the tag, and there was a lot more pain in the left ear than I've experienced before. "This is bad", I thought, whilst trying to extricate my right foot from its minor tangle in the lanyard. Briskly pulling up to the surface and listening to a wet fluttering sound in my left ear, instead of the happy sound of it re-equalising, I knew I'd done some damage and that the competition was probably over for me, but managed not to panic. I just hoped there wasn't going to be blood pouring out of it when I got to the surface. Got my white card at least, which was nice, and retreated back to dry land.



Competition platforms, somewhere near the horizon ☺

The ear felt OK, just delicate, and I didn't worry about it too much. Just got some antiseptic drops to try to keep infection out, but on day 2, having optimistically not withdrawn from competition and still announced 36m CWT on the offchance of an overnight ear-mending miracle, I got into the hotel pool and found that I could not equalise even at 1m. So that was that. However, George suggested that I "coach" Sung Chul Kim, a lovely Korean guy who'd been trying for some national records but had been screwing up the protocol, starting his static one second too late and his FIM one second too early. So in order that I was at least in the water doing SOMETHING useful, I took him out to the warm-up lines and practiced the countdown to official top, and made sure he wouldn't get a line-grab penalty at the start of the dive. I didn't feel that this was particularly "coaching", but it seemed to work as he finally got his first white card and a new record. Hurrah! Time for a beer for Mr Kim!



Living it up at Rush...

Similar story on day 3, my ear no better. I was almost glad not to be diving as there was a massive swell! Loads of blackouts in the CNF discipline (including Sung Chul who perhaps would have been better advised NOT to do a 24m no-fins FRC as a warm-up for a 27m attempt!)

So in summary...I pretty much screwed up the competition for myself, but still had an overall positive experience. Some nice training, I finally learned to love my monofin, and got a couple of new PBs, and more importantly I learned that I can cope with a competition environment (I had been concerned that the "officialdom" of having judges and fixed dive times and countdowns etc, might daunt me).

As for taking any kind of lesson away from the ear injury, I guess the main one is that I have to sort out my weighting and learn where my sink phase will start. Secondary to that (or maybe even more important?) I need to become patient, like I used to be, and if the sink starts slowly, just keep calm and enjoy the acceleration. Finally I need to reduce my habit of "riding out" a bit of ear pain for the sake of reaching a target. Especially in FIM, where I could simply have turned myself around for an easy head-up equalisation and then finished the descent...

See you all next year ☺